



# Sustainability Marketing – An Innovative Conception of Marketing

Conventional marketing thinking is increasingly unable to cope with the ecological, social and commercial realities that confront mankind. This conceptual article presents a vision of an integrated approach to 'sustainability marketing' and highlights a number of innovative ways in which this differs from the conventional marketing management mainstream.

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The 20<sup>th</sup> century was, amongst other things, the century of marketing. It began with the first formal marketing courses being established, such as on 'The Marketing of Products' in 1905 at The University of Pennsylvania (Bartels 1988). By the end of the century it had become a key driving force within the global economy, and increasingly a factor in all aspects of society from how political leaders are chosen and cultural heritage is preserved and funded, to how services in fields like health and education are delivered.

Marketing thinking and practice evolved over a period of decades, but the core components of 'modern mainstream marketing' thinking were largely in place by the end of the 1970s (Bartels 1988). Marketing had its philosophy which centred a company's efforts around the needs and wants of the customer as the means to deliver profits and growth. It also had an emphasis on research to understand the customer and the marketing environment, which allowed for the effective targeting of a customised 'mix' of marketing variables at specific segments of the market.

Although marketing thinking has continued to evolve since, reflecting the evolution in the social, technical and cultural environments, the core ideas of 'modern mainstream marketing' have proved remarkably resistant to change. Many new and/or 'post-modern' notions of marketing emerged to address the perceived shortcomings of the mainstream discipline. Badot et al. (2007) identified seventy different generic (as opposed to sector-specific) forms of 'new' marketing which were proposed between 1985 and 2005. These new forms of marketing were generally not very different to the established mainstream, and largely involved focusing efforts more around particular market segments, communications approaches or company capabilities. There were only two sets of ideas about marketing that went beyond adjustment and enhancement to fundamentally challenge the dominant marketing paradigm.

The first set of ideas addressed the disconnection between current marketing practices and the ecological and social realities of the wider marketing environment. This group includes macro-marketing, societal marketing, ethical marketing, green marketing, envi-

ronmental marketing and eco-marketing. Macro-marketing sought to address and integrate concerns about the social and environmental impacts of marketing activity and the relationships between markets, regulation and social welfare. It tried to systematically consider the inter-relationship between marketing and society with an emphasis on the (often unintended) impacts on environmental quality and societal welfare (Hunt 1981). This ‘big picture’ view of marketing has, however, remained a field of academic interest for a specialist few, whilst the mainstream field has become increasingly focused on the technical minutiae of marketing (Wilkie and Moore 2003). The various types of environmentally, ethically or socially orientated marketing which emerged typically sought to accommodate social and environmental concerns into existing marketing principles and practices. These concerns were recognised as having the potential to generate opportunities and threats within the marketing environment, and superior social and environmental performance was recognised as a strategy option to generate competitive advantage. This resulted in many successful niche strategies competing on a platform of social and environmental excellence, and it increased the sensitivity of larger companies to the need to be perceived as good corporate citizens and to avoid negative headlines linked to social or environmental impacts. What such strategies have failed to deliver is real change in marketing thinking or substantive progress towards more sustainable consumption and production.

The second set of ideas promoted a shift of focus away from products and the commercial transaction with the customer, and towards the relationships formed and maintained with customers. Grönroos’ (2007) book, ‘In Search of a New Logic for Marketing’ opens with a chapter entitled ‘Marketing – A Discipline in Crisis’. The crisis described is caused by the failure of marketing thought and practice to evolve, so that a marketing executive time-traveling forward from fifty years ago would be quite comfortable work-

