

Transformational Marketing: Linking Marketing and Sustainability

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Current marketing practices promote goods and services irrespective as to what their impacts on the environment and human society are. As this often has serious negative ecological and social consequences, change in practices and better education are required. The paper argues for the need for transformational marketing which links marketing with sustainability values in order to contribute towards mitigating or reversing the environmental and other harm caused by humans because of their poor consumption choices. Such new sustainability approach to marketing would allow to: (1) change the way marketing is perceived; (2) improve its role within society and (3) emphasize the long-term responsibility of business and consumers in relation to the marketed products, services or activities. Incorporating sustainability into education for marketing would inspire marketers to develop a new business ethics that puts global human and ecological values ahead of short-term business profits. Most importantly, such ethics would build the foundations of trust and respect allowing marketing to support only moral and responsible businesses, the benefits from which would be long-term and to broader society.

Field of Research: Marketing, Business and Management

1. Introduction

Lack or neglect of business ethics is a key problem faced by the global marketing sector since the 1960s (Donaldson, 1989; Ellis et al., 2011). A clear manifestation of this is the continuing marketing of products (such as four-wheel drivers, factory-farmed meat, styrofoam and plastic bottles) that are unsustainable and contributing to the deterioration of the social and ecological systems on the planet. Climate change is the most commonly discussed problem, but equally threatening is the damage wasteful products have done to biodiversity, the social fabrics of society, availability of clean water, state of the oceans and natural habitats. In order to address this situation, it is crucial to transform human perceptions about our place in nature, patterns of resource use and their consequences, our responsibilities and obligations (Chapin et al.; 2009).

The marketing profession is equally, if not more, responsible for promoting unsustainable behavior and this is certainly not a new phenomenon (Fisk, 1974). It consistently encourages sales, hence consumption, of products and services with very little awareness of existing or past damage caused to environmental and human health. The manipulative power of marketing has been successful in eroding long-held moral norms within society replacing them with western type consumerism. The success of global marketing has also been manifested in the destruction of local businesses as well

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as in encouraging people to want things that they do not really need, cannot afford and are unsuitable for them (Brenkert, 2008).

There are abundant examples of products and services that are being marketed despite their negative impacts. Advertisements for four-wheel drive vehicles promote their comfort and mobility completely disregarding the impact they have on the urban environment in terms of high fuel consumption, pollution and social behavior on the roads. Medical drugs are still being advertised despite mounting evidence of side effects not only in relation to human health, but also to the natural environment in the countries where they are being manufactured (an example are analgesics). Overpricing (e.g. brand names or sports gear products) and profiteering (e.g. entertainment violence) are not an economic rarity and this often creates social tension. Similarly, the impacts of alcohol or gambling are not a barrier for the marketing world. Factory-farmed cheap meat and junk food are promoted as acceptable nutritional options.

Even when concerns of environmentalists and community members are loudly voiced, marketing seems to avoid responsibility. It sees its role in promoting and encouraging the use of the goods and services without questions asked about any environmental pollution, resource use, carbon footprint, health risks or other possible negative impacts. Is this something that society should continue to tolerate or is there need for reforming the marketing world?

Many believe that marketing can also help addressing current environmental and social problems (Sheth and Sisodia, 2006). The research question addressed in this paper is how marketing can help transform society. We argue that based on sustainability ethics, it can inform better business morals and practices. Some businesses see this as a niche and there is already emerging evidence of companies endorsing sustainable or green marketing promoting better environmental practices, better relationships and product responsibility. However, we argue that sustainability needs to become mainstream in the marketing culture in order for it to guide business in the right direction. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a literature review around the issue of sustainability values. This is followed by an explanation of the research approach taken in our analysis (Section 3). The findings are discussed in Section 4 and the final part (Section 5) presents the conclusions and limitations of this study.

2. Literature Review: Adopting Sustainability Values

In response to the vast environmental and social damage caused by industrialization, the Brundtland Commission (WCED, 1987) called for the business sector to be reformed in order to conform to a sustainable development ethos. It emphasized the need for a proactive, rather than reactive, stance; for an acknowledgement that the environment and sustainability are strategic business concerns; for the acceptance of the notion of product stewardship whereby companies take responsibility for the impacts of their products throughout their entire life cycle; and the importance of partnerships between business and other agents in society. These messages were targeted also to marketing, both as an industry on its own and as part of any other industry companies.

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The ecological limits of our planet were not explicitly obvious even a century ago (Newton, 2006), but now there is ample evidence about the anthropogenic climate change and pressures on the natural environment caused by the unsustainable way of living of the planet's human population (IPCC, 2007). The world has "embarked upon a new project – the first century in the history of the species that we have entered in the knowledge that we are responsible for the future of the natural world on which we depend" (Newton, 2005:220). This shared responsibility needs to penetrate all sectors of society, including marketing, and they all have to change. Educating about sustainability needs to become a core component of all professions but marketing is of a special importance as its main aim is to encourage particular behaviors within society.

