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Marketing and sustainability

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## VIEWPOINT

# Marketing and sustainability

Marketing and  
sustainability

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to raise for debate among marketers the issue of the relationship between marketing and sustainability.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An opinion piece, that presents the views of four authors on the current state of the debate in this field.

**Findings** – There is little consensus on these matters. There are those who believe that marketing and sustainability simply cannot be reconciled, while there are others who argue that marketing can contribute to the development of sustainable consumption.

**Originality/value** – The paper opens up the debate on a subject that is clearly going to be high on the agenda for years to come.

**Keywords** Sustainable development, Marketing, Green marketing, Environmental management

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Everything is never enough (marketing slogan used by Molton Brown perfumed cosmetics in Cavendish House, The Promenade, Cheltenham, July 2007).

It is a common assumption that marketing and sustainability are set for a head on collision because marketing is about selling more while sustainability is about consuming less (Chartered Institute of Marketing, 2007).

In many ways marketing is often seen as the antithesis of the concept of sustainability. The one is seen by many as one of the principal drivers of consumption while the other seeks to “enable all people throughout the world to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life without compromising the quality of life of future generations” (Her Majesty’s Government, 2005). However, there is growing interest in the relationships between marketing and sustainability. The Sigma sustainability marketing guide (The Sigma Project, n.d.), designed to help companies to develop strategies to market the benefits of their approach to sustainability to customers and to help sustainability practitioners and marketers to gain a shared understanding of their respective fields, disputes the argument that sustainability and marketing are incompatible. Rather it argues that sustainability and marketing have much to offer each other. According to strategy and marketing consultant Peter Fisk, sustainability is one of the key trends shaping marketing today (ITSMA, 2006) while Schaefer (2005) an academic at the Open University Business School has argued that sustainable development is perhaps the most significant and the most difficult problem currently facing marketing. This paper looks to tease out some of the relationships between



marketing and sustainability by posing two inter-related questions. Firstly, what can sustainability offer marketing? Secondly, what can marketing offer sustainability?

### All things to all people?

Any attempt to explore these relationships and to answer the two questions faces the problem that both marketing and sustainability are defined and understood in a variety of ways. Palmer (2000), for example, claims that “There is much misunderstanding about what marketing is” and Kyle (2004) suggests that many people “see marketing” as “a series of tactics and gimmicks” or define it “as pyramid programs” or treat the words “marketing” and “sales and marketing” and “advertising” as synonymous. In answering the question “What is marketing?” Gronroos (1990) argues that it is “a philosophy guiding the overall thinking in an organization” as well as both “a way of organising various functions and activities of the firm” and “a set of tools and techniques” such as “packaging, promotion, distribution activities and pricing”.

While there are probably as many definitions, and understandings, of marketing as there are academic marketing textbooks, commercial marketing manuals, bar room orators and dissatisfied and overdrawn customers it is perhaps useful here to identify two basic and contrasting meanings. The first pillories marketing for encouraging people to purchase things that they do not need while the second views marketing as having a vital role to play in identifying and meeting customer needs profitably. The first is perhaps most generously defined in the *MSN Encarta Dictionary* (2007) which defines marketing as “the business activity of presenting goods and services in such a way as to make them desirable” and less charitably in Palmer’s (2000) belief that many people equate marketing with “trying to sell things that people don’t really want”. Much more critically Brown (1995) outlines popular views of marketing as being “manipulative, devious, unethical and inherently distasteful” while many critics see it as promoting materialism and encouraging people to work long hours and incur considerable debt in order to maintain seemingly prized lifestyles and view marketers as corrupt agents of commerce willing to mislead and manipulate customers for profit.

By way of contrast the second set of meanings draw on academic perspectives, which see marketing as a fundamental business philosophy that makes customers and the satisfaction of their needs the central focus of an organization’s business activities. Thus, Palmer (2000) defines marketing as being “about marshalling the resources of an organization so that they meet the changing needs of customers on whom the organization depends”. In a similar vein Kotler *et al.* (1999) have argued that marketing is “A social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others.”

The concept of sustainability can be traced back to the thirteenth century but in more recent times it appeared in the environmental literature in the 1970s (Kamara *et al.*, 2006) and since then it seems to have become a desired goal in most areas of human activity and endeavour. However, defining this concept is not straightforward and here again contrasting meanings can be identified. On the one hand, there are sets of definitions which recognize that all human beings live on a planet with finite quantities of natural resources and fragile ecosystems on which human life ultimately depends. On the other hand, there are much more all embracing definitions that look to include ambitious social and economic goals and to meet human needs in an

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equitable manner. Typical of the first set is ecological sustainability defined by Callicot and Mumford (1997) as “meeting human needs without compromising the health of ecosystems” and Sutton (2004) definition of environmental sustainability as “the ability to maintain things or qualities that are valued in the physical environment”. The second set is typified by McCann-Erickson’s (2007) definition that:

Sustainability is a collective term for everything to do with responsibility for the world in which we live. It is an economic, social and environmental issue. It is about consuming differently and consuming efficiently. It also means sharing between the rich and the poor and protecting the global environment while not jeopardizing the needs of future generations.

