Marketing for Sustainability: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to put forward a roadmap to attain sustainable marketing through social marketing, green marketing and critical marketing. Social Marketing is an approach to decide the marketing strategies and activities keeping society's long term welfare in the mind. Social and ethical concerns are at the centre of social marketing. Green Marketing is an approach to develop and market environmentally safer products and services and introducing sustainability efforts in various marketing and business processes. At last, Critical Marketing is an approach that calls for analyzing marketing principles, techniques and theory using a critical theory based approach. This approach helps in regulating and controlling marketing activities with a focus on sustainability as it challenges and questions the existing capitalist and marketing systems so as to achieve a more sustainable marketing system.

1. INTRODUCTION

OECD (2002) defines sustainability as 'the consumption of goods and services that meet basic needs and quality of life without jeopardizing the needs of future generations. Though there are numerous definitions of sustainability, however the essence lies in reducing the consumption of resources so as to ensure that our future generations are not deprived of those resources. Given the adverse impact of global warming, sustainability has become a burning issue for the humankind (Fitzsimmons, 2008). Today, the world is facing major challenges like limiting production and consumption, tackling climate change, saving energy and resources, controlling population. Marketing has an important role to play in facing these challenges because it has power to influence and shape human behavior.

It is apparent that 'monumental environmental damage has been caused by ever increasing production and consumption (Saha and Darnton, 2005), making it obvious that a sustainable future is not achievable if we continue to ignore the two prime causes of ecological imbalances - ever growing population and highly consumption oriented lifestyles (Bandura, 2007). While historically governments have been unwilling to reduce the production and consumption of products and services (Cohen, 2001), there is growing frustration with the less sustainable after effects from production and marketing activities. For example: Government of India has levied a 114% tax on luxury goods to address conspicuous consumption (Bendell and Kleanthous, 2007).

Marketing plays an important role in global economy, and if utilized responsibly can encourage us to reuse, recycle, reduce wastages, saving energy, eat healthily, drink sensibly, and support good causes. Fisk (2010) observes that marketing

performs a key role in promoting economic growth and development around the world, raising living standards in many countries. At present, marketing primarily focuses on selling more goods by encouraging consumption and thus make profits. The marketing function is not essentially managed to deliver sustainability, thus potential of marketing to deliver sustainability is often overlooked. This paper aims to present a roadmap to achieve sustainable marketing with the help of three sub-discipline of marketing i.e. social marketing, green marketing and critical marketing.

2. SOCIAL MARKETING

Social marketing has been defined by the UK National Social Marketing Centre as "the systematic application of marketing concepts and techniques, to achieve specific behavioral goals for a social or public good" (French and Blair-Stevens, 2006). Basically, social marketing is about promoting social change. Like commercial marketing it still focuses on changing human conduct; but instead of focusing on increasing sales, revenue or profits, it is about changing individuals' conduct for the advantage of society in general. The objective may be to encourage a healthy lifestyle, donating for a social cause or stopping practices damaging to environments. A critical element of social marketing is a strong consumer orientation, which can be harassed to win people preferences, to engage them, to motivate them and empower them as individuals or within communities (McKenzie-Mohr, 1999).

While social marketing has potential to do good for society, not everybody will fundamentally welcome endeavors by government offices or others to force their propaganda on them particularly those who oppose change and what they see as social engineering (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). Besides, the wellspring of social marketing activities is an issue, as industrially supported social marketing can be treated with incredulity

(Hastings and Angus, 2008). Research studies focusing on role of social marketing in influencing health related behavior, indicates that the approach can be fruitful in shaping human behavior (Stead et al., 2007). Research studies are also acknowledging that the social media can also be effective in promoting sustainable behavioral practices (Shrum et al., 1994; Peattie and Peattie, 2009). Maibach (1993) explicates how social marketing can help in forming a practical approach towards generating solutions for various environmental related problems and help policy makers and other responsible stakeholders in translating various sustainability issues into practical and effective actions.

