Eco Grounds: Scaling Sustainable Coffee from $50K to $13M

Context & Opportunity

In 2013, I joined Java City as a Field Marketing Manager, inheriting a dormant sub-brand called Eco Grounds Coffee. Originally born in the early 2000s under Bewley's Coffee, it functioned merely as a label to highlight certified sustainable offerings rather than a living brand. It possessed no distinct visual identity, no compelling community narrative, and no strategic positioning. In an increasingly values-driven marketplace, this lack of substance made it impossible to compete against established national chains.



Initial brand state and packaging mockups

The turning point arrived in 2014 when I wrote my first RFP response for the entire UC Riverside campus coffee program. What had previously been a single convenience store account generating approximately $50,000 annually was suddenly on the table in full. This included residential dining, catering, retail espresso, and convenience retail operations across the university. Winning this bid required transforming Eco Grounds from a generic line extension into a fully realized, independent brand with a powerful story.

The Problem in Depth

As we began scaling our presence across institutional environments, two distinct but intertwined problems emerged. First, we were consistently going head-to-head with formidable national brands like Starbucks, who possessed deep recognition and virtually limitless marketing budgets. Competing on traditional brand awareness was a losing battle, necessitating a completely different value proposition centered on genuine connection and customization. We needed to prove that a values-driven offer could outcompete legacy corporate giants on the campuses that mattered most.

$50,000

INITIAL ACCOUNT VALUE

Annual revenue from the single convenience store account before the transformation.

The second, more urgent problem surfaced from UC Irvine and their food service provider, Aramark. The university was committed to becoming first in the nation for eliminating food service waste, but coffee packaging had become their number one source of unrecyclable material. Conventional coffee bags rely on a layered construction of paper, plastic, and foil fused together, making them impossible to separate, recycle, or compost. No existing solution in the industry addressed this fundamental structural flaw.



The packaging waste bottleneck

Research & Discovery

To tackle the packaging crisis, I initiated a rigorous three-year research and development process. My initial assumption was relatively straightforward: simply switch the packaging to a number five plastic and the problem would be solved. However, working closely with packaging manufacturers, foil companies, and waste processors fundamentally altered my understanding of municipal waste systems. I discovered that existing infrastructure was entirely ill-equipped to handle even technically recyclable materials if they didn't fit standard processing streams.

> *“Even a perfectly recyclable material will never be recycled if it enters the wrong waste stream.”*
>
> — Katrina Benedicto, Brand & Sustainability Manager

This foundational research phase also involved extensive field marketing efforts across university campuses. I spent my early years walking campuses, sitting with sustainability managers, and listening intently to dining directors. I needed to understand exactly what these massive institutions actually required from a coffee partner beyond just the beans. The overwhelming consensus was a demand for verifiable sustainability metrics and tangible community impact that students could see and feel.

Key Insight

Recyclability on paper means nothing without the behavioral and infrastructure systems to actually support it.

Strategic Shift

Competing against legacy brands requires shifting the battleground from brand recognition to localized community impact and transparent supply chains.

Framing the Challenge

Synthesizing our research, I established a core philosophy for the brand's evolution: 'Substance Over Spin.' We adopted a zero-tolerance policy for greenwashing, anchoring our entire brand narrative in hard science, real operations, and verified impact. I recognized that solving the packaging crisis wasn't just about designing a better coffee bag; it was about engineering an entirely new, closed-loop behavioral system. We had to build a solution rooted in the principle of extended producer responsibility.

> *“Impossible is just short for 'not yet'—if it's built on truth and commercially sound.”*
>
> — Eco Grounds Brand Strategy Guide

Stepping into the dual role of Brand Manager and North American Sustainability Manager, I defined the overarching brand identity as the 'Practical Alchemist.' Our core belief was that impossible is just short for 'not yet'—if it's built on truth and commercially sound. This meant bridging visionary sustainability with high-stakes commercial scale to turn breakthrough ideas into profitable movements. Every design decision, from packaging to digital interfaces, had to reflect this aspirational yet deeply grounded ethos.

Passionate

Deeply committed to the craft of coffee and the livelihoods of the farmers who produce it.

Connected

Bridging the gap between the students pouring the coffee and the communities at origin.

