

Finn Arne Jørgensen

Turning a Green Machine Green

"The world can not become disposables only, but in order for that to happen we believe technology is key. Recycling has to become so convenient that there is no resistance."

– Petter and Tore Planke, founders of TOMRA Systems, 1971

The Reverse Vending Machine



The Reverse Vending Machine (RVM) is used for the return of empty bottles and cans in grocery stores. In 1971, the Norwegian company TOMRA Systems invented a fully-automated RVM. In order to sell the machine to grocers, only functional and economic arguments were used.

Yet, the RVM operates in a world of two shades of green: *Green as in money*, and *green as in the environment*. Recycling as an activity contains the same ambiguity, as it is both an economic practice and an environmentally friendly behavior. The *environmental green* helps give recycling legitimacy and public support, while the *economic green* makes recycling a viable solution.

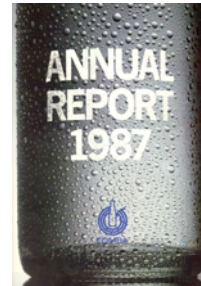
The corporate identity and cultural packaging of the RVM changed between 1987 and 1990, as the company re-envisioned their machine within a changing environmentalist landscape. This change is reflected in TOMRA's annual reports.

1987: High-Tech Infrastructure Machine

Until 1985, TOMRA experienced tremendous growth, expanding in Europe and the US particularly in the aluminum can recycling market. But a flood of Soviet aluminum on the world market in 1985 caused the economic incentives for aluminum recycling to disappear. TOMRA almost went bankrupt.

After the crisis of the mid-1980s was over, a new management looked for a different set of core values that could revive the company. The 1987 TOMRA Annual Report is a glossy publication revealing the stripped-down company's desire to appear *lean, modern and future-oriented*. By stating that "the future is with TOMRA," they hoped to renew customer, consumer, and investor confidence in the company.

The clean, shining images create associations to the bottles and cans that daily pass through the RVMs. Yet, they are *images far removed from notions of waste, nature, or recycling*.



1988: Creating Associations to Nature



Signs of a new corporate identity were visible in the 1988 Annual Report. The layout lost some of the modern, timeless look of the previous report. Gone was the idea of TOMRA as solely modern. The last two pages signal a turn towards *new associations between the environment and TOMRA's RVM*.

The combination of a double photo spread depicting a pristine winter landscape and the declaration "A clean environment – our common responsibility" indicate that TOMRA was increasingly influenced by the *rapidly rising environmental awareness* of the late 1980s. However, no efforts were made to communicate a specific connection between the RVM and the environment.

1989: The Environmental Machine

In 1989, TOMRA was declared "the greenest company in Europe" and was "riding an environmental wave" to new highs on the stock exchange. The annual report, printed on recycled paper and illustrated with commissioned pastel artwork of nature, flowers, and the sea, reflected *the company's new greenness*. Several full pages of text established *a clear connection between TOMRA, deposit systems, and environmental protection*. TOMRA characterized containers as "An Environmental Issue". They expected the 1990s to be filled with "political debate on the recycling of all packaging."

In the years to come, the company followed two strategies: (1) actively participating in political debates on environmentally friendly deposit systems and (2) convincing grocers that the RVM would not only help them with their infrastructure problems, but would also draw green consumers to the store and create goodwill. While the RVM remained technically unchanged, it became a *full-fledged environmental machine through its cultural packaging*.



This material in this poster is based on my PhD dissertation (in progress) in the History of Business, Technology, and the Environment.

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