Today, Social marketing is not only well positioned to influence individuals' behaviors, but it also has tremendous potential to change value and belief system that is consistent with various dominant social institutions. Various social marketing campaigns have been designed to alter values, beliefs and attitudes to make individuals learn or unlearn certain behaviors. Addressing prevailing belief and value system is important as it generally has an influence on individuals' attitude and actions. De Beers (2008) observes that growing interest in sustainable practices is backed by a shift in social beliefs and values from conspicuous consumption (what we wear) to considered consumption (who we are).

Besides having the power to influence people beliefs, values, attitudes and behavior, social marketing can also be instrumental in encouraging communities, policy makers, regulators, law makers, managers and other responsible groups or institutions to make necessary changes in policies, processes, practices or products rather than concentrating only on changing individuals' behavior. For example: upstream social marketing activities may use media advocacy, pressure governments for changing policies, influence law making etc. Notwithstanding these advancements,

there is lot to be done to understand how social marketing can be best used for the cause of sustainable development (Takahashi, 2009). This place demands for more research activities to examine the various applications of social marketing to various problems and concerns related with sustainability, as it is evident that social marketing has potential to influence practices and behaviors not only at the consumer level but also to an extent at the upstream and corporate level.

3. GREEN MARKETING

Peattie (1995) depicts Green marketing as: 'the holistic management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying the requirements of customers and society, in a profitable and sustainable way'. In simpler words, sustainable consumption is encouraged and promoted by marketers using all the tools and techniques of marketing. There is sufficient body of literature on green marketing (e.g. Peattie, 1995, 1999; Thogersen and Crompton, 2009). Carrigan and de Pelsmacker (2009) advocates that green marketing is profitable as green and ethical considerations, such as local produce, animal welfare etc are gaining ground. Further, studies show that where there are insignificant differences among competing brands, eco-performance can play an important role as a key criterion for decision-making (Christensen, 1995; Peattie, 1999). This is of course a win-win solution as marketers can align their marketing strategies to win customer, benefit company, and at the same time help ecological environment (Elkington, 1994).

Despite these benefits, there are several concerns and issues which marketers face which consider green marketing as a strategy to promote their products and services. First, green marketing efforts often requires be rewarding or incentivizing by the government, or the regulatory bodies or the

business environment. However, such initiatives are limited in both scope and impact (Thogersen and Crompton, 2009). Second, consumers continue to doubt the performance of green product, which is further aggravated by the competing opinions regarding the advantages of organic products (Ginsberg and Bloom, 2004). Third, there are also concerns over the influence of green marketing initiatives as consumers often doubt the claims of companies and perceive them as exaggerated and overestimated (Saha and Darnton, 2005). For example: bio-fuels which are often marketed as "green fuel" can not only be inefficient in reducing carbon footprint but also generate higher carbon footprint compared to fossil fuels (Crutzen et al., 2007). Fourth, trust on trivial changes in the behavior of firms and consumers may help in deviating pressure for governments from adopting beneficial but unpopular policies and regulations while, at the same time, allowing marketers opportunities to claim that they are not affecting environment aversely rather making meaningful contributions for ecological environment through minor gestures (Thogersen and Crompton, 2009).

At last, green marketing primarily puts the responsibility on the marketers and business world to promote and nurture sustainable development, thus largely ignoring the role and responsibility of individual consumer. Businesses may do their best to adopt green marketing and try to contribute for sustainable environment, however if consumers do not support their green initiatives or change their behavior to adopt green practices and products, then marketers cannot do much in this regard. Thus green marketing will neither be beneficial commercially not will benefit environment. Green marketing is not a panacea, and if not implemented properly, may cause unintended harm or 'rebound effects' (Hertwich, 2005). Driving a hybrid car may be less harmful to environment than driving a petrol car, but it will

be counterproductive if consumer increases their car usage under the misconception that their car has very little impact on environment. Many such contradictory consumer behaviors have been identified (Hertwich, 2005). Therefore, it can be concluded that green marketing alone cannot be effective and it must be complemented by social marketing and critical marketing to achieve the goal of sustainable marketing.