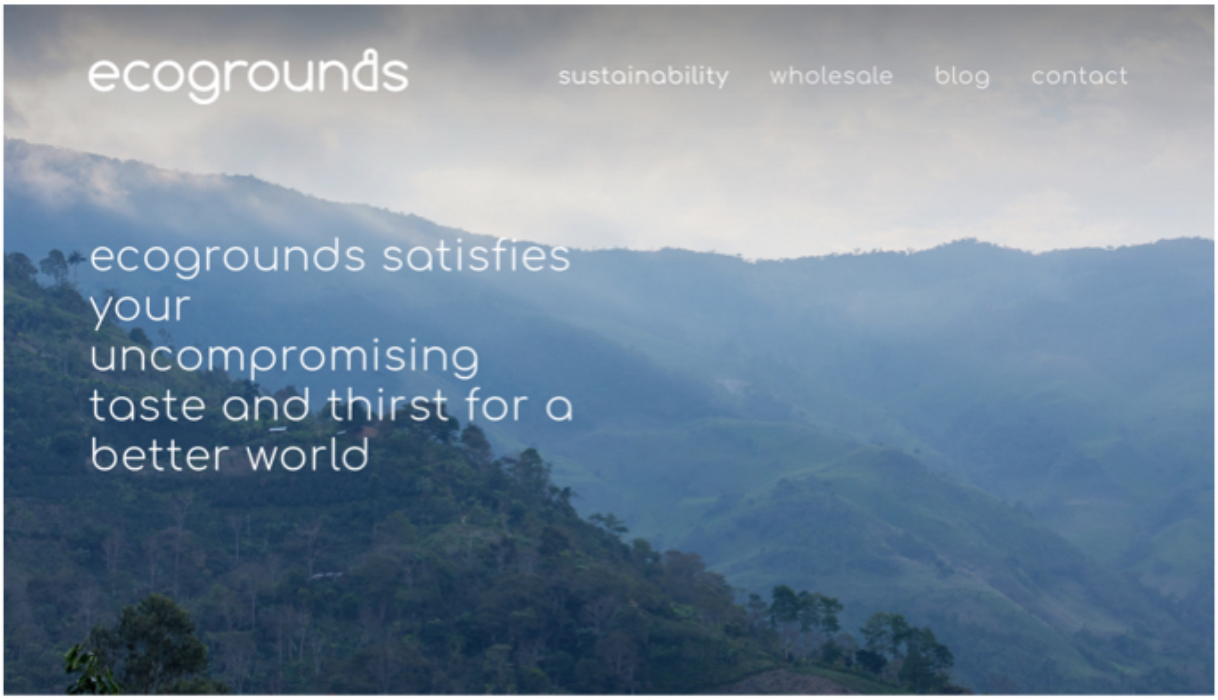
Transparent

Zero tolerance for greenwashing, anchored entirely in hard science and verified impact.

Design Exploration

For our physical presence, we explored modular kiosk designs and large-scale environmental graphics tailored for institutional settings. We created 3D architectural renderings of coffee kiosks that integrated seamlessly into university environments while maintaining brand distinctiveness. All physical cafes were build from sustainable

materials so that the ecoGrounds ethos is evident in every touch point. Simultaneously, we designed digital interfaces. This multi-channel design exploration ensured that whether a student was interacting with a stadium digital display or an eCommerce site, the brand felt cohesive.



Digital Interface Explorations

The Solution

The culmination of our efforts was a multi-faceted brand and operational transformation, starting with custom community impact programs. For UC Riverside, we launched the 'Highlander Blend,' structuring $0.50 per pound to fund a rainwater harvesting program in Comunidad, Guatemala. This initiative brought clean water directly into family homes, saving women and girls hours of labor and keeping young girls in school. This hyper-customized approach proved that commerce and community could reinforce each other by design.

Tyson Monocle

Institutional Sustainability Manager (Aramark / UC Irvine)

GOALS

+ Eliminate food service waste on campus
+ Achieve first-in-nation sustainability ranking for the university
+ Find a scalable solution for unrecyclable coffee bags

FRUSTRATIONS

- Conventional coffee packaging is impossible to separate or compost
- Existing recycling infrastructure cannot process multi-layered foil bags
- Vendors often provide greenwashed marketing rather than structural solutions

"[INSERT QUOTE: e.g., We cannot hit our zero-waste targets if our highest-volume product comes in unrecyclable packaging.]"

