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**The Importance of Marketing Sustainability**

1. **Introduction to Sustainability**

Sustainability is a term that is quickly increasing in importance and meaning in today’s world as climate change and social issues continue to evolve and persist. Much of the burden of this global crisis has fallen on the corporate world, blamed for monumental amounts of pollution and taking advantage of workers globally in an effort to cut spending and become more profitable. Consumers are beginning to take greater notice of industrial accidents that pollute our planet and kill wildlife as science continues to reveal the irreversible damage that is being inflicted. With all of these problems arising, businesses are starting to make changes in big ways, forgoing their wasteful practices in favor of more sustainable initiatives in an effort to start making a difference. Now, many companies are recognizing the potential competitive advantage they stand to gain by marketing the good they are doing to make a difference. Consumers’ needs and wants are ever-changing, and sustainable efforts are becoming more and more important in the purchasing decisions they make.

1. **How Marketing Has Evolved**

Over time, the ways that companies appeal to consumers has changed greatly with the emersion of new beliefs and standards. Consumers consider more than the functions of a product when making a purchasing decision and sustainability is one such aspect they are starting to acknowledge more. The concept of corporate sustainability began to truly emerge in the 1970s and 80s once climate change was starting to be researched and publicized more widely in the wake of the Industrial Revolution (Caradonna, 2014, p.3). As a result, Corporate America was starting to be held accountable and consumers demanded change before the damage became irreversible. This demand, in part, contributed to a shift in marketing where consumers began to value the relationship they had with a brand as opposed to merely making purchases to satisfy needs. What a company values and how it acts now has a significant impact on consumers’ purchasing habits. That means, that it has become necessary for businesses to advertise the change they try to make in the world. To simply recognize environmental concerns is no longer enough for businesses, instead, it is crucial that they have, “a commitment to develop marketing strategies that balance organizational and societal concerns” (Baker and Sinkula, 2005, p. 462). Consumers value products and brands that are committed to sustainable efforts and therefore companies have the potential to gain a competitive advantage by publicly engaging in such initiatives through marketing campaigns.

This new opportunity for marketers to use more sustainable aspects in their campaigns coincides directly with changes that have been occurring in how companies sell their products to potential consumers. As marketing has evolved, consumers are looking beyond the functional aspects of a good or service when making purchasing decisions and are instead focusing on intangible aspects that ultimately end up defining brands, giving customers a new symbolic value for products (Lusch and Webster, 2011, p. 130). This especially comes into play when there are multiple substitutes for a product and the value that sustainability adds can make a customer choose one option over another. Society has moved into what is called the ‘Customer Relationship Era’, where companies now have to make a connection with their customers from all aspects of their organization to sell products (Kerin and Hartley, 2017, p. 15). Consumers are increasingly focused on where a product comes from and the actions of the company producing it. Brands are forced to change their products and messages constantly in order to maintain brand reputation and avoid offending or angering those it is trying to appeal to. People care about what a brand or product symbolizes and look for deeper meanings that are associated with how a company presents itself. Recently, shoe and sports apparel icon, Nike, was forced to drop its ‘Betsy Ross Flag’ sneaker design because of its perceived connection to a history of racism and oppression within the United States (Hsu et al., 2019). This action was taken because Nike did not want its brand to be associated with those historically harmful concepts and was forced to end production and rescind those shoes that had already been made. Other companies have been forced to take similar action as the marketing environment has continued to develop.

The messages that are conveyed by a company through its price, product, place, and promotion strategies have become a must in marketing. Companies have to promote their products in a meaningful way that shows consumers that their purchase will be beneficial and that they are supporting the right company with their purchase. Green marketing is one way that businesses are able to achieve that perception and many have used it to differentiate themselves from their competitors. There are three main ways that companies have been engaging in green marketing: ecological marketing, environmental marketing, or sustainable marketing (Peattie, 2001). Ecological marketing involves working to reduce global reliance on harmful products and focusing on solutions that can reduce waste such as biodegradable packaging alternatives. Environmental marketing focuses on reducing environmental damage by harnessing consumers’ demand for green actions and thereby potentially gaining a competitive advantage over others in an industry. Lastly, sustainable marketing is the practice of advertising resource-saving methods which aim to create a sustainable economy through efforts that cover the environmental costs of consumption and production. Through green marketing, not only are companies able to further connect with the market, but they do so while also making a greater impact on the world. Businesses are able to profit from operating sustainably because they are able to operate more efficiently, generating a minimal amount of waste (Porter, 2013). Even if sustainable efforts are often profit-driven, a company is still making an effort that has a positive impact on global stakeholders. Once a company starts ingraining more sustainable efforts into its operations, the next step is to market those undertakings to increase the value of the goods or services that are produced.