Life in the industrialized world is dominated by the emphasis on competitiveness, making profits and achieving efficiencies. The task of education is to provide people with skills and knowledge that make them employable in this current globalized economy – the economy also responsible for the alarming state of the planet. There have been many calls for change in the way business operates and in some cases, educational institutions have adequately reacted by providing additional curriculum material on topics related to sustainability, such as triple-bottom-line accounting, life-cycle analysis, corporate social responsibility, industrial ecology, cleaner production, business and sustainability ethics, to name a few (Marinova et al., 2007). The problem however is that outside of the educational edifices, the "real" business world continues with its business-as-usual ignorance of the sustainability priorities. Directed by its demands for profits, marketing graduates quickly become obedient parts of the system geared along the ecological and human precipice. The educational system does not seem to equip them to "use the knowledge and information responsibly and wisely" (Lin 2006:85) in a way allowing them to improve society and business practices.

To carry out marketing in conformity with sustainability, there is an undeniable need for learning founded on ethics and value systems that overlay conventional (utilitarian) assumptions about the purpose of business (Huckle and Sterling, 1996). Sustainability values require the marketing of products and services to be consistent with their impact on the human and natural world (Huckle and Sterling, 1996). Marketing needs to be based on core virtues, such as integrity, caution, patience, perseverance, willingness to inquire in depth and examination of alternatives, leading to prudence and responsibility in relation to the natural environment and other human beings. Business requires fundamental changes in product design, production and distribution, but marketing philosophy and strategies also need to improve (Lorey, 2003:252).

Adopting sustainability values needs to be at the core of education for marketing. It needs to inspire people to practice sustainability activities in their day-to-day personal and professional lives endorsing only products and activities that do not cause harm. By rejecting support to immoral, wasteful and harmful products, the marketing profession can move to the forefront of transforming the entire society.

3. Data and Methodology: Building on Previous Research

Based on the analysis of the existing literature, the paper makes a strong argument that without incorporating sustainability values and ethics into the essence of marketing, it will continue to be a business accomplice in the persisting environmental and human degradation of our planet. Adopting the change however, would allow marketing to have a significant transformational role.

The approach we have taken is to use and interpret publicly available literature and information instead of doing an original data collection. The reason for this is that the concept of transformational marketing in order to facilitate a shift towards sustainability is a new one but can be substantiated with previous academic work. What this paper achieves is to build on previous research to the extent that it leads to new and creative outcomes (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2002).

4. Findings and Discussion: Transformational Marketing

By its nature, marketing involves ways to influence people to change their behavior. The motivation behind this is to generate profits for business whose product/service is marketed or reduce public costs in the case of government campaigns. A sustainability-informed marketing, which we describe as transformational marketing, also aims to change behavior but its main goal is to reduce the harmful environmental and social impacts. In the face of existential threats to humanity, it makes little sense to continue with the traditional way of marketing. Endorsing sustainability values in marketing would eliminate the need for trade-off between personal morals, ecological values and economic profits. In fact, only when all of these aspects could be integrated in a product, would marketing be allowed. Education for transformational marketing will need to combine the conventional learning of how to do things with the acquiring and confirmation of sustainability values as guiding principles. This will allow the development of critical awareness and ability to think in new and creative ways that have been lacking for a long time (Pepper, 1986).

Endorsing Sustainable Products and Practices

Irresponsible and sometimes unscrupulous marketing of goods and services can not only jeopardize sustainability norms of a place, but can also generate a deep imbalance in the social and environmental domains of many cultures and countries, especially in the developing world. The relationships between marketing of consumer goods and services, and social and environmental unsustainability are strongly intertwined. Below are some examples.

Over the past ten years, globalization (often represented by multinational companies) has taken existing wasteful products and production systems, which previously served people in developed countries, and extended them to the elites and rising middle class in the developing world. According to Environmental Careers Organization (2004:302), many companies establish in countries, such as China and India, to use access to raw

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materials and cheap labor to lower production costs often avoiding stricter environmental regulations. These strategies have spawned increases in environmental degradation throughout the developing world and are contributing towards increasing social disparities. The marketing of their products, both in the West and the Third World, has been also aggressive and extremely adaptive in order to maintain and attract new consumer preferences displaying ignorance or irresponsibility for any negative impacts.