Procurement	Consumption	Waste Management
Selects coffee vendor based on sustainability metrics and community impact proposals. *Struggling to differentiate genuine impact from corporate greenwashing.*	Serves coffee to students while communicating the origin story and impact.	Collects empty packaging and utilizes the closed-loop return shipping system. *Previously frustrated by throwing thousands of bags into landfill streams.*

To solve the waste crisis, we launched the world's first fully closed-loop coffee packaging take-back program. The mechanics were elegantly simple yet revolutionary for the industry, built entirely on the principle of extended producer responsibility. Institutional customers stuffed their empty number five plastic packaging back into the original shipping boxes using a provided return label. These boxes were shipped back to Java City at no cost, then traveled by rail to Trex, where the pristine plastic was repurposed into composite decking materials.

1. **Step 1: Distribution**
   A return shipping label was printed on the outside of every bulk coffee order sent to institutional customers.
2. **Step 2: Collection**
   Universities stuffed their empty number five plastic packaging back into the original shipping box.
3. **Step 3: Return Logistics**
   When full, the institutions shipped the boxes back to Java City at absolutely no cost to them.
4. **Step 4: Rail Transport**
   Collected packaging was consolidated and traveled by rail to Trex recycling facilities.
5. **Step 5: Repurposing**
   The pristine plastic was processed and successfully repurposed into composite decking materials.

Finally, we established a comprehensive student brand ambassador program to build the next generation of coffee professionals. Engaging up to 24 students across 12 campuses, this was a career development ecosystem teaching project management, event planning, and community building. We brought students directly to our Sacramento roasting facility and, in 2020, took ambassadors to Costa Rica to connect with farming communities. This closed the loop between the students pouring the coffee and the people whose livelihoods depended on those cups.



Physical Site Development

Impact & Results

The commercial and environmental impact of this comprehensive transformation vastly exceeded our initial projections. By refusing to compete solely on brand recognition and instead focusing on genuine connection, we scaled the model exponentially. The original $50,000 single-location account successfully grew into a massive $13 million contract spanning six University of California campuses. Furthermore, we expanded into the California State University system, securing accounts at Sacramento State, San Diego State, and the CSU system headquarters.

$13M

CONTRACT VALUE

Grew from a single $50K account to a multi-campus system contract.

$250K

RESEARCH SPONSORSHIP

Secured for the UC Davis Coffee Center to fund agronomic science.

BEFORE

2013 Baseline

Single $50,000 convenience store account with conventional unrecyclable layered packaging.

AFTER

2020 Scale

$13,000,000 institutional contract across 6 UC campuses with a world-first closed-loop recycling system.

Our sustainability initiatives generated measurable, industry-leading outcomes that garnered significant national recognition. The closed-loop packaging program earned speaking opportunities at major conferences like AASHE and CHESC, proving the viability of producer responsibility. Through cross-promotional efforts like the Triton Blend, we also generated over $10,000 to date for campus food pantries. Perhaps most significantly, we secured a $250,000 sponsorship for the UC Davis Coffee Center, funding critical agronomic research and sustainability science for the industry's future.

24

STUDENT AMBASSADORS

Peak program engagement across approximately 12 campuses simultaneously.

$10,000

FOOD PANTRY FUNDING

Generated to date through cross-promotional campus blends like the Triton Blend.

Reflection

Looking back at the seven-year journey from 2013 to 2020, the evolution of Eco Grounds represents far more than a conventional logo refresh. It was a complete structural transformation that began in the field—listening to customers, walking campuses, and seeing opportunity where others saw obstacles. The brand ultimately followed the values we built from the ground up, proving that high-stakes commercial scale and visionary sustainability are

not mutually exclusive. If I were to approach a similar challenge today, I would integrate the closed-loop tracking metrics into a digital customer-facing dashboard much earlier in the process.



Connecting at Origin

The most enduring impact of this work isn't just the millions of dollars in coffee sold, but the people shaped along the way. Alumni of our student ambassador program have gone on to careers in sustainability, the Peace Corps, and other mission-driven organizations. They carry forward a lived understanding of how community, transparency, and commerce can work together to create lasting change. Ultimately, we proved that a coffee brand can be 'Consciously Great' while completely redefining the institutional supply chain.