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The Effectiveness of Marketing Policy Boycotts: Environmental Opposition to Marketing

Marketing strategists assert that environmental management is a critical marketing task. However, little attention has been given to environmental forces that actively oppose an organization's marketing policies. Protest groups often use boycotts in an attempt to coerce an organization to modify allegedly harmful marketing policies. The author proposes and tests a theory of the effectiveness of such boycotts.

Question: What do American Broadcasting Company, Anheuser-Busch, Burger King, Coca-Cola, Coors Brewing, Dow Chemical, General Electric, General Foods, Hasbro, Marriott, McDonald's, National Broadcasting Company, Scott Paper, SmithKline Beckman, and Union Carbide have in common?

Answer: In addition to the obvious commonality of being widely recognized corporations, these companies all have been the targets of boycotts during the 1980s that focused on their allegedly improper marketing policies.

In recent years the news media have paid considerable attention to the famous Nestlé boycott in which Nestlé was accused of marketing baby formula improperly in Third World countries (Post 1985). However, the Nestlé boycott was not an isolated incident, as managers whose organizations were also the targets of marketing policy boycotts can attest:

Any business should *not* be surprised if this happens to them. First you ask, "Why us?" And, sometimes it defies logic to understand. But you have to be prepared for something like this.

—Senior Vice-President at a major banking institution

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If you are hit by a boycott and you have to turn to someone else for advice, you are in bad shape. You should monitor the environment and be prepared for this.

—Director of Public Relations for a national nonprofit organization

Never underestimate them. Don't be lulled into thinking that they are just a bunch of nuts. They are a bunch of *organized* nuts!

—Vice President at a large publications company

Though boycotts have been employed as coercive strategies to promote change for centuries (Laidler 1913), the marketing discipline has paid little attention to this phenomenon. The study reported here is an initial attempt to analyze marketing policy boycotts. First, boycotts are defined and distinguished from the related concepts of divestment, embargoes, and individual choice behavior. Then the importance of boycotts, particularly marketing policy boycotts, to marketing is established and delineated. The interdisciplinary literature on the effectiveness of boycotts is reviewed and critiqued. Finally, a theory of the effectiveness of boycotts is proposed and is tested on a set of recent boycotts directed at allegedly improper marketing policies of target organizations.

Definition of a Boycott

According to *Black's Law Dictionary* (1983, p. 98), a boycott is a "concerted refusal to do business with

a particular person or business in order to obtain concessions or to express displeasure with certain acts or practices of person or business." To clarify more fully the nature of boycotts and distinguish them from divestment, embargoes, and individual choice behavior, three additional points must be discussed.

First, boycotts and divestment both involve a "concerted refusal to do business." However, a boycott is the refusal to conduct marketing transactions (the purchase, sale, or distribution of goods) with a target, whereas divestment is the cessation of financial investment in a target (Magnuson 1985). Second, whereas an embargo mandates by governmental decree that people must refuse to deal with another party (*Black's Law Dictionary* 1983, p. 272), organizers of a boycott may use only social pressure and not legal obligation to encourage participation in a boycott. Third, a boycott involves an organized group effort to force a target to modify its policies. A boycott therefore is qualitatively different from an individual consumer's, supplier's, or distributor's personal preference decision not to deal with a certain party. Hence, a boycott may be defined more specifically as the concerted, but nonmandatory, refusal by a group of actors (the agents) to conduct marketing transactions with one or more other actors (the target) for the purpose of communicating displeasure with certain target policies and attempting to coerce the target to modify those policies.

Importance of Boycotts to Marketing

The study of boycotts, especially marketing policy boycotts, is pertinent to the marketing discipline for five reasons.

1. *The use of boycotts is increasing.* Some marketers may dismiss boycotts as social quirks that were prevalent only in the activist period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, boycotts apparently have been increasing in frequency in recent years (Friedman 1982). Furthermore, given the recent trend toward less governmental regulation of business, protest groups may utilize boycotts even more in the future (Friedman 1985).
2. *Boycott agents are becoming more sophisticated.* Experienced boycott organizers, such as Cesar Chavez, have begun to adopt high-technology techniques (e.g., computerized mailing lists) to improve the effectiveness of their boycotts (Chavez 1983; Lindsey 1983). This increased sophistication may enable boycotts to generate more pressure on their targets.
3. *Recent court decisions have supported boycotts*

as legal forms of protest. Two key decisions have held that boycotts are constitutionally protected forms of protest and agents are not liable for the financial damage their boycotts inflict on targets (*State of Missouri v. National Organization for Women, Inc.* 1980; *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People et al. v. Clairborne Hardware Co. et al.* 1982). The exceptions are that targets may receive legal protection when the agents (typically competitors or channel members) use boycotts to set prices (Sheffet and Scammon 1985) or to reduce competition (Sullivan 1977, p. 229–65). These rulings indicate that targets generally will find only limited refuge from boycotts in the legal system.