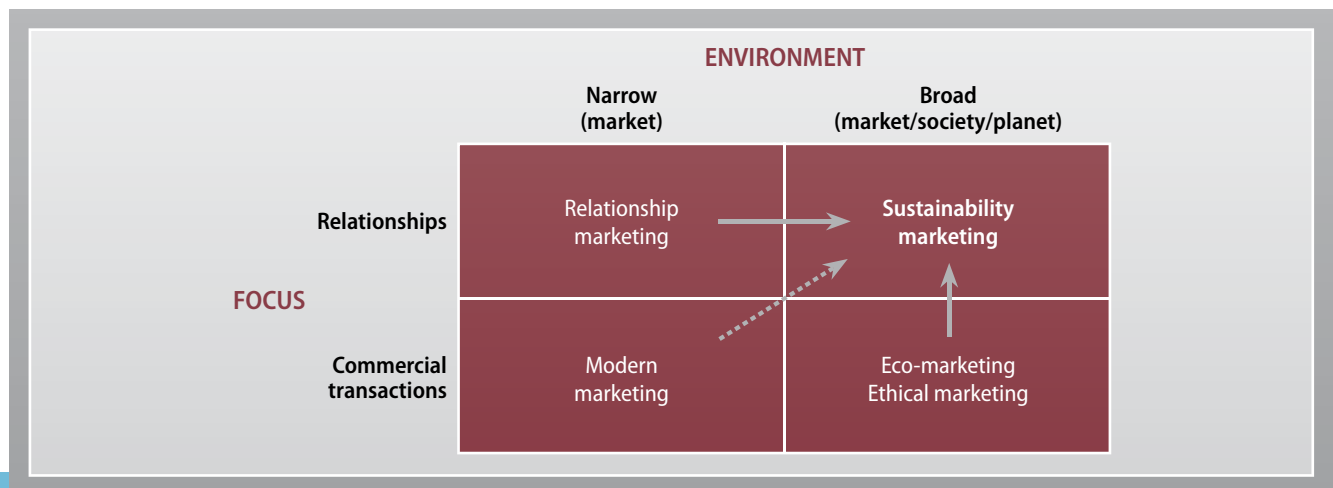
ing in a contemporary marketing department (albeit with a little catching up to do about digital media). As Grönroos phrases it: ‘Mainstream marketing continues to be orientated towards doing something to customers, instead of seeing customers as people with whom something is done.’ He proposes an alternative vision of marketing as a process of managing relationships with customers rather than of facilitating exchanges with them. In doing this, it shifts the focus away from the marketing of products to customers, and instead emphasises the delivery of value to them. Grönroos is not the only scholar to draw such conclusions; others have described the discipline as suffering a ‘mid-life crisis’ (Wilson/Gilligan 1997) or being ‘stereotyped on a derelict foundation in commodity-like textbooks’ (Gummesson 2002).

The challenges to the conventional mainstream from relationship marketing and from eco- and ethical marketing have each progressed ideas about how marketing should be conducted, and what it should encompass. The authors argue that to contribute to sustainable development, the next logical step in marketing’s development is to merge those two sets of challenging ideas to create a new concept of ‘sustainability marketing’ as set out in Figure 1.

### Towards Sustainability Marketing

In general terms, sustainability marketing involves building and maintaining sustainable relationships with customers, the social environment and the natural environment (Belz 2006). Sustainability marketing shares the long-term orientation of relationship marketing, as opposed to the conventional short-term transaction focus of modern marketing. The transition to sustainability marketing in part involves the integration of social and environmental criteria into conventional marketing thinking and processes. Therefore it requires their integration into the articulation of mar-

Fig. 1 Towards a New Concept of Sustainability Marketing



Source: Belz/Peattie 2009, p. 18

keting values and the setting of marketing goals. It also adds a new dimension to marketing research and provides a new basis on which to try to segment markets and target customers. However, the transition to sustainability marketing also requires some different and innovative thinking on the part of marketing managers and scholars in four key areas:

- treating socio-ecological problems as a starting point of the marketing process, not as a set of externalities or constraints;
- understanding consumer behaviour holistically;
- reconfiguring the marketing mix; and
- appreciating and utilising the transformational potential of marketing activities and relationships.

These four innovations in marketing thinking for sustainability are the focus of this paper.

### Socio-Ecological Problems as a Starting Point for Marketing

As well as the emergence of marketing, the 20<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed unparalleled global population expansion, economic growth and technological development. These factors combined, however, to generate negative environmental impacts to the extent that the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment diagnosed that 60% of the world's ecosystem services had suffered significant degradation (WRI 2005). This, and an enduring legacy of global poverty, endangers the quality of life and future prospects of the poorest 80% of the planet's population. Mainstream marketing decisions about strategies and pricing have conventionally tended to treat these impacts as 'externalities' and exclude their consideration, even when production or consumption activities are contributing factors.