Another example is tourism which has been promoted as a means for further economic growth in less developed countries. Due to immoral practices, it is causing more damage than benefit. Sex tourism and other poor behavior vastly attributed to European and North American tourists destroy local economies (Go and Jenkins, 1997:299). There have also been direct condemnations, particularly by Third World pressure groups, of tourism development as a source of moral corruption. Tourism almost inevitably has an impact, occasionally quite profound, on the aesthetic landscape and the natural environment. Tourist facilities and infrastructure may quite radically transform the quality of natural landscapes, especially in the absence of stringent regulations. Despite the many negative impacts, advertisements trying to attract tourists to such places can be seen all around the world. Ecotourism experts say that while tourism sells pleasure, in practice, it has caused vast environmental, cultural, social and economic damage to many areas (Environmental Careers Organization, 2004:178). Anthropologists see this tourism as acculturation (or cultural pollution) and refer to the socio-cultural change, desirable or not, that results from such culture contact (Nash, 1996:26).

Rapid climate change, a critical topic nowadays, is synergistically related to the lifestyle of the West (Hardy, 2003; Newton, 2005). Marketing has been a big contributor in encouraging expanding consumption of unsustainable consumer goods and services as well as of the western life style.

If the marketing profession endorses sustainability values, it will stop promoting behaviors that destroy the fabrics of society and the foundations of life on earth. Instead, transformational marketing would find creative and innovative ways to support businesses whose products have a better life-cycle analysis and smaller ecological footprint. It will encourage the use of simple longer lasting products that are also culturally better. Such approach will build reputation of trust and authority within society; people will feel comfortable with the products endorsed by marketing and financial benefits will follow.

Becoming Agent of Change

According to Boff (1999), the human race has only until 2030 to arrest the trend of self-destruction. Marketing can play a powerful role in facilitating the required fast changes. Transformational marketing can contribute towards steering business in the direction society and community groups want. It will be able to inform decision-making about the choice of sustainable products that are more socially and environmentally desirable. The role of marketing within society will change and the way it is perceived by

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consumers will also drastically improve. It will reinvent itself as a conduit between what is scientifically and socially desirable and what the business world can deliver.

According to the Korn/Ferry Institute (Moran, 2012), marketing needs to be involved in transforming how business is done as it is constantly being scrutinized not only by its CEOs and corporate boards but also by the wider community. Polonsky (2011) describes the failure of green marketing in promoting environmentally friendly products and stresses that for marketing to become transformative, it will need to find new ways of calculating and communicating the broader sustainability values moving away from financial measures that have no real environmental (or social) meaning.

The only way current trends in environmental and social deterioration can be arrested is by changing people's attitudes and value systems. Based on sustainability values, transformational marketing will be a powerful tool in achieving this. It will become a major component of the global green system of innovation (Marinova et al., 2012) shaping the future of the planet. This new approach of linking marketing and sustainability is long overdue and most needed by the emerging green and blue economies.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

Many of the negative business phenomena and marketing of unsustainable products and lifestyle take place because of the lack of sustainability ethics. Unless the conventional marketing education and the marketing profession change by incorporating sustainability aspects, humanity will continue to fail in protecting the planet, its people and species. As one of the first attempts to define the new role marketing can play for transforming existing business practices, this study has the limitation of being only a conceptual effort in integrating sustainability into the field of marketing. Unless we change the way we think about a profession, we will not see any substantial changes that could be empirically investigated as time goes on.

The findings from this paper suggest that a strong sustainability stance by marketing will help address some crucial issues in transforming society.

- a) Most businesses that still view social and environmental issues largely as added costs and afterthoughts are required to comply with triple-bottom-line accounting as a move in the right direction, but much more needs to be done to incorporate sustainability thinking in all points of the business activities, including their conception and planning. This will allow for the proper values to be reflected in the product development and will make the marketing of these products easier and part of sustainable development and the new economy;
- b) Companies construct and execute their competitive strategies, and only then deal with any environmental or social problems occurring as a result, usually only to the degree that ensures their ability to maintain legitimacy and their right to operate. The marketing of such products is also seen as completely separate from any sustainability concerns. If sustainability is to be integrated in the

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companies' business as an internalized endogenous requirement, then transformational marketing can not only assist in building a good reputation and giving a competitive advantage but can also promote the right changes within the broader society by means of marketing education for sustainability.

c) Should today's marketers are prepared to adopt sustainability ethics and work proactively in order to trigger a sustainable marketing culture, transformational marketing can change the present state of society towards sustainability.

We live in a globalized digital world where people are more connected than ever before, have more information, access to mass media and all forms of advertising. They have become more aware, more knowledgeable and their lives are more complex. As consumers, people want to find the right answers and balance their needs with those of others and the planet. Transformative marketing is not about adding an environmental or social feature to increase competitiveness; it is about responding to all these changes and demands, inspiring others and triggering a cultural sustainability revolution in business and wider society.

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