4. *Marketing strategists have neglected marketing policy boycotts as relevant environmental forces.* Marketing strategists suggest that marketers must scan the environment to identify opportunities and threats (e.g., Wind and Robertson 1983). The recently proposed environmental management perspective "argues that marketing strategies can be implemented to change the context in which the organization operates, both in terms of constraints on the marketing function and limits on the organization as a whole" (Zeithaml and Zeithaml 1984, p. 47). In addition, Hutt, Mokwa, and Shapiro (1986) have emphasized the importance of "disruptive change strategies," such as boycotts, in the parallel political market. However, little research has been directed at environmental forces, such as marketing policy boycotts, that *actively oppose and seek to change* an organization's marketing policies.
5. *Marketing policy boycotts present a "double-barreled" challenge to marketing.* A marketing policy boycott is one in which the agents are specifically opposed to the target's marketing policies (product, price, promotion, or distribution policies). Thus, a marketing policy boycott is doubly relevant to marketing because (1) the agents' goal is *a change in the target's marketing policies* and (2) their method of attack is a boycott that seeks to *disrupt the target's marketing exchange relationships*.

Because a marketing policy boycott is a coercive attack on a target's marketing policies, *the marketing discipline should analyze the effectiveness of such boycotts*. Both agents and targets should be interested in determining why some boycotts succeed and others fail to achieve their goals. Marketing managers who are ignorant of the potential effectiveness of boycotts may respond inappropriately when faced with a boy-

cott and damage their organizations' marketing positions. Likewise, protest group leaders who believe that a marketer's policies are injurious might benefit from a better understanding of the potential effectiveness of boycotts. The blind usage of a boycott in an inappropriate situation may only result in wasted resources for an ineffective protest.

Literature Review

The review of the boycott literature is presented in three segments: (1) research findings, (2) research methodology, and (3) critique of the literature.

Research Findings

Research findings pertaining to the effectiveness of boycotts can be divided into two major categories. First, the actual or projected level of participation in boycotts has been studied ("ABC, NBC Studies Find Little Support for Ad Boycotts" 1981; Franck et al. 1982; Klapper 1978; "Negro Boycott Could Have Serious, Lasting Effect on Sales, Study Shows" 1963; Petrof 1963; Phillips 1961). As might be expected, the level of participation varies greatly among boycotts. Second, several scholars have attempted to explain a potential participant's decision to join a boycott (Clark 1965; DeCrespigny and McKinnell 1960; Friedman 1971; Hines and Pierce 1965; Jackson 1971; Laidler 1913; Mahoney 1976; Miller and Sturdivant 1977; Rea 1974; Rodgers 1982). In this second body of research, six factors are hypothesized as the determinants of boycott participation.

1. Potential participants cannot support a boycott if they are unaware of the target of the boycott.
2. Potential participants with certain values are, in general, more likely to participate in any boycott.
3. Potential participants support only those boycotts whose goals are consistent with their attitudes.
4. Potential participants will not join a boycott if their personal cost to participate is high.
5. If the social pressure to support a boycott is high, potential participants are more likely to join the boycott.
6. Potential participants are more likely to support a boycott that is promoted by a highly credible leader.

Research Methodology

To evaluate boycotts empirically, researchers generally have chosen to study either (1) one or two isolated boycotts by using primary information (consumer or boycott leader interviews) or (2) a broader

cross-section of boycotts by using secondary information (media news reports). The former methodological approach was used in the following studies.

- Phillips (1961) analyzed black consumer support for a boycott of segregated lunchcounters in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, by comparing shopping patron volume in three stores.
- During a boycott by blacks of Atlanta department stores in 1960, Petrof (1963) surveyed 594 black households to identify changes in their shopping behavior.
- To evaluate the relative effectiveness of black boycotts in 1959 in Tuskegee, Alabama, and in 1968 in Durham, North Carolina, Jackson (1971) surveyed 150 and 151 local residents, respectively.
- Friedman (1971) evaluated boycott leadership characteristics and activities by surveying 125 respondents representing 72 local protest groups involved in the national food price boycotts of 1966–1967.
- In an evaluation of the personality characteristics of participants in a nationwide meat boycott in 1973, Mahoney (1976) interviewed 47 shoppers in Richmond, Virginia.
- Miller and Sturdivant (1977), in a study of the impact of publicity about a boycott of a local fast food outlet, surveyed 442 respondents to ascertain their future patronage intentions.

The second methodological approach of analyzing a broader cross-section of boycotts by using secondary information has been employed less frequently.

- Friedman (1982) content analyzed a set of newspapers and magazines to identify the occurrence of consumer boycotts during the period 1970–1980.
- In a related study using the same data base, Friedman (1985) described various boycott attributes, including actions taken by boycotting groups and the targets' offending actions, and made qualitative judgments about the effectiveness of these 90 boycotts.

