

Products for Conscious Consumers

Developing, Marketing and Selling Ethical Products

Edited by

Kemi Ogunyemi • Vanessa Burgal



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*To our students and programme participants at Lagos Business School,
past, present, and future*

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Foreword

Many industries have been hard hit by the shifts in consumer demand for health, hygiene and tech products due to the COVID crisis of 2020 and 2021 and so they are re-strategising for a post-pandemic future. There is no better time to transform the workplace and step up our levels of responsibility and sustainability. Driven by bottom-line imperatives and distracted by the need to sell and keep selling more products and services, we have not always taken into account the impact on the planet of marketing actions, nor the impact of marketing decisions on people/society.

Sanitising an industry, especially from the unique point of view of the marketing function, requires re-thinking to a great degree. Hence it is wonderful to see this fresh new book on ethical marketing.

This book is an important resource for all business educators and leaders of industry, to spur them on to that necessary re-thinking. In fact, this book should become essential reading for all management students. It includes many practical examples of how things can be done better so that both responsible businesses and conscious consumers are able to impact the world for the better. At times, all it takes is a nudge and a boost to help us raise our standards and demand better behaviour from ourselves and from others. This book provides a nudge and a boost.

Both individual and corporate actions and decisions can lead towards a better world in general, and to greater human flourishing for all stakeholders, when we do 'green' business, and the marketing function is the lynchpin to achieve this.

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Part A
Ethical Marketing

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Chapter 1

Products for Conscious Consumers – A General Introduction

Vanessa Burgal

Abstract

Over the last century, marketing has evolved from a simple sales support role to a complete strategic business department focused on satisfying the consumer to ensure better company results. With this end objective, marketers incessantly look for consumer data to better understand the consumer. Identifying the customer needs is vital to offer the right product, with the right price, at the right place and with the best promotion. However, consumer-centric companies have to deal with powerful clients in an environment more competitive than ever. In parallel, significant concern about sustainability has grown. The impact of humankind on the planet and how companies redefine their business models to satisfy consumers are trending topics, especially in countries where consumers are informed and concerned by the impact of humankind on the planet. Thus, customers request sustainable companies to offer sustainable products and services. However, transforming the business models, reviewing the supply chains or developing green products is not easy. Companies fail to respect consumer demand. Thus, professionals can ‘greenwash’ procedures generating, in the long run, a solid negative feeling of scepticism towards companies and, more specifically, towards marketers. Developing sustainable products, educating the market and supporting clients with accurate information should be the end goal of all marketers who truly believe in customer-centric organisations and want to build a sustainable customer relationship.

Keywords: Sustainable marketing; CSR; marketing strategy; consumer education; responsible consumer; marketing ethics

1. Introduction

While watching the news about the latest Glasgow COP26 UN Climate Change conference, I recalled the summer headlines of *ELLE*'s magazine: 'The Skinny Jean Is Dead: The five Denim Styles You Need Now' (Somray & Murray, 2021). According to the UN's Environment Programme (2021), 'it takes 3,781 litres of water to make one pair of jeans', considering cotton production, manufacture, transport and washing. In this crazy world of contrasts, with constant new consumption trends, increased poverty levels and global warming emergency news, should we, marketers, convince consumers to renovate their wardrobes regularly? And shouldn't we consumers think twice before buying? To what extent are we marketers responsible for the consumer choice and the end usage of our products?

Famous young activists, such as Greta Thunberg, are deeply concerned about climate change. As Vanessa Nakate, the well-known young climate justice activist from Uganda, stated: 'Historically, Africa is responsible for only 3% of global emissions and yet Africans are suffering some of the most brutal impacts fuelled by the climate crisis' (BBC, 2021). Do consumers have the power to slow down these trends? This book is about the marketer's role and its relationship with the consumer, evaluating the effect of developing, selling, shopping and consuming products on our communities, economy, society, environment and future.

2. The Marketing Role

The marketing role has evolved dramatically since the first marketing course, 'Marketing of products' in 1905 in the University of Pennsylvania (Peattie & Belz, 2010). The marketer has moved from a simple sales support role to a complete brand responsible professional, orchestrating from the development to the commercialisation of companies' products and services. Today, the marketer is in charge of identifying the consumer needs to create, develop and launch the best-adapted products to ensure client satisfaction. During this process, all businesses have to pay attention to ethical challenges to provide a sustainable image towards consumers and society.

Going back to the *ELLE*'s article (Somray & Murray, 2021) mentioned earlier, one can read how fashion brands are trying to 'focus on sustainable and planet-friendly washes and fabrics', obviously because we marketers know that this is an important new consumer trend. In 2020, a survey from Accenture (2020) found that 60% of shoppers reported making more environmentally friendly, sustainable or ethical purchases since the start of the pandemic. And according to a Nielsen study from 2021, a truly 'conscious shopper' has emerged after the pandemic. Millennials and Gen Z consumers care, and marketers have to answer this need when innovating and developing new products, building the marketing strategy and executing the marketing mix.

