



# Carborundum

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## Who is the Ethical Consumer Anyway?

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Even cynics would be hard pushed to deny the existence of ethical consumption. Sales of organic products have shown compound increase over recent years, as have Fairtrade-labelled products, eco-friendly cleaning products and numerous other ethical alternatives currently available on the high streets and supermarkets' shelves. But who are the people buying these ethical products?

## Who is the Ethical Consumer?

The Ethical Consumer can be seen as a responsible consumer concerned with the moral implications of his or her purchase behaviour, eg someone who chooses Fairtrade over Chiquita bananas. Clearly these moral concerns are all encompassing (including 'values' such as trade-justice, child- and slavery-free labour, vegetarian, green, organic and local environmental issues). They are also more likely to motivate consumption behaviour if they are of personal relevance and involvement (eg choosing organic produce in order to be protected from hazardous chemicals, or sponsoring cancer research as a result of knowing someone with cancer). In addition, there seem to be many types of ethical consumers, ranging from the few radically ethical exceptions who may act as opinion leaders, to the elusive and often poorly characterised majority for whom inconsistency in purchasing behaviour is characteristic.

## What are the key issues regarding the Ethical Consumer?

The inconsistency of this elusive majority lies in their unwillingness to trade convenience, value and choice for ethics and this behaviour has created some scepticism amongst marketers regarding the existence of the Ethical Consumer as a viable segment. In response to this scepticism, some researchers believe the way to access ethically driven consumers is to focus on facilitating ethical shopping by making ethics an added value that goes alongside convenience and low prices by reducing the barriers to ethical shopping such as relatively high prices, restricted choices and lesser availability. Without this approach, argues this school of thought, ethical shopping will remain the privilege of the few who have the money and the extra time to seek and pursue ethical alternatives. The key issue in accessing profitably via the ethical consumer is whether to continue to regard this as a specialist profitable but limited niche or to expand it into a large, lower margin but higher volume market.



## What is best practice in ethical product offerings?

Although no company can be said to have entirely achieved a mass market position via targeting the ethical consumer, a few leading companies are well advanced in that direction and provide models for other companies to learn from. Companies such as Ecover (green cleaning products), The Body Shop (green cosmetics), CafeDirect (Fairtrade hot drinks) and Divine (Fairtrade chocolates) have been offering ethical products that meet the criteria of ethical values combined with a reasonable degree of convenience and value, albeit not matching “non-ethical” products on either criteria.

## What are the implications for practitioners?

Combining ethics, convenience, value and choice is the key to achieving a competitive edge in this area. That said, organisations must be genuine about their adopted ethical claims or else they may find themselves suffering from ‘ethical backlashes’ or becoming vulnerable to several forms of consumer resistance.

## Key further reading

### Ethical consumption market data:

- <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>; <http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/>
- Mintel, Datamonitor and Key Note reports
- The Cooperative Bank’s (2001; 2002; 2003) *The ethical consumerism reports*

### Ethical consumption behaviour:

- Harrison, R., Newholm, T. and Shaw, D. (2005) *The ethical consumer*, Sage, London.
- Strong, C. (1997) "The problems of translating fair trade principles into consumer purchase behaviour", *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 15(1), pp. 32-37.
- Carrigan, M. and Attalla, A. (2001) "The myth of the ethical consumer - do ethics matter in purchase behaviour?", *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 18(7), pp. 560-578.

### Green/ ethical marketing:

- Dolan, P. (2002) "The sustainability of 'sustainable consumption'", *Journal of Macromarketing*, 22(2), pp. 170-181.
- Peattie, K. (2001) "Towards sustainability: the third age of green marketing", *The Marketing Review*, 2(2), pp. 129-146.
- Prothero, A. and Fitchett, J. A. (2000) "Greening capitalism: opportunities for a green commodity", *Journal of Macromarketing*, 20(1), pp. 46-55.