Critique of the Boycott Literature

Most scholars generally have concluded that as boycott participation increases, the economic pressure on the target increases because of the greater number of severed exchange relationships. In turn, they have reasoned that as the economic pressure on the target increases, the likelihood of target concessions also increases. Thus, research has examined primarily the purported causal link between economic pressure on the target and the effectiveness of a boycott. Though

this work has made significant contributions to understanding of the effectiveness of boycotts, four weaknesses in the body of literature limit future theoretical development.

1. *The “economic pressure equals effectiveness” assumption.* Theorists generally have assumed that the level of economic pressure generated by a boycott is the sole determinant of the boycott’s effectiveness. Other potentially critical determinants of boycott effectiveness have been neglected.
2. *Lack of a dyadic perspective.* The preponderance of the research focuses solely on boycott agents, with little explicit attention to targets of boycotts. For example, no researcher has sought to obtain through direct interviews the perceptions of boycott targets. The weakness of such a noninteractive or unitary perspective has been discussed in the marketing literature (Bonoma, Bagozzi, and Zaltman 1978).
3. *Absence of an integrative theoretical foundation.* Most of the contributions lack a unifying conceptual framework to support a comprehensive theory of boycott effectiveness. Little effort has been taken to define explicitly such key constructs as “effectiveness of a boycott” or to specify appropriate testable hypotheses.
4. *Paucity of empirical support.* Though some scholars have attempted to gather empirical data, the quantity and quality of such data are limited. More precisely, *no prior research effort has analyzed a broad cross-section of marketing policy boycotts by utilizing multiple sources of primary information.*

These weaknesses in boycott research suggest the need for explicating and testing a comprehensive theory of boycott effectiveness.

A Theory of the Effectiveness of Boycotts

The theory proposed here (1) specifies the meaning of “effectiveness of boycotts” and (2) posits three determinants of boycott effectiveness. A dyadic perspective is used and two previously neglected, but potentially critical, determinants of boycott effectiveness are incorporated.

Effectiveness of Boycotts

The theory explicated here holds that effectiveness of a boycott should be measured as the *achieved change in the target’s disputed policies*. Though the particular objectives of various agents’ boycotts may be very dissimilar, all boycott agents seek to force a target to

change certain policies. If a target makes absolutely no modifications in its policies, a boycott is ineffective. In contrast, if the target completely capitulates to the agents and abandons its disputed policies, the boycott is highly effective.

Determinants of Boycott Effectiveness

Three variables are posited as determinants of the effectiveness of a boycott: (1) economic pressure, (2) image pressure, and (3) policy commitment.

Economic pressure. Scholars have discussed extensively how a boycott can create financial hardship for a target. As marketing exchange partners, including consumers, suppliers, and/or distributors, refuse to interact with a target, the target may suffer some degree of economic loss, especially if these exchange partners cannot be easily replaced. This economic pressure may be increased substantially when significant constituent groups, such as labor unions, consumer groups, or political organizations, encourage their members to support the boycott. The agents hope this economic pressure will induce the target to make the desired changes.

Image pressure. Though scholars have stressed the economic pressure component of boycotts, they generally have failed to emphasize that *boycotts also may create pressure on the target’s image*. The announcement of a boycott against an organization may create undesirable publicity for the target, whether or not the agents’ charges are justified. If the agents can sustain sympathetic media coverage of their boycott, the target’s image may become tarnished. This potential threat to its image may persuade the target to concede, even if the economic pressure of the boycott is minimal. This image pressure component of boycotts is critical because organizations are becoming increasingly concerned about cultivating a positive public image (Guzzardi 1985).

Policy commitment. By not adopting a dyadic perspective, scholars have overlooked the importance of the *target’s policy commitment* as a determinant of the effectiveness of boycotts. Policy commitment is the level of resistance that the target decides to adopt, at the outset of the boycott, in response to the agents’ coercive efforts to modify its policies. For various reasons the target may believe that concessions to the agents are not in its best interests. For instance, the target may believe the agents’ complaints have no merit, the agents’ coercive tactics are not appropriate, or the costs of policy modifications are unacceptable. In these cases of high policy commitment, the target prefers to endure the economic pressure and image pressure created by the boycott rather than agree to the demanded policy changes.

Hypotheses

The theory of the effectiveness of boycotts suggests the following hypotheses.

- H₁: The effectiveness of a boycott is related positively to the economic pressure on the target.
- H₂: The effectiveness of a boycott is related positively to the image pressure on the target.
- H₃: The effectiveness of a boycott is related negatively to the target's policy commitment.

Method

Selection of Boycott Cases

To identify marketing policy boycotts to use for testing the theory, 16 newspaper and periodical indices were reviewed for their entries under "boycotts."