Nowadays, numerous companies and marketing departments successfully produce and manage authentic, sustainable products and services. Successful stories are always linked to professionals who really care but who are also

supported by their company stakeholders. Sustainable marketing cannot succeed without ethically responsible managers and employees, company owners and end consumers, as well as suppliers and distribution partners. Sustainability is a team process. But is this new marketing role a trend to stay? Are we marketers ideating sustainable products to only satisfy the consumer request, or are we truly concerned professionals?

3. A Green Marketing Mix

Today, the marketing mix of green marketing departments is activated with a green product design, a distribution with green criteria, pricing of green products, green promotion and sponsorship (Rivera-Camino, 2007, p. 1333). However, pricing is often the primary reason a consumer won't choose the greener product. Consumers are not always ready to pay more for a product that is not clearly differentiated from competitors and brings a perceived added value. As mentioned above, many studies show consumer concern about the environment; however, those purchase intentions do not often translate into the active purchase of environmentally friendly products (Mortimer, 2020). In those situations, marketers can play a significant creative role in communicating their sustainable solutions: from the 100% traceability of Tiffany's gold, silver and platinum to Patagonia's campaign pushing consumers to buy used garments to protect the Earth.

4. The Consumer Power

More and more consumers are aware of the potential negative impact of unethical business, pressing for sustainable products and services. They can access worldwide information regarding the companies they purchase from, and thus, they can easily decide about their brand loyalty, purchasing behaviour and final recommendations. However, some brands are not always ready to listen to the consumer needs.

Let's look, for example, at the Monsanto case. Without being an expert on the topic, one can easily find numerous complaints against Monsanto unethical behaviours and how customers, especially farmers, unpowered by non-governmental groups, have carried a worldwide media campaign against the brand. Looking at the number of books, memes and even Facebook campaigns against the company, one can easily understand consumer power.¹ How such a strong brand, once nominated as the company of the year by *Forbes* (Langreth & Harper, 2009) can finally be demolished by its own users. In this case, however, consumers had to wait many years and numerous trials before proving the unethical company behaviour. After buying the company, in 2020, Bayer agreed to pay \$10 billion to settle the lawsuits against Roundup cancer effects and decided to continue with Monsanto's industry but changed the company's name (Mattera, 2020).² Monsanto's brand was too damaged. As Liam Condon, President of Bayer's Crop Science Division, stated: dropping Monsanto's name 'is part of a wider campaign to win back consumer trust' (Dewey, 2018).

Recently, Facebook has applied a similar strategy, adopting a new name for the group, META. A new name to calm down the bad publicity around the famous Facebook papers? Or just to release a new concept? Obviously, the consumer is now fully aware of some of the non-ethical activities of Facebook and the relationship between the brand, and the consumer is in trouble. As Taina Bucher at the University of Oslo (Norway) and author of the book *Facebook*, said: ‘All the bad press and political battles it is currently fighting have to do with its social networking products, so launching something entirely new – in their minds – is a way to completely rebrand and start fresh, without changing much with the existing problematic products’ (Stokel-Walker, 2021). Funnily enough, it is thanks to social media that consumers are becoming more powerful and can influence business attitudes towards more sustainable practices (Mainwaring, 2011).

5. Educating Consumers

However, not all consumers are adequately informed. For example, when observing the food industry, many consumers don’t know how food reaches their plates and don’t understand the health and environmental consequences of their dietary choices (UN environmental program, 2021). Thus, information and education are key tools to enable consumers to make the right decisions. We all know how much power the marketer has when informing and communicating with the end consumer. An excellent example of consumer education is the Unilever campaign carried by their ‘Lifebuoy’ soap brand, teaching and motivating children to clean their hands (H for handwashing). By improving hygiene and handwashing habits, this campaign has helped prevent childhood deaths and has built a strong sustainability image around Unilever and its soap brand ‘Lifebuoy’ (Unilever, 2021).

Keeping this in mind, during the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation highlighted the need to ‘develop and adopt, where appropriate, on a voluntary basis, effective, transparent, verifiable, non-misleading and non-discriminatory consumer information tools to provide information relating to sustainable consumption and production’.

6. Conscious Consumption in Developing Countries

In some underdeveloped or poorly regulated countries, consumers do not have alternatives, and industries often have limited options to respect sustainability and produce responsibly.

