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## The Knowledge

Advanced Knowledge for Senior Marketers | January 2015

### Consumed by Consumption

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#### Synopsis

Despite an increase in awareness and knowledge, the problem of society's unsustainable behaviour continues to grow. Possible reasons proposed by some researchers include inconsistency in consumer behaviour and attitudes, a lack of awareness and action surrounding citizen duty, and greater need for macro-institutional sustainability research and policy initiatives. It's likely that all play a role, but many agree that at the crux of the matter is the need to better understand sustainable consumer behaviour.

Professor Sherry Finney brings you up to date on some of the most recent research in this field and reveals that, despite more than a quarter century of research, there is so much more to be learned and explored on the topic.

#### Definition

So, what is sustainable marketing, exactly? There are many proposed definitions, but one states, sustainable marketing is the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers in such a way that both natural and human capital are preserved and enhanced throughout.

Sustainable marketing is still very much about the process of exchange and creating value – and this is not surprising since that is the essence of marketing. But, the added emphasis is on the need to also maintain sustainable and economically feasible associations with other entities that are in any way, shape or form, socially or environmentally affected by marketing's activities. Sustainable marketing is, therefore, much more involved and accountable than the role played by 'green marketing' of earlier times.

#### Current thinking

The question is often debated; should we choose a "bottom up" or "top down" strategy to turn around this reckless mass consumption behaviour practiced by society? Realistically, both are needed. However, it is argued that unsustainable levels and types of consumption are at the center of the sustainable development challenge. A basic understanding of people and why they behave the way they do is the most natural starting point.

Research on the "green consumer" is advancing but is still far from being fully explored. We've learned that findings have been inconclusive when considering demographic and knowledge variables for segmentation. There appears to be a value or belief system in place where those consumers who are more open to change are more likely to adopt green purchasing behaviour. There is an acknowledgement that choosing a green alternative means making a concession in some form. If the business world moved toward a more holistic adoption of sustainable marketing, this perception of having to make a trade off would be non-existent, as everyone would be operating under the same principles. Some would argue that green practices, however, can often save a business money, and doesn't always translate into higher prices.

The process of information seeking during the consumer decision making process is also different for green versus non-green consumers. It has been discovered that consumers use different selection criteria, consult different media, trust different sources, and spend different amounts of time when purchasing sustainable domestic technologies. It has also been discovered that eco-friendly consumers are those who seek a simpler life not for reasons such as stress, work pressures, family, but rather because they believe in the environment and the need to protect it. These individuals have high levels of ethics and support community development.

Finally, there seems to be increasing evidence that product ownership and over-consumption doesn't always produce satisfaction and happiness. These findings need to be ingrained into the minds of our future marketers. Motivations to purchase are sometimes driven by a society that is consumed by consumption, and marketing is certainly partly to blame for this mindset. Marketing is also the same place where changes have to be made to correct it. Changing culture is one of the greatest challenges of all time, and successful culture change requires an understanding of the need for change, a shifting of resources and lastly, a motivation to do so. Undoubtedly, marketing can play an important role in all facets of any culture change process directed toward sustainable consumer behaviour.



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### **Implications for managers: think context, content and competency**

Marketing management as we have understood it has now changed because of the need for a sustainability agenda alongside traditional marketing planning. Needs, wants and demands may now conflict. In a sustainable society, there is a greater movement toward "consumer welfare" and incorporation of this into marketing.

The product has also changed. It is so much more than just the tangible item. Increasingly, augmented dimensions and other services and intangible features are becoming more important. In fact, in some instances, the discerning customer will select one brand over another because they have more confidence in supply channel ethics, or prefer some augmented feature, as an example.

Another concern for management relates to a new meaning for satisfaction. Satisfaction has long been linked to the consumption of the product and has only considered the satisfaction of the consumer. What about the satisfaction of non-consumers? Should we also be thinking about the people who might be affected by our product in one way or another, even though they haven't actually bought it?

Further, although marketing's roots have long emphasised exchange transactions and resultant ownership of products, research has revealed that use of product causes satisfaction and not necessarily ownership of product. Finally, the exchange process has long been viewed as linear in nature. Products are produced, moved along the supply chain, consumed by the end consumer and then disposed of by whatever means are available. A new sustainable society, however, promotes an exchange process that is comprised of closed loops.

I have reflected on the new meanings for what are traditional tenets of the function of marketing management and suggest my own managerial guidelines for sustainable marketing planning:

- From a consumer behaviour perspective, greater consideration of the "healthy" or "good" choice should begin to win over profit. Marketers should help consumers make the choice of the better option.
- Marketers need to understand that the information search and purchase decision process will not be strictly limited to product features only. The sustainable consumer will be increasingly discerning and critical of broad company dimensions, and not just the product.
- As more and more lobby groups become powerful, the satisfaction of non-consumers will increase in importance. Marketers focused on sustainable consumption need to consider the satisfaction of all stakeholder groups, thus practicing good corporate social responsibility.
- For various product classes, it will be necessary for marketers to understand the ownership and satisfaction relationship. Research will be necessary to determine if the given product in question requires ownership to produce satisfaction.
- Marketers need to look for opportunities to incorporate closed loops. The mindset must be "everything has a use".
- We know now that marketing is a holistic approach and marketing's role, or at least one role, is to balance the need for resources today with the needs of our future generations. Those focused on sustainable marketing need to proactively promote the agenda internally through the organisation.

In conclusion, the way businesses treat and understand the above functions creates the foundation of a marketing strategy. Pursuing a sustainability agenda requires a different mindset, one more holistic in nature, and one that may be very contradictory to the "old ways" of doing business.

### **Further reading**

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## About the author



Dr. Sherry Finney is a faculty member in the Shannon School of Business, Cape Breton University, Nova Scotia, Canada. Finney has been teaching marketing for approximately 18 years and has been researching and writing business case studies in the area of sustainability for the past eight. She was a finalist in the Academy of Management 'Dark Side of Business Case Writing' competition and has published sustainability cases in several text books. She was a recipient of the North American Case Research Association's Outstanding Newcomer Award. She has also published her work in Business Process Management Journal, Journal of Education for Business, Journal of Marketing Communication, Leadership in Health Services, The Case Research Journal and The Marketing Review.