1. *Alternative Press Index*
2. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution Index*
3. *Business Index*
4. *Business Periodicals Index*
5. *Canadian Newspaper Index*
6. *Chicago Tribune Index*
7. *Christian Science Monitor Index*
8. *Index to Black Newspapers*
9. *Los Angeles Times Index*
10. *New Orleans Times-Picayune Index*
11. *New York Times Index*
12. *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*
13. *San Francisco Chronicle Index*
14. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Index*
15. *Wall Street Journal Index*
16. *Washington Post Index*

In addition, three newsletters concerned exclusively with publicizing boycotts were reviewed (*Boycott Census*, *Grapevine*, and *National Boycott Newsletter*). This is the first empirical study of boycotts to use these newsletters for information.

Only those boycotts which met three criteria were used in the data collection phase. First, because of language problems and data collection costs, only boycotts in which both the target and agent organizations were based in the United States or Canada were used. Second, the boycotts must have been active during the period of January 1, 1981, to December 31, 1984. An active boycott was defined as one that was called for publicly by the agents during this time pe-

riod. Cases in which an agent only discussed the possibility of boycotting without actually issuing a formal call for a boycott were not included. Respondent recall problems precluded the use of boycotts active prior to 1981. Third, only boycotts that had a primary goal of modifying a target's marketing policies were included. Marketing policy boycotts were defined as those seeking to change a target's product, price, promotion, or distribution policies.

The review yielded 38 reported marketing policy boycotts. Five of these cases were discarded because the identity and/or present location of the agents' organization could not be determined. In addition, three more cases were discarded because the target and agent organizations indicated that, contrary to the news reports, a boycott did not occur. The remaining 30 identifiable and confirmed boycotts were used for data collection. Appendix A lists the names of the agents and targets involved in each of the 30 boycott cases. In addition, brief descriptions of the central policy disputes are provided.

Sources of Information

One of the major weaknesses of prior studies of boycott effectiveness has been the lack of a dyadic perspective. In this study respondents from *both agents and targets* were interviewed. To maximize respondent cooperation and candor, the respondents were guaranteed anonymity. Because some respondents may have been inclined to provide answers that reflected favorably on their organizations, articles from newspapers and magazines, supposedly impartial third parties, also were collected for analysis. Thus, for each boycott, efforts were made to collect information from three sources: (1) the target's interview, (2) the agent's interview, and (3) news articles about the boycott.

Data Collection

Telephone interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method for collecting the necessary data (Sudman and Bradburn 1982). Telephone interviews provided (1) flexibility in identifying the most qualified respondents in the organizations, (2) cost-effective data collection, (3) freedom in interviewer probing, and (4) the potential for good cooperation.

Respondent Selection

The question of whom to interview within an organization has been examined in the marketing discipline (e.g., Anderson 1985; Phillips 1981). Though the use of multiple intraorganizational informants is appropriate in certain circumstances, two factors dictated that only one informant be interviewed from each of the target and agent organizations. First, within most organizations, one person had the responsibility of managing his/her organization's boycott affairs. Thus,

TABLE 1
Correlation Matrix^a

	Effectiveness of Boycott	Economic Pressure	Image Pressure	Policy Commitment
Effectiveness of boycott	1.00			
Economic pressure	.54 (.006)	1.00		
Image pressure	.50 (.009)	.76 (.0001)	1.00	
Policy commitment	-.55 (.005)	-.43 (.026)	-.32 (.079)	1.00

^ap-values in parentheses.

usually only one qualified informant could answer the questions. Second, where there were multiple qualified respondents, usually only one person was authorized by the organization to respond to inquiries about the boycott.

Questionnaire Development and Format

After an extensive review of the boycott literature, interviewing guides were developed. They were composed of open-ended questions pertaining to the four theoretical constructs (effectiveness of the boycott, economic pressure, image pressure, and policy commitment). To ensure content validity, the wording of these questions was refined during pretest interviews with three targets and three agents involved in labor relations boycotts. Open-ended questions were used because pretest respondents strongly preferred to explain their boycott experiences rather than answer closed-ended questions. Because boycotts are dynamic, the respondents were encouraged to discuss the evolution of events related to their boycott experience.

Response Rate

A response rate of 70% was obtained (21 of 30 identifiable and confirmed cases). In 21 cases interviews were completed with both agent and target, in two cases an interview was completed with the target but not the agent, in three cases an interview was completed with the agent but not the target, and in four cases interviews were not completed with either the agent or the target.

The most common reason given for nonresponse was a lack of time to complete the interview. A comparison between the 21 cases in which interviews were completed and the other nine cases did not reveal any apparent differences that would affect the interpretation of the results. Though 21 cases may be a small sample by some standards, Sawyer and Peter (1983) persuasively argue that there should *not* be a bias against appropriately selected small samples, especially if the obtained results are significant (as they are here).

Coder Evaluation

Quantitative measures of the constructs were obtained by having 16 coders content analyze the collected information. Because coders might have imposed their own "models" on the data if they had been asked to evaluate all four constructs (i.e., coders may believe that effectiveness of a boycott and policy commitment should logically be negatively related), each coder was asked to evaluate only one construct. Thus, each of the four constructs was evaluated by four different coders. To further minimize any potential bias for the coders, the three information sources (target interviews, agent interviews, and news reports) were edited to remove all references to the other three constructs not being evaluated.