Conventionally, marketing views the world narrowly from the perspective of the 'customer' whose wants and needs shape and drive the objectives, strategies and actions of marketers and of marketing-orientated businesses. Other forces within the marketing environment including other actors within the market, and the social, economic, political and technological forces within the wider environment may act as constraints and influences on the marketing process, but the customer stands alone as the starting point. There are some problems with this perspective:

1. It gives the rights and interests of the customer priority over those of other people and species unquestioningly, simply on the basis that the customer wants something which is legally available and that he can afford to pay for it.
2. By conceptualising people narrowly as 'consumers', it ignores their interests in other roles. A car-buyer and driver may also be a parent, pedestrian and cyclist with a wider stake in how cars are used within their community.
3. It conceptualises 'the customer' as a single entity with a single set of interests and a unified will that can be obeyed, not as a heterogeneous group whose members have multiple and potentially conflicting wants.
4. By envisaging social and ecological problems simply as constraints, or as limits to what can be achieved economically, it pri-

oritises short-term economic gain over long-term viability. Eco-footprinting data shows that collectively humankind's production and consumption behaviours are already exceeding the planet's bio-capacity and degrading the ecosystem services on which our welfare depends. By the time the ecological limit on a particular economic activity is understood through research data, that limit has already been exceeded and therefore reduced. This was graphically illustrated through the decimation of the Newfoundland cod banks through overfishing, despite it being one of the most thoroughly researched and actively managed fish populations on the planet.

5. The lack of attention to the long-term consequences of consumption may ultimately collectively disadvantage all consumers. The long-term impact of current consumption and production activities may include a destabilisation of global climate systems that effectively disadvantages all citizens including consumers.

Making marketing more sustainable will be difficult if we continue to treat the customers and their wants and needs as the sole driving force of marketing, and socio-environmental problems as part of the range of constraints on what the marketer can accomplish,

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which must be accommodated. To do so is to abstract the consumers and their interests from the social and environmental context in which they live, and to absolve the customer and the company from the consequences of their consumption and production behaviours in a way which ignores both morality and long-term viability. The alternative is to consider the customers and their wants and needs, and the socio-ecological problems to which they relate, in a balanced and co-ordinated way as the starting point for marketing processes. This intersection of socio-ecological problems and consumer wants sets the context for sustainability marketing and can also create significant new market opportunities for innovative companies. For example, outdoor patio heaters have emerged as an iconic example of a product which meets a customer need in a way which is both energy inefficient and directly contributes to the key ecological problem of climate change. In the UK, this led to retailers such as Wyevale Garden Centres and B&Q delisting such heaters from the product selection offered to customers, and in cities like Copenhagen to many bars and restaurants replacing their heaters with free-to-borrow, blanket-style wraps for customers, using designs which reflect their branding.

## A Holistic Approach to Consumer Behaviour

Sustainability marketing also requires a different approach to considering consumers and their behaviour. As the discussion above outlines, the conventional mainstream approach to consumers is to view people narrowly, reducing them to a handful of characteristics and wants, and abstracting them from the rest of their lives, the rest of society and from the ecological systems that they ultimately depend on. As Eden et al. (2007) suggest, marketing research for sustainability needs to rediscover and get to know consumers as real and complex people, rather than treating them as superficial research constructs to make assumptions about.

The conventional mainstream approach to consumer behaviour has a number of shortcomings when trying to understand it from the perspective of sustainability. Perhaps most significant is the almost total dominance of purchasing (or often purchase intention) as a specific consumer activity, even though consumption encompasses a range of behaviours that both precede and follow purchase. The importance of the moment of purchase is obvious for economists and marketers, but from a social and ecological perspective the significance of a purchase often becomes clear only during the use and post-use phase of the consumption process. For example for a typical European domestic dishwasher, 95% of its environmental impacts relate to the use phase (Otto et al. 2006). In the context of sustainability, all the stages of consumer behaviour are important.