1. **Why Sustainability should be Used in Marketing**

Consumers are influenced by a host of factors when they are deciding which product to purchase. Their decisions are impacted by psychological, sociocultural, and situational influences as well as by elements of the marketing mix (price, product, promotion, and place) (Kerin and Hartley, 2017, p. 130). When buying a product, consumers are typically influenced the most by price, brand, and availability of the product. These are the elements that stand out most to consumers and decide whether they can even buy something in the first place before making a choice. Yet, how sustainably a product is produced and the impact it has on the environment is becoming an ever-important factor for consumers when they are choosing between multiple products that may be similar in price, brand, and availability. When making purchasing decisions, consumers tend to choose more sustainable options if they require minimal effort, are not too much more expensive, and if they make a considerable impact on something that is important to the consumer (Mcdonald and Oates, 2006, p. 168). It may not be the first thing that customers will consider and should not be the only thing that companies market, but how sustainable a company or brand is, does tend to come into play especially when consumers are choosing between competitors. In fact according to United Kingdom professors at the University of Gloucestershire and University of Glamorgan:

…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. (Clarke-Hill et alt., 2008, p. 126)

Operating sustainably has an impact on how a company is viewed as a whole and affects all of the goods and services that they may offer. But a company will only be viewed more favorably if its efforts are actually made known and are a part of every aspect of what it does. This means including their sustainable initiatives in their marketing strategies.

On a smaller scale, most companies already engage in this through the mission and vision statements that they develop. For those businesses devoted to pursuing sustainable efforts, these statements proclaim a company’s goal to make a profit through their efforts to serve a global community. But this is a very simple part of a company’s strategy to build its brand. Alone, a mission or vision statement is merely a set of words telling what a company would like to do. It is something that needs to be further backed up by actions showing what the company is actually doing to make an environmental and social difference. The sustainable actions that a company engages in are what it needs to advertise. Companies need to show their markets what exactly they are doing to fulfill the goals of their mission and vision statements in order to gain further credibility among audiences. Doing so will bring companies a more trustworthy reputation and will prove to potential customers that they are willing to work to live up to the promises they have made. Advertising what they are doing sustainably accomplishes this and also encourages consumers to buy a company’s products at the same time.

More indirectly, marketing sustainability also serves a higher purpose by encouraging others to engage in sustainable efforts. Once one company in an industry starts reaping the benefits of the competitive advantage it gains from its sustainable efforts, other companies will follow suit. Marketing has the potential to increase the use of sustainable practices by, “making sustainability a household word and a universal way of adding social, economic and environmental values to the products and services society consumes” (Clarke-Hill et alt., 2008, p. 128). Advertising what a company is doing and the positive impact it is having on the millions of global stakeholders shows others what they can be doing and sets an example. The more companies that can see how beneficial sustainability is and the profit it will bring them rather than cost, the closer society will be to slowing down the environmental and social crises that are progressing.

However, there is a negative side to this fact that comes in the form of greenwashing. Greenwashing occurs when companies falsely advertise or exaggerate sustainable initiatives that they may or may not be partaking in (Bowen, 2015, p. x). When one company engages in greenwashing, the credibility of other companies who market their sustainable initiatives is severely lessened. Consumers no longer know who they can trust and much of the value that sustainability brings to a product is lost. It ends up damaging the confidence customers have in green products and thus negatively impact the overall consumer market for sustainable goods and services (Delmas and Burbano, 2011, p. 64-65). In essence, greenwashing has the potential to destroy the whole market and demand for sustainable products if it becomes too widespread. Consumers will lose trust in everything that is being marketed to them in the context of sustainability. There have already been massive scandals that have brought much discredit to the industry and stand to threaten it further in the future if there is no way to combat it. In 2014, a major greenwashing scandal came to light after it was discovered the German automaker, Volkswagen had falsely advertised that its car, the Jetta, produced a significantly lower amount of nitrogen oxide emissions than it did in reality (Siano et alt., 2017, p. 29-30