The coders were trained and given explicit written and verbal instructions about the content analysis task. For cases in which the coders perceived conflicting information, they were instructed to use their best judgment to identify the most impartial and best supported evidence. For each case, the coders responded to a set of items using 7-point Likert scales. The items were generated from the review of the boycott literature and analysis of the agents' and targets' comments. Four items per theoretical construct were developed, as shown in Appendix B. The coders worked independently after completing their training session.

Results

Intercoder Reliability

By the formula suggested by Krippendorff (1980, p. 138), the intercoder reliability in the four categories was calculated.

Rating Category	Intercoder Reliability
Effectiveness of boycott	.86
Economic pressure	.77
Image pressure	.59
Policy commitment	.77

Krippendorff (1980, p. 147) suggests that standards for intercoder reliability "must be related to the validity requirements imposed upon research results, specifically to the cost of drawing wrong conclusions. . . . If it is an exploratory study without serious consequences, that level may be relaxed considerably, but it should not be so low that the findings can no longer be taken seriously." Given the exploratory nature of the research, the reliability results for effectiveness of the boycott, economic pressure, and policy commitment are reasonably strong. The relatively weaker reliability rating for image pressure indicates that caution should be used in interpreting the results related to that variable.

Evaluation of Hypotheses

For each of the 21 cases, values for the four constructs were calculated by summing the four coders' scores across the 4-item measures. Correlation analysis then was used to evaluate the relationships among the four constructs. The results, reported in Table 1, support all three hypotheses.

Discussion

As hypothesized, the results suggest that a boycott will be most effective when the economic pressure and image pressure on a target are high and the target's policy commitment is low. The relationships among the explanatory variables of economic pressure, image pressure, and policy commitment also warrant mention. The high positive correlation between economic pressure and image pressure suggests that (1) as the media intensify their coverage of the boycott (increase image pressure), more consumers become aware of and support the boycott (increase economic pressure), and/or (2) as more consumers join the boycott, the media recognize the groundswell of activity and increase their coverage of the boycott. Likewise, the negative correlations between policy commitment and the two forms of boycott pressure suggest that (1) targets tend to reduce their commitment when they perceive the pressure potential of the boycott to be very high and/or (2) agents tend to become discouraged and lessen their boycott efforts when they perceive the targets to be firmly committed to their policies.

Because both agents and targets presumably desire to implement strategies that maximize their interests in the boycott, the following sections discuss the strategic implications of the research. The strategic recommendations are derived from the logical relationships among the theoretical variables and are supported extensively by the verbatim comments of the agent and target respondents.

Strategic Implications for Targets

The theory of boycott effectiveness suggests that, when confronted with a boycott, targets should evaluate two variables. First, they must estimate how much pressure (economic and image) the boycott may potentially generate. Second, they must determine how committed they are to the policies the agents desire to change. As shown in Figure 1, four strategic responses are then available to the target.

Policy modifications with a warning. When the target is not strongly committed to its disputed policies and the pressure potential of the boycott is minimal, the target may, at its discretion, make the policy changes sought by the agents. However, the target also should send a clear signal to the agents that, if the policy changes are made, it is *not* because the target feared the boycott. Unless the target issues this warning, these agents or other agents may be encouraged to use more boycotts against the target in the future. For example, one target respondent revealed that, even though the changes sought by the agents were reasonable, his organization refused to yield because of a belief that concessions would only invite additional boycotts from other protest groups.

Damage minimization. Targets must not forget that boycotts sometimes can generate significant pressure, as the following target responses indicate.

The boycott was very damaging. . . . Our share [of the market] dropped from 49% to the low 20's. . . . We lost millions [of dollars] in revenues.

FIGURE 1
Strategic Options for Boycott Targets

		Target's Policy Commitment	
		Low	High
Boycott's Pressure Potential	Low	Policy Modifications with a Warning	Low Profile
	High	Damage Minimization	Counterattack

The boycott had a big effect. It generated nationwide publicity and it really caused a scandal for [our organization]. . . . The media caused the worst reaction. . . . It became an inquisition.

When the target perceives that the agents have a legitimate complaint and the pressure potential is high, the optimal strategy should be to revise the incorrect policies quickly before the boycott can inflict unnecessary damage. In at least three cases, targets even invited agent representatives to join their advisory panels so that the potential for future conflicts could be reduced.

Low profile. As shown in the following target respondents' comments, sometimes the target is adamantly opposed to the changes sought by the agents.

They are paranoid and twisted. . . . In this kind of issue you can't sacrifice even a little bit. If you sacrifice it a little bit, you lose it all.

[We] are a symbol. The organizer of the protest is very candid that there has to be some symbol of bad persons who have resources. That is why we are singled out. . . . [Their goal] is socialistic and they are trying to undermine the free market system. They know it and they don't give a damn.