## Reconfiguring the Marketing Mix for Sustainability

The mix represents the interface between a company and its customers. It comprises the variables that marketers control and manipulate to win the custom and loyalty of their target market. The concept of the 'mix' emerged in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but it was

McCarthy's (1960) memorable four 'P' factors of Product, Price, Place and Promotion that captured the collective marketing imagination and have endured for the last 50 years, despite many changes to the world and to marketing. The conventional 4Ps mix model has regularly been criticised for perceived weaknesses, omissions or negative side-effects. Two criticisms of the conventional mix are important from a sustainability perspective. The first is that it is producer-orientated, and therefore cuts across the consumer orientation that underpins the marketing discipline (Shaw/Jones 2005). The product is what the producer produces. The price is (usually) set by the producer according to the product's cost or what the producer believes the market will bear. The other Ps are dominated by the management of the producer's distribution channels, and promotional efforts. The second is that the 4Ps model was never intended by McCarthy to consider a wider range of stakeholders than the end user (Silverman 1995). As our appreciation of marketing strategy and the dynamics of consumer behaviour have extended, so has our understanding of the important role that a range of other stakeholders play in the development and execution of marketing strategies.

Given the challenges that the marketing discipline currently faces in terms of a transformation towards a focus on customer relationships and a need to harmonise marketing thinking and practices with the principles of sustainable development, the authors propose a new '4Cs' sustainability marketing mix (Belz/Peattie 2009). This retains the simple and memorable mnemonic approach, but is more customer orientated by considering Customer solutions, Customer cost, Convenience and Communication.

## Customer Solutions

We purchase material goods and immaterial services because they represent a perceived solution to a particular problem linked to a want or need. This is in line with the conventional marketing wis-

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dom that, for example, consumers purchasing a drill are not really buying the drill, but the holes they can now create. The advantage of envisaging what consumers buy in relation to 'solutions' rather than the more conventional view of a product as 'a bundle of benefits' is that it emphasises the limitations of purchasing a product which solves one problem, whilst causing another (either for the consumer or for others). From a sustainability perspective, products and services need to address both customer problems and socio-ecological problems. Exactly what defines a 'sustainable product' is a fraught question. This is because the answer ultimately depends on the sustainability of the energy and material resources embedded within the product, the social and environmental behaviours of all the companies within the supply chain behind it, how it is purchased and used, and what happens at the end of its life. The absolute sustainability of a product will also depend upon the sustainability of the society in which it is produced and consumed, since ultimately a single component of a system is only as sustainable as the system which it is a part of. The most workable definition of sustainable products and services refers to those that offer satisfying solutions to customer needs and significant improvements in social and environmental performance along the whole product life cycle in comparison to conventional or competing offers (Peattie 1995). This definition emphasises the following six characteristics (Belz/Peattie 2009).

- **Customer satisfaction:** If sustainable products and sustainable services do not satisfy customer needs, they will not survive in the market in the long run.
- **Dual focus:** Unlike purely environmental products, sustainable products have a dual focus on ecological and social aspects.
- **Life cycle orientation:** Sustainable products have to consider the whole life cycle from cradle to grave, i.e. extraction of raw materials, transportation, manufacturing, distribution, use, and post-use.
- **Significant improvements:** Sustainable products and sustainable services have to make significant contributions to (a) socio-ecological problems on a global level (macro level), or (b) socio-ecological problems of products analysed and identified with instruments of life cycle assessment, or c) both.
- **Continuous improvement:** Sustainable products and sustainable services are not absolute measures, but are dependent on

the state of knowledge, latest technologies and societal aspirations, which change over time. A product or service that meets customer needs and that has an extraordinary social and environmental performance today may be considered standard tomorrow. Thus, sustainable products and services have to be continuously improved regarding customer, social and environmental performances.

- **Competing offers:** A product or service that satisfies customer needs and that provides environmental and social improvements may still lag behind competing offers. Thus, the offerings of competitors are yardsticks for improvements with regard to customer, social and environmental performances.

### Consumer Cost

Price represents the money charged for a product or service, and although it also reflects demand, pricing tends to focus marketing thinking on the needs and costs of the producer and the process of exchange. From the consumer's perspective, price represents only one element of the costs incurred by acquiring, recycling or disposing of a product. 'Total customer cost' is an alternative concept that addresses the total consumption process, and also non-financial transaction costs of time and effort (see Figure 2). Consumers seeking to manage product lifetime costs, rather than purchase price for key products in terms of sustainability such as houses and cars, may behave differently, creating opportunities for innovative products and charging systems.