While sustainability has attracted widespread political support and has become applied to many areas of activity as evidenced by policies not just for sustainable development but also, for example, for sustainable communities and sustainable railways, the concept has also attracted criticism. Robinson (2004), for example, has summarized three sets of considerable criticisms. Firstly, that the concept is vague in that it means many different things to different people and organizations. Clark (2005), for example, writing in *The Times* newspaper argued “In the absence of any precise meaning the concept of sustainability is pointless. It could mean virtually anything and therefore means absolutely nothing.” Secondly, that it attracts hypocrites who use the language of sustainable development to promote and defend unsustainable activities. Thirdly, that it fosters delusions in that it fails to recognize that the current rates of economic growth are unsustainable and that it draws attention away not only from the need to develop new ways of organising how people can relate to the natural world but also from the need for fundamental social and political change.

### **What can sustainability offer marketing?**

A growing number of companies are looking to recognize the role of sustainability as an integral component of their business strategy. A number of factors seem to be important in helping to explain this trend. These include the need to comply with a growing volume of environmental and social legislation and regulation; concerns about the cost and scarcity of natural resources; greater public and shareholder awareness of the importance of socially responsible financial investments; the growing media coverage of the activities of a wide range of anti-corporate pressure groups; and more general changes in social attitudes and values within modern capitalist societies. However, the Chartered Institute of Marketing (2006), in its report for the Department of Trade and Industry Sector Sustainability Challenge; found that marketing teams lead on campaigns and communications but not on business strategy, that marketing did not lie at the strategic centre of sustainable development and that marketing teams were not playing a major role in driving forward the development of sustainable products and services. This suggests that marketing currently has a secondary, rather than a primary, role in driving sustainability agendas within many companies.

That said it is important to recognize that there is growing interest in “sustainable marketing” which has been defined by Charter *et al.* (2006) as “creating, producing and delivering sustainable solutions with higher net sustainable value whilst continuously satisfying customers and other stakeholders”. Ideally the goals here are to systematically embed sustainability within a company’s strategy throughout the supply chain from new product and service development to consumption.

Charter *et al.* (2006) have also argued “Companies should begin to prepare for a more sustainable millennium by re-examining the social and environmental impacts of their marketing strategies.” At the same time the authors recognize that this is a complex task which involves research throughout the supply chain and one which will take marketers outside their traditional frame of reference. On the one hand, such calls may be interpreted as encouraging marketing departments and marketers to lead the way, or at least to play an important role in the development of more sustainable products and services and in making the traditional “marketing mix” more sustainable. Charter *et al.* (2006), for example, argue that price is a key element in the sustainable marketing mix and that here the challenge is to translate social and environmental improvements into a value proposition for which customers are willing to pay. Becker (2004), depicts this challenge as two dilemmas. The first focuses on “integrating the reality of additional costs (internalizing the externalities) into the marketing mix” while the second “concerns the consumer who is mainly interested in price and quality”. On the other hand the term “sustainable marketing” can also be seen as a little more than a thinly veiled and cynical ploy to attract socially and environmentally conscious consumers while “sweeping” pressing environmental and social concerns “under the carpet”.

More specifically one of the most obvious links between marketing and sustainability is the way in which growing numbers of companies are looking to emphasize their commitment to sustainability in an attempt to help to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to enhance their corporate brand and reputation. Here, the accent is integrating sustainability thinking into the core brand. In pursuing such a strategy it is important that companies take account of all the contact points between the brand and the consumer. One of the UK’s leading retailers, Marks and Spencer, for example, launched its high profile “Plan A” designed to “tackle some of the biggest challenges facing our business and the world” in January 2007. The company plans to work with customers and suppliers to “combat climate change, reduce waste, safeguard natural resources, trade ethically and build a healthier nation”. Regular press releases and news briefings are re-enforced by signage and leaflets in the company’s stores and by window displays. The August 2007 edition of “Plan A News” for example, highlighted the company’s joint campaign with Save the Children to enable up to 15,000 children in Uganda to go to school, the launch of a new organic fashion range, the removal of additives from almost all of Marks and Spencer’s foodstuffs and details of a campaign to encourage customers to reduce their carbon footprint.

There are also issues relating to internal marketing or more specifically with getting sustainability accepted throughout a company and in engaging all employees in the sustainability debate. The Chartered Institute of Marketing (2006), for example, argues that “In order that an organization can build its sustainability credentials, an all pervading culture needs to be developed for staff to recognize opportunities and to deal with them.” Further it is argued that where the concept of sustainability is taken on board by employees this leads to them having a greater sense of loyalty and pride in the company and that this in turn can prove to be a valuable “sales asset” when communicating with customers. However, the Chartered Institute of Marketing (2006) also reports that there is little evidence that marketers build on these benefits when projecting a company’s sustainability in the public domain. A growing number of companies are encouraging their employees to participate in community programmes

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often helping them to enhance their understanding of sustainability challenges within the local environment. Tesco, for example, reports its desire to see its employees engaging more closely with local communities and during 2007-2008 Tesco Express managers and staff will each spend a day working on social and environmental projects within these communities. At the same time, it is important to recognize that where employees are working under pressure to meet demanding performance and financial targets promoting sustainability may be quickly, and conveniently, ignored.