[Their charges] were totally inaccurate and false. . . . I don't appreciate my judgment as [a manager] being challenged by a flotilla of nuts.

When the target is highly committed to its policies and the boycott's pressure potential is relatively low, the target should adopt a low profile. As some target respondents indicated, in this situation a target should avoid making overly aggressive responses that merely aid the agents.

Let them make their own mistakes. In the beginning, we would issue statements and then they would throw our statements back in our face. Now we don't make any more statements.

Most important, you need to read the situation and decide whether you should adopt a low profile or a high profile. If they are being highly inflammatory, you need to take a similar approach. But, if there are just a few rumblings of protest out there, you should stay low profile.

Counterattack. Sometimes a boycott's pressure potential is too great for a target to ignore. In these high commitment/high pressure situations, the target must act decisively to attempt to minimize the pressure of the boycott. As repeatedly stressed by target respondents, this counterattack should feature a vigorous publicity campaign to present the target's perspective.

In the beginning, we were quite passive. But after the group issued blatant misrepresentations, we became more aggressive in our response. Now, more newspaper editors and consumers are more acceptant of our position.

The best offense is a good defense. We got our story across in the media so that people could see two sides

of the story. . . . We responded to any negative publicity. We wanted to make sure we got our fair share of media coverage.

In summary, because almost any organization could be the target of a boycott, all organizations should consider how to respond strategically if they are confronted with one. By choosing the optimal strategic response, a target may be able to maintain its desired policies and minimize the damage caused by a boycott.

Strategic Implications for Agents

Much like their targets, agents should base their strategies on an evaluation of the pressure potential (economic and image) of their boycott and the target's policy commitment. As shown in Figure 2, four strategic options are available to agents.

Nonthreatening information exchange. Agents should recognize that most targets are very protective of their images and the mere mention of a possible boycott can be threatening to them. For example, one target respondent commented:

We have a good record in [this disputed area] and we feel we are a leader in [our industry] in dealing with this problem. . . . We were very frustrated that they did not communicate their views adequately with us before they went public [with a boycott].

Therefore, if a target is not strongly opposed to the policy changes sought by the agents, the agents should avoid any actions, such as a boycott, that may alienate the target. This is particularly true when the

FIGURE 2
Strategic Options for Boycott Agents

		Target's Policy Commitment	
		Low	High
Boycott's Pressure Potential	Low	Nonthreatening Information Exchange	Mandated Change Strategies
	High	Attention-Getting Boycott	Protracted Siege Boycott

agents lack the resources or expertise to generate a high pressure boycott. In low pressure/low commitment situations, the agents should provide the target with nonthreatening information that supports the agents' desired policy revisions.

Attention-getting boycott. Sometimes, even though a target has little commitment to the disputed policies, it may not respond expeditiously to agents' complaints. Usually the target's unresponsive behavior is a sign of organizational insensitivity. Agent respondents suggested that if the agents can potentially generate a high pressure boycott, a boycott should be used, even if reluctantly, to capture the target's attention and to convey the agents' seriousness of purpose.

We did not boycott at first. . . . We did not want to hurt them. We just wanted to get their attention. . . . We wanted them to see that there was a problem.

It is not our policy to boycott. We would rather deal with them from a different way. . . . There was some trouble with communication. They were not listening as well as they should have [to our complaints].

Mandated change strategies. When a boycott has little potential to generate pressure and the target is strongly committed to its policies, the agents should not use a boycott. Instead, the agents should pursue strategies that can mandatorily force the target to change its disputed policies. For example, agents may attack the legality of the target's disputed policies, as anti-nuclear-power activists have done (Brown and Davis 1983). Also, agents may attempt to modify a target's policies by gaining control of the ownership of the target, as conservatives led by Senator Jesse Helms recently tried to do with the Columbia Broadcasting System (Kelly 1985). Though a boycott usually requires the support of a large number of participants to be effective, these mandated change strategies can be employed by a relatively small group with sizable financial resources.

Protracted siege boycotts. Several agent respondents commented that, even though a boycott may generate great pressure, boycotters must be prepared for a protracted struggle when the target is strongly committed to its policies.

If you do decide to boycott, be prepared to rechannel and redirect your resources. . . . Boycotts are very energy and time consuming.

Boycotts do work, but the amount of energy to make them work is quite a lot. . . . You need to get at least 5 people who can dedicate one year out of their lives [to the boycott] and nothing else.

To establish a good track record for later [for dealing with other targets], you have to stick through to the end. . . . Three years is relatively quick for a boycott [to achieve its goals].

The agents must maintain the boycott's high level of

pressure and hope the target eventually will decide that the boycott is more trouble than the disputed policies are worth.

In summary, the most important strategic implication of this study for potential boycott agents is that a boycott should be used only in selected situations. If used in an inappropriate situation, a boycott may only antagonize the target unnecessarily or waste the agents' resources on an ineffective protest.