4. CRITICAL MARKETING

Green marketing and social marketing together cannot provide for all contingences. The third component i.e. critical marketing is needed where marketing alone may not give the desired results or may be problem or part of problem itself. Critical marketing is the critique of the marketing systems, marketing paradigms and marketing methodologies and if needed can be applied to criticize the marketing itself. Critical marketing is based on the critical theory, which offers a criticism of present-day society while visualizing answers to prevalent problems. Critical theory is normative in nature and focuses about values and what should happen in the future rather than just focusing on here and now. A critical appraisal of marketing and marketing theory was inevitable due to radical social, economic and political change over the years (Brownlie et al., 1994; Thomas, 1999). Indeed, critical theory has been placed as one of the paradigmatic approaches in marketing and consumer research (Lowe et al., 2003).

Commercial marketing that promotes more consumption of products and services can be competing with the idea of social marketing which promotes sustainability through decreasing conspicuous consumption. Critical marketing can be instrumental to make this competition productive. Critical analysis and competitive studies of commercial marketing and social marketing efforts can provide valuable insights for

the development of sustainable marketing. It does so by providing necessary timely guidance for regulation, control and correction of commercial and social marketing efforts whenever their consequences harm the sustainability efforts. Evidence indicates that critical studies can also lead to regulation that induces innovation and increases competitiveness (Porter and van der Linde, 1995). For example pursuing a clean technology approach, often stimulated through regulation, can be very cost effective (Irwin and Hooper, 1992). Therefore, critical marketing can be used as a tool to encourage more sustainable marketing by developing more optimal regulatory conditions (van Dam and Apeldoorn, 1996).

Peattie (2007) builds up the role of critical marketing in the sustainability debate by indicating that sustainability demands not the diligence of a critical analysis to marketing, but an investigation and reassessment of some of the underlying rationales and concepts underpinning it. Peattie (2007) also observes that marketers have often avoided this kind of critical assessment of the influences of marketing upon sustainability issues. Thogersen and Crompton (2009) support this view by mentioning that traditionally, marketers tended to refuse or minimize the extent of the sustainability challenge. Due to growing sustainability concerns and issues, some marketing scholars have started to adopt critical theory approach to marketing and its role in promoting and fostering sustainability. However, the influence on marketing education and practices has been marginal. Marketing should focus on meeting customer needs, delivering customer value and satisfaction, rather than concentrating promoting excessive materialism, disposability and unsustainable consumption (Cooper, 2005, Bauman, 2007). For accomplishing these objectives, a significant degree of critical reflexivity is required by all within the marketing discipline (Polonsky et al., 2003).

Sustainable Marketing

Marketing has often been criticized as a deterrent to sustainable living; however, this peer argues in favor of marketing as if done right, it has many potential answers to some of the sustainability challenges that the modern world faces. The paper opines that using the tremendous power of social marketing, green marketing along with critical marketing, sustainability marketing offers many opportunities for the developing solutions to sustainability challenges. Social marketing has tremendous potential to use the marketing power for fostering sustainable behavioral changes. Moreover, upstream activity such as advocacy, regulation and policy change can be stimulated through critical social marketing. Green marketing can help to introduce sustainable products and services into the market. Despite the fact that there has been a backlash and an element of myopia resulting in 'greenwash', the concept of green marketing has tremendous potential which is yet to be realized. Furthermore, critical marketing can be applied to challenge the prevalent marketing theories and practices so as to help shifting the emphasis of marketing from encouraging and increasing consumption to other goals such as quality of life, satisfaction and sustainability (Lee and Sirgy, 2004; Peattie and Peattie, 2009).

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