### Convenience

There are three key weaknesses in the conventional 'Place' mix variable from a sustainability perspective. Firstly it tends to emphasise the physical distribution of products, and therefore suffers from being envisaged largely from the producer's perspective. Conventional marketing books focus on the organisation of distribution channels and the management of the relationships between producers and the intermediaries within them. This is of little interest to the consumer, providing the channel works as intended. Secondly, thinking about place creates a focus on the point of exchange (or the service encounter), whereas the total consumption process

Fig. 2 „Total Customer Cost“



goes beyond the acquisition of products to encompass their use and their disposal. Finally, the conventional concept of place in many markets is becoming less relevant as elements of the consumption process move into an online environment.

From a consumer perspective, the key value that the distribution process delivers is convenience. Through their efforts, retailers and service providers will seek to bring together a range of goods and services in a way that makes them widely available (for example by importing out-of-season fruit) and easily accessible (for example via 24/7 store operation or good parking provision). Convenience is highly valued by consumers, and for cash-rich/time-poor customers it may be a key driver of behaviour and satisfaction. Convenience represents a challenge for sustainability marketers, since historically there has often been a trade-off between convenience and environmental performance (e.g. in the use of rechargeable

*» Marketing research for sustainability needs to rediscover consumers as real and complex people. «*

batteries). While some commentators argue that successful marketing of sustainability solutions will depend on matching conventional products for convenience (Ottman et al. 2006), others argue that our devotion to, and notion of, convenience may have to change (Shove 2003).

### Communication

The conventionally narrow and unidirectional notion of 'Promotion' in conventional marketing has long since given way to an appreciation of the importance of two-way communication with customers. For the sustainability marketer, communication is as much a vital part of the marketing mix as it is for conventional marketers. Without effective communication it will be almost impossible to make consumers aware of sustainability solutions that have been developed, and how they will integrate with consumers' lifestyles and meet their needs. Effective communication to forge long-term relationships with consumers (that continue through use and post-use of the product) will also be crucial to ensure that a whole life cycle approach is taken to managing sustainable solutions. The challenge for sustainability marketers is to develop communications campaigns which suit the nature of their consumers and the solutions they develop for them. It is, however, more challenging for sustainability marketers to take advantage of the power of marketing communications techniques, due to widespread concerns about 'greenwashing' and the social and ecological criticisms that techniques such as advertising or direct mail have attracted. Concerns about greenwashing have escalated as the number of

'green' products and claims have increased. TerraChoice's international product research revealed a tripling in green-themed advertising between 2006 and 2008 and found that 98% of products marketed on that basis committed at least one of their 'seven sins of greenwashing' (TerraChoice 2009). An approach to communication which emphasises openness and dialogue with stakeholders (including critics), rather than relying on the selective use of 'good news' information is the key to avoiding such greenwashing sins.

### Sustainability Marketing as a Transformational Force

The conventional view of marketing is as something which responds to consumers and society, but which does not have the power to influence or change society. This principle has been at the centre of some fierce debates over whether or not marketers are able to generate consumer wants (as opposed to uncovering and exploiting latent wants and needs) and over whether marketing images simply reflect back society or operate as a 'distorted mirror' which changes societal perceptions (Pollay 1986). The conventional positioning of the marketer as the passive servant of the consumer is a relatively comfortable one because it allows the marketer to devolve to the customer any sense of moral responsibility for the impacts of products on the consumer or others. However, it is arguably neither realistic nor defensible in the face of the obvious economic, political and cultural influence of large companies and the negative social and environmental impacts of the systems of production and consumption which they are a part of.

The authors therefore argue that sustainability marketing should be distinctive through recognising and pursuing the potential of companies to change the environment within which they operate. This will provide opportunities for sustainability marketing transformations achieved through the active participation of companies in public and political processes to change institutions in favour of sustainability (Belz 2001). Within the present institutional framework the successful marketing of sustainable products is possible, but difficult. It frequently fails to provide positive incentives for sustainable behaviour, both for producers and consumers, and instead often encourages unsustainable behaviour. Institutional change is important for creating the intersection between socio-ecological problems and consumption behaviours which will allow for the expansion of sustainable innovations beyond market niches.