Directions for Future Research

As the first comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of marketing policy boycotts, this study suggests several conceptual and methodological issues that should be considered in future research. The proposed theory of boycott effectiveness centers on measuring the achieved levels of economic pressure and image pressure generated by boycotts. Future research might consider the actual procedures used by boycott agents to generate high levels of pressure on their targets.

The relatively weak intercoder reliability rating for the image pressure construct indicates that coders differed rather widely in their evaluation of the information provided for this construct. This variability may be related to the highly subjective nature of image pressure, especially in comparison with economic pressure, which usually was described in quantitative terms in the coders' information sources. Perhaps a quantitative measure of image pressure can be developed that more precisely captures this construct.

Most target respondents discussed their level of policy commitment in terms of the perceived validity of the agents' demands. Future research could consider whether targets also increase their level of policy commitment when their "management style" causes them to react negatively to external influence attempts or when the perceived costs associated with the policy changes are high. In addition, as suggested by one reviewer, future research could evaluate what effect acrimonious negotiations with the agents have on a target's level of policy commitment.

For potential targets, a central issue is how to predict whether and when an agent will resort to a boycott strategy during a conflict situation. Though agents apparently use boycotts primarily when they feel the target is not responsive to their demands in a timely way, this prediction issue could be explored more thoroughly.

Because boycotts are dynamic, more attention should be directed to how relationships between the agent and target change over the course of a boycott. Longitudinal analysis of a single boycott, using a series of agent and target interviews, may be beneficial.

The strategic recommendations offered are based on the assumption that both targets and agents are rel-

actively knowledgeable of their opponent's strategic plans. During the interviews, several agent and target respondents mentioned how their opponents used very creative "intelligence gathering" operations, such as posing as members of the press. Future research could evaluate the accuracy and ethicality of these functions. Also, the impression management strategies used by the adversaries to influence the opponent's perception of their commitment and power could be evaluated.

The study focused solely on publicly announced boycotts reported in the media. Future research could evaluate the frequency and effectiveness of boycotts that are threatened but never actually called for by the agents.

Though the potential problem of respondent bias was addressed in the study by using three sources of information (agents' interviews, targets' interviews, and news reports) and guaranteeing respondent anonymity, research is needed to evaluate the optimal methods for analyzing sensitive interorganizational conflicts such as boycotts.

The study examined boycotts as one specific technique that "confrontation groups" can use to force a target organization to modify its marketing policies. Future research in marketing might consider other types of techniques that these groups can employ, such as legal action, ownership control, rumor generation, and sabotage.

Conclusion

Marketing strategists advocate the judicious usage of organizational resources to maximize environmental opportunities. However, previous research in marketing has not paid enough attention to environmental forces that may actively oppose and attempt to modify an organization's marketing policies. Specifically, the marketing discipline has ignored the potential importance of marketing policy boycotts. A theory of the effectiveness of boycotts is presented and tested. The results suggest that both marketing managers and protest group leaders might benefit by understanding more fully the determinants of the effectiveness of boycotts.

Appendix A

Summary of Boycotts Studied

The target is listed first and the agent is listed second.

1. Adirondack Trust Co. (Saratoga Springs, NY) vs. Neighbors for Fair Banking (a local coalition of homeowners)
Complaint: The bank's recall and rewriting of home mortgages at higher interest rates.
2. *Baltimore Sun* newspaper vs. NAACP (Baltimore Chapter)
Complaint: The newspaper's lack of news coverage of events related to the black community.
3. Burger King Corp. vs Boycott Burger King Coalition (a coalition of animal rights activists)
Complaint: The restaurants' marketing of veal products from animals allegedly raised under inhumane conditions.
4. *Chicago Sun-Times* newspaper vs. Midwest Community Coalition (composed of concerned citizens in the Chicago area)
Complaint: The newspaper's allegedly offensive coverage of Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign and its insufficient dealings with black-owned businesses.
5. *Dallas Times-Herald* newspaper vs. local real estate developers in the Dallas area
Complaint: The inclusion of certain articles in the newspaper's real estate section that purportedly denigrated local real estate developers.
6. Folger's Coffee (Procter & Gamble) vs. Committee for Justice in El Salvador (a group protesting U.S. support for the El Salvador government)
Complaint: The company's marketing of coffee, made from coffee beans purchased in El Salvador, which supposedly supported that country's repressive government.
7. Food Lion Grocery Stores vs. NAACP
Complaint: The chain's lack of transactions with black-owned businesses, including advertising, banking, and suppliers.
8. General Electric vs. GE Boycott Committee (a coalition of anti-nuclear activists)
Complaint: GE's involvement in the nuclear products industry.
9. General Foods vs. Church of Christ
Complaint: General Foods' advertising on television programs that contained objectionable sexual content and violence.
10. Girl Scouts (Detroit Chapter) vs. Right to Life-Lifespan, Inc. (a pro-life organization)
Complaint: The Girl Scouts' discussion of abortion in its "Teen-age Pregnancy Prevention and Intervention Project."
11. Hasbro Industries vs. Blacks Against Nukes (a coalition of citizens opposed to nuclear war)
Complaint: The company's marketing of G. I. Joe, a war toy, which allegedly stimulated aggressive behavior in children and glorified war.
12. *Homemaker's Magazine* vs. Campaign Life (a pro-life organization)
Complaint: The magazine's content which was perceived to be pro-abortion.
13. Jersey Central Power Co. vs. People's Utility Fight (a coalition of citizens serviced by Jersey Central Power)
Complaint: The utility's proposal to increase rates to pay for the damage at the Three Mile Island disaster.
14. Marriott Hotels vs. Paralyzed Veterans of America
Complaint: The lack of wheelchair accessibility in some hotel rooms.
15. McDonald's Restaurants vs. Boycott McDonald's Coalition (a coalition of animal rights activists)
Complaint: The chain's inclusion of meat products on its menu and its refusal to add more nonmeat items to its menu.
16. Mellon Bank vs. Denominational Mission Strategy (a coalition of clergy and labor activists)
Complaint: The bank's refusal to lend to local steel businesses.
17. Scott Paper Co. vs. Scott Paper Boycott Committee (a

