Marketing and sustainability: what can they offer each other?

It is a common assumption that marketing and sustainability are set for a head on collision because marketing is about selling more while sustainability is about consuming less.

In many ways marketing is often seen as the antithesis of the concept of sustainability. The one is seen by many as one of the principal drivers of consumption while the other seeks to enable all people throughout the world to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life without compromising the quality of life of future generations. There is, however, growing interest in the relationships between marketing and sustainability.

The Sigma sustainability marketing guide, designed to help companies develop strategies to market the benefits of their approach to sustainability to customers and to help sustainability practitioners and marketers gain a shared understanding of their respective fields, disputes the argument that sustainability and marketing are incompatible. Rather it argues that sustainability and marketing have much to offer each other.

What can sustainability offer marketing?

A growing number of companies are looking to recognize the role of sustainability as an integral component of their business strategy. A number of factors seem to be important in helping to explain this trend. These include:

- the need to comply with a growing volume of environmental and social legislation and regulation;
- concerns about the cost and scarcity of natural resources;
- greater public and shareholder awareness of the importance of socially responsible financial investments;
- the growing media coverage of the activities of a wide range of anti-corporate pressure groups; and
- more general changes in social attitudes and values within modern capitalist societies.

However, the Chartered Institute of Marketing has found that marketing teams lead on campaigns and communications but not on business strategy, that marketing does not lie at the strategic centre of sustainable development and that marketing teams are not playing a major role in driving forward the development of sustainable products and services. This suggests that marketing currently has a secondary, rather than a primary, role in driving sustainability agendas within many companies.

That said it is important to recognize that there is a growing interest in “sustainable marketing” which has been defined as “creating, producing and delivering sustainable solutions with higher net sustainable value whilst continuously satisfying customers and other stakeholders.” Ideally the goals are to systematically embed sustainability within a company’s strategy throughout the supply chain from new product and service development to consumption.

Companies should begin to prepare for a more sustainable millennium by re-examining the social and environmental impacts of their marketing strategies. However, this is a complex task which involves research throughout the supply chain and one which will take marketers outside their traditional frame of reference. On the one hand, such calls may be
interpreted as encouraging marketing departments and marketers to lead the way, or at least to play an important role in the development of more sustainable products and services and in making the traditional “marketing mix” more sustainable. On the other hand the term “sustainable marketing” can also be seen as a little more than a thinly veiled and cynical ploy to attract socially and environmentally conscious consumers while “sweeping” pressing environmental and social concerns “under the carpet.”

More specifically one of the most obvious links between marketing and sustainability is the way in which growing numbers of companies are looking to emphasize their commitment to sustainability in an attempt to help to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to enhance their corporate brand and reputation. Here, the accent is integrating sustainability thinking into the core brand. In pursuing such a strategy it is important that companies take account of all the contact points between the brand and the consumer.

There are also issues relating to internal marketing or more specifically with getting sustainability accepted throughout a company and in engaging all employees in the sustainability debate. In order for an organization to build its sustainability credentials, an all pervading culture needs to be developed for staff to recognize opportunities and to deal with them. Further it is argued that where the concept of sustainability is taken on board by employees this leads to them having a greater sense of loyalty and pride in the company and that this in turn can prove to be a valuable “sales asset” when communicating with customers.

However, there is little evidence that marketers build on these benefits when projecting a company’s sustainability in the public domain. A growing number of companies are encouraging their employees to participate in community programmes often helping them to enhance their understanding of sustainability challenges within the local environment. At the same time, it is important to recognize that where employees are working under pressure to meet demanding performance and financial targets promoting sustainability may be quickly, and conveniently, ignored.

What can marketing offer sustainability?

In looking to answer this question attention is focused on the role of marketing in understanding and changing consumer behaviour and more generally in influencing attitudes and beliefs. As such marketing can be seen to recognize the key role of consumers as decision makers in moving towards sustainability, for example in reducing carbon dioxide emissions, recycling increasing volumes of waste, supporting Fair Trade initiatives and adopting healthier lifestyles.

Studying the current behaviour of green consumers can provide important lessons in helping to spread sustainable buying behaviour and to understand the reality of trying to operationalize green or ethical values in terms of concrete purchases. More specifically, while such consumers are generally predisposed to purchase sustainable products their buying behaviour is also constrained by a range of more conventional factors including price, brand and availability and that in order to increase sustainable patterns of consumption it is important to understand more about how consumers arrive at their purchasing decisions.

Research suggests that while green consumers look to translate their sustainable values into purchasing criteria, such as energy efficiency or local sourcing, decisions concerning actual purchasing behaviour also incorporate more conventional factors which effectively compete with sustainability criteria. In one study the increased complexity of decision making led green consumers to complain that sustainable shopping was “hard work” and that sustainable criteria were likely to be abandoned. More positively, it is easier to encourage sustainable buying behaviour in fast moving consumer goods, such as food, where regular shopping allows habits to be formed and maintained rather than it is for the occasional purchase of large items like a fridge, a motor car or a house.

A focus on changing behaviours is one of the key elements in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ (DEFRA) approach to sustainable consumption. This
approach is partly rooted in the recognition, recently reinforced in the DEFRA (2007) survey of public attitudes and behaviours towards the environment, of an often sharp discontinuity between awareness of the environmental impacts of a particular set of behaviours and a willingness to change personal behaviour to reduce such impacts. Research commissioned by DEFRA, focused on behaviour change in terms of establishing the link between environmental practice and everyday behaviour, targeting policy for specific lifestyle groups and establishing the potential for change. Five main policy implications emerged from this work.

1. the need to remove many of the barriers, including lack of choice, cost, convenience, time and effort, to change;
2. the need for policy makers to work more closely with large corporations, particularly the supermarket groups, to promote sustainable consumption and behaviour;
3. the need for collective, rather than individual action, in moving towards greater sustainability;
4. a recommendation that changes in behaviour are likely to be best achieved by incentives rather than penalties; and
5. in making the case for incremental change, very few individuals are willing to make radical changes to their lifestyles.

More generally there is the argument that by harnessing the creativity and innovation that is often seen to be one of the characteristic hallmarks of marketing it may be possible to move towards a more sustainable future.

A sustainable future?

While marketing and sustainability might seem to be as different as “chalk and cheese” there is growing evidence that the two concepts have something to offer each other.

On the one hand, an increasing number of companies publicly claim to be committed to an all-embracing definition of sustainable development of a marketing mix of sustainable goods and services. That said many of the sustainability commitments claimed by companies can be interpreted as being driven by business imperatives. Thus, while many of the environmental initiatives currently being made by a number of the UK’s prominent retailers are designed to reduce energy, water consumption and waste emissions they also reduce costs. On the other hand there are claims that marketing offers important ways of changing consumer behaviour and in influencing attitudes and beliefs.

However, the jury will surely be out for some time on whether marketing has the power to promote the sort of radical lifestyle changes that a truly sustainable future demands.

January 2009.

This is a shortened version of "Marketing and sustainability", which originally appeared in Marketing Intelligence & Planning, Volume 26 Number 2, 2008.

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