Examples have already emerged of sustainability pioneers and leaders harnessing enlightened self-interest to pressurise or change public and political institutions in order to enhance the prospects for sustainable development (Bendell/Kearins 2005). This phenomenon is perhaps most obvious in the USA, where according to the Senate Office of Public Records there were 291 'green' firms hiring lobbyists to represent their businesses (and their associated environmental causes) in the US Congress by the end of 2008, compared to only 36 two years earlier. Such lobbying allows companies to push for changes to public purchasing policies, tougher environmental regulations, infrastructure investment, research

investment in sustainable technologies and taxation or subsidy measures which favour more sustainable products. As more societal and political institutions take steps which encourage more sustainable consumption, it becomes easier for companies to market innovative sustainable solutions. This provides a strong linkage between sustainability marketing activity and corporate social responsibility.

## Conclusions

The successful marketing of innovations which contribute to sustainability is more than a product development challenge. The technological innovation will need to be matched by innovative thinking in how we conceive of and practice marketing. Conventional marketing thinking provides a highly abstracted view of the relationship between individual companies and their target markets in which: the time-frame is relatively short; key socio-environmental impacts are assumed away as 'externalities'; and the marketing environment is considered an important influence on companies and consumers, but companies and consumers are assumed to have no power to shape that environment.

The elements of sustainability marketing, some of which have been outlined here, provide a more realistic view of markets. Sustainability marketing recognises that key players do have some power to influence their environment, and argues that companies and consumers should take some responsibility for the social and environmental impacts of production and consumption, and that the impact of today's decisions on future generations of consumers, citizens, investors and managers should not be ignored. Given the social and environmental challenges facing policy-makers and businesses, a logical question for marketers is: 'What would a sustainability-orientated vision of marketing look like?' The authors would sum it up through a pseudo-mnemonic, that sustainability marketing is marketing that endures forEVER, in that it delivers solutions to our needs which are:

- **Ecologically orientated:** taking account of the ecological limits of the planet and seeking to satisfy our needs without compromising the health of ecosystems and their ability to continue delivering ecosystem services. InterfaceFLOR is the global leader in modular flooring systems, but its strategy is strongly based on its 'Mission Zero' promise to eliminate negative environmental impacts. Since 1996 it has reduced waste to landfill by 75% and greenhouse gas emissions by 82%, as part of an effort to reach total environmental sustainability by 2020.
- **Viable:** from a technical feasibility and economic competitiveness perspective. The 2010 launch of the Smart EV in Switzerland and the UK brought to market an electric car for urban personal transport combining a range of 71 miles (112 km) and top speed of 70 mph (113 km/h) with a fuel efficiency equivalent to 300 mpg. With suitable charging infrastructure in place it provides a viable competitor to conventional cars in terms of running costs, performance, style and convenience combined with the environmental benefits of a zero emissions

car which in the UK incurs neither road tax nor London congestion charges.

- **Ethical:** in promoting greater social justice and equity, or at the very least in terms of avoiding making any existing patterns of injustice worse. Café Direct became the UK's fifth biggest coffee brand and largest FairTrade hot drinks company only 16 years after being founded in 1991. Its success was based on its principles of offering producers in poorer countries a guaranteed minimum (FairTrade) price and re-investing around 50% of its profits in initiatives to assist the development of producer communities.

*» Sustainability marketing should recognise the potential of companies to change the environment within which they operate. «*

- **Relationship based:** in moving away from viewing marketing in terms of economic exchanges, towards viewing it in terms of the management of relationships between businesses and their customers and other key stakeholders. A key to reducing private car use will be public transport solutions which instead of selling travellers individual journeys, develop a long-term value relationship with travellers. The RATP transit service in Paris offers regular travellers smart card based packages adapted for different market segments, backed with multi-media travel planning information and integrated into entertainment, cultural and other services (Goldman/Gorham 2006).

In other words, sustainability marketing seeks to blend mainstream economic and technical perspectives with the emerging concepts of relationship marketing and the social, ethical, environmental and intergenerational perspectives of the sustainable development agenda. Creating a successful blend will require some innovation in marketing thought and practice, but if it can be achieved, it will create a type of marketing that can endure.

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