coalition of environmental activists)

Complaint: The company's application of herbicides and methods of product harvesting that allegedly harmed the local environment.

18. *SmithKline Beckman Co. vs. Alliance for the Liberation of Mental Patients* (a coalition concerned with protecting the rights of mental health patients)
Complaint: The company's marketing of certain drugs that allegedly caused severe side effects for mental health patients.
19. *Theatre Project Company (St. Louis) vs. Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights*
Complaint: The theatre's production of a play, "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You," which is offensive to some Catholics.
20. *United Way vs. American Life Lobby* (a pro-life organization)
Complaint: The organization's alleged funding of abortion-related activities.
21. *Wall Street Journal vs. Mobil Oil Corp.*
Complaint: The newspaper's allegedly biased coverage of Mobil's activities.

The following nine boycotts were not analyzed because either the agent or the target declined to be interviewed.

22. *Anheuser-Busch Corp. vs. People United to Serve Humanity (PUSH)* (an organization founded by Rev. Jesse Jackson to foster black economic opportunities)
Complaint: The lack of opportunities for black-owned establishments, including suppliers and distributors, to do business with the brewer.
23. *Dow Chemical Corp. vs. Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides* (a coalition of environmental activists)
Complaint: Dow's marketing of certain herbicides that allegedly were environmentally harmful.
24. *Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., vs. a group of concerned nutritionists*
Complaint: The publisher's marketing of *The Beverly Hills Diet*, a book that advocated an allegedly unsafe diet plan.
25. *Southland Corp. vs. National Federation for Decency* (a conservative organization based in Mississippi)
Complaint: 7-11 Stores' sale of adult magazines.
26. *Coors Corp. vs. NAACP*
Complaint: Coors' management's attitude toward blacks and Coors' lack of dealings with black-owned businesses, including suppliers and distributors.
27. *American Broadcasting Company vs. Moral Majority* (a conservative organization founded by Rev. Jerry Falwell)
Complaint: ABC's airing of the movie "The Day After," which supposedly supported the anti-nuclear movement.
28. *Coca-Cola Corp. vs. People United to Serve Humanity (PUSH)*
Complaint: Coca-Cola's lack of business dealings with black-owned businesses, including suppliers and distributors.

29. *Union Carbide vs. Future* (an environmentalist group)
Complaint: Union Carbide's uranium plant's allegedly harmful impact on the environment.
30. *National Broadcasting Company vs. Coalition for Better TV* (a coalition of conservative religious groups)
Complaint: The supposedly excessive emphasis on sex and violence in certain television programs.

Appendix B Coder Evaluation Items

Effectiveness of the Boycott

1. The agent achieved its goals because, for whatever reasons, the target changed the practices to which the agent objected.
2. For whatever reasons, the target modified the practices the agent had been complaining about.
3. The agent "won" this dispute because, for whatever reasons, the target made the changes sought by the agent.
4. The agent was successful because, for whatever reasons, the target changed the practices the agent felt were improper.

Economic Pressure

1. The boycott had, or would have had, a negative impact on the target's financial condition.
2. The boycott was, or would have been, a serious threat to the target's revenue flow.
3. The boycott placed, or would have placed, the target in a difficult financial position.
4. The target had, or would have had, problems dealing with the economic impact of the boycott.

Image Pressure

1. The boycott tarnished, or threatened to tarnish, the target's public image.
2. The target was concerned about the potentially negative effects of the publicity generated by the boycott.
3. The press was, or would have been, interested in covering this boycott.
4. The target was, or would have been, concerned by the media's coverage of the agent's complaints.

Policy Commitment

1. The target felt that the complaints made by the agent were not valid.
2. The target felt that its disputed practices were proper.
3. The target was determined to defend its disputed policies.
4. The target was committed to maintain the practices the agent sought to change.

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