Can we ask a sub-Saharan consumer, living with less than 3\$ per day, to think about recycling? Without consciously taking care of the environment, many of them recollect plastic bottles to be cleaned, sold and reused. In many developing countries, the 3Rs of waste management (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) are naturally implemented by the local population, without conscious environmental consideration. However, the lack of government regulations and proper local

infrastructures often negatively impact the people and the environment. One can easily find tonnes of floating plastic surrounding Lagos Islands in Nigeria. Kids searching for precious metals through trashed appliances, televisions and fridges in Agbogboshie, Ghana, the world's largest electronic waste dump (Webster, 2018). While in Bangladesh, resilient workers risk their lives daily trying to dismantle cargo ships from wealthier countries (Vidal, 2017). Obviously, this is not the type of waste management ethical products should aim at. Ultimately, manufacturers should contribute to ensuring their own production is ethically handled. In Africa, some FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods) companies, such as Coca-Cola, encourage entrepreneurship and job creation around collection and recycling through healthy and decent jobs, moving the collectors up the value chain rather than promoting collection from landfills and bins (Coca-Cola, 2020). Undeniably, the bottom-of-the-pyramid consumers, with the lowest daily incomes, should have access to a proper job and education that could eventually lead to conscious shopping and consumption.

7. CSR or Greenwashing?

Considering this, businesses through their marketing and PR departments invest more and more into sustainability, often to ensure they stay relevant in their markets and keep their consumer loyalty. Do companies feel truly responsible, or is this just a CSR campaign to survive against the competition? Is this authentic behaviour or is it just a 'Green Washing' strategy claiming your products are eco-friendly when your company is actually not really sustainable? Environmentalist Jay Westerveld coined the term 'greenwashing' in an essay in 1986 in which he explained how the hotel industry was falsely promoting the reuse of towels to reduce water and energy waste, when in fact, the objective was to reduce costs (Bhatnagar & Verma, 2019). At that time, hotels cared about profit more than about sustainability. Some marketers use a misleading marketing mix to position their brands as 'green' without really having a scientific argument.

Overall, as John Grant explains, green marketing is about making green things look normal, not about making normal things look green (Grant, 2007).

Unethical marketing uses different types of greenwashing, from the green imagery to the misleading claims, through a thorough marketing mix execution. Take a look, for example, at FMCG brands (Fast Moving Consumer Goods) and cosmetic brands with packaging claims such as 'eco', 'natural' or 'organic'. One may recall when the EU regulations forced the famous Danone Yogurts Bio to change their brand name to 'Activia', since 'Bio' was misleading to consumers (El Pais, 2011). We can also talk about the trends of the 0% (no parabens, no sugars, no palm oil) (Costa, 2017). Again, these statements in a pack do not imply that the product is good for you and the planet. You can easily find cosmetics with an ecological ingredient, but this doesn't mean that the whole product is eco-friendly. Consumers tend to believe that by shopping these types of brands, they care about the environment, and some of them even consider these products as good for

health. Companies take advantage of some consumers' lack of information or understanding and play with this new trendy strategy: caring about the environment. According to research from the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, only 35% of consumers who buy ecological products understand what 'ecological' means (Costa, 2017).

We can also review some famous misleading marketing campaigns such as the 'A better environment inside and out' from Airbus A380 (Gillett, 2007). Also, when the Italian regulators fined Eni €5 million (2020) after claiming that 'Bio-Diesel' is a 'Green' fuel (Hicks, 2020), arguing that biodiesel is palm oil based when this raw material is leading to deforestation. Similar campaigns use nature, green and other environmental images to give consumers an 'eco-friendly' perception.

Overall, numerous companies take advantage of this new consumer request for sustainability to develop complete CSR programmes and market themselves as sustainable and environmentally friendly (Truthinadvertising.org, 2021).

Recently, Danone's CEO was dismissed after the company's share performance decreased compared to competitors such as Nestlé and Unilever. Quoting the Professor of Finance at IMD, Arturo Bris (2021), 'Danone is perceived to have cared more about people, the planet and social responsibility than its shareholders, and Faber is paying the price'. Again one can conclude that sustainability is a 'nice to have strategy' to ensure consumers perceive your brand as socially responsible. But, when this strategy reduces the benefits of company shareholders, priority runs back to numbers.

8. Is the Consumer Responsible?

Today, we are into a pull-marketing strategy, where the consumer is an active player deciding what to shop, consume or recommend. Consumers are also responsible for their actions and can take advantage of this new era of information to make ethical decisions. When businesses strongly invest in sustainable strategies, why do we find consumers overspending during Black Friday, changing their mobiles every year to new models or assuming one plastic bottle will finally disappear if thrown into the water? As conscious consumers, do we really need another bag or a new iPhone? Is it right to buy a pair of shoes for less than 10€? Are we naïve enough to think this price is reasonable and sustainable? What are the implications of renovating our wardrobe regularly, just because the fashion industry remodels its storefront every week? Quoting Jennifer Nini (2017): 'What's better than buying better? Not buying at all. But businesses won't sell you that concept because it's just not as profitable'.

This book should help marketers position themselves and evaluate their role and behaviour, considering their influence on society through their products and consumers.

And following Jackqueline Ottman's (2011) Green Marketing Strategy recommendation, 'Don't quit. Promote responsible product use and disposal practices. Continuously strive for "zero" impact'.