### **What can marketing offer sustainability?**

In looking to answer this question attention is focused on the role of marketing in understanding and changing consumer behaviour and more generally in influencing attitudes and beliefs. As such marketing can be seen to recognize the key role of consumers as decision makers in moving towards sustainability, for example in reducing carbon dioxide emissions, recycling increasing volumes of waste, supporting Fair Trade initiatives and adopting healthier lifestyles. McDonald and Oates (2006) argue that studying the current behaviour of green consumers can provide important lessons in helping to spread sustainable buying behaviour and they sought to understand “the reality of trying to operationalise green or ethical values in terms of concrete purchases”. More specifically the authors argue that while such consumers are generally predisposed to purchase sustainable products their buying behaviour is also constrained by a range of more conventional factors including price, brand and availability and that in order to increase sustainable patterns of consumption it is important to understand more about how consumers arrive at their purchasing decisions. The authors’ empirical research suggested that while green consumers look to translate their sustainable values into purchasing criteria, such as energy efficiency or local sourcing, decisions concerning actual purchasing behaviour also incorporate the more conventional factors mentioned above which effectively compete with sustainability criteria. The increased complexity of decision making led green consumers to complain that sustainable shopping was “hard work” and that sustainable criteria were likely to be abandoned. More positively the authors argue that it is easier to encourage sustainable buying behaviour in fast moving consumer goods, such as food, where regular shopping allows habits to be formed and maintained rather than it is for the occasional purchase of large items like a fridge, a motor car or a house. The authors also explored the sources of information used by green consumers and while their research revealed that a wide variety of formal and informal sources were consulted it also suggested that informal sources were used more widely by the consumers who exhibited the more extreme sustainable buying behaviour.

A focus on changing behaviours is one of the key elements in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ (DEFRA) approach to sustainable consumption. This approach is partly rooted in the recognition, recently reinforced in the DEFRA (2007) survey of public attitudes and behaviours towards the environment, of an often sharp discontinuity between awareness of the environmental impacts of a particular set of behaviours and a willingness to change personal behaviour to reduce such impacts. Research by Barr *et al.* (2006), commissioned by DEFRA, focused on behaviour change in terms of establishing the link between environmental practice and everyday behaviour, targeting policy for specific lifestyle groups and establishing the

potential for change. Five main policy implications emerged from this work. Firstly, the need to remove many of the barriers, including lack of choice, cost, convenience, time and effort, to change. Secondly, the need for policy makers to work more closely with large corporations, particularly the supermarket groups, to promote sustainable consumption and behaviour. Thirdly, the need for collective, rather than individual action, in moving towards greater sustainability. Fourthly, a recommendation that changes in behaviour are likely to be best achieved by incentives rather than penalties. Finally, in making the case for incremental change the authors stressed that very few individuals were willing to make radical changes to their lifestyles.

More generally there is the argument that by harnessing the creativity and innovation that is often seen to be one of the characteristic hallmarks of marketing it may be possible to move towards a more sustainable future. The accent here might, for example, be on making sustainability a household word and a universal way of adding social, economic and environmental values to the products and services society consumes. That said there are major challenges here in that such an approach may need to span the entire product life cycle and to involve a comprehensive reassessment of product design and development, of pricing policies, of distribution and marketing communications and of product and packaging disposal.

At the same time, the arguments about changing behaviour and about harnessing the creative and innovative power of marketing are generally couched within a growth idiom. The Ethical Corporation (2003), for example, in answering the question “Would marketing sustainability mean less growth?” argues that it means “better, smarter and much more efficient ways” of production and consumption. However, more radical commentators would emphasize the stark reality that the present patterns of production and consumption are simply unsustainable. Here, marketing could conceivably play a major part in moving towards a much more self sufficient and truly sustainable society but as such it would contain the seeds of its own destruction and those of the current business model that is at the heart of contemporary capitalist society.

### **Conclusion**

While marketing and sustainability might seem to be as different as “chalk and cheese” (Ethical Corporation, 2003) there is growing evidence that the two concepts have something to offer each other. On the one hand, an increasing number of companies publicly claim to be committed to an all-embracing definition of sustainable development of a marketing mix of sustainable goods and services. That said many of the sustainability commitments claimed by companies can be interpreted as being driven by business imperatives. Thus, while many of the environmental initiatives currently being by a number of the UK’s prominent retailers are designed to reduce energy and water consumption and waste emissions they also reduce costs. On the other hand there are claims that marketing offers important ways of changing consumer behaviour and in influencing attitudes and beliefs. However, the jury will surely be out for some time on whether marketing has the power to promote the sort of radical lifestyle changes that a truly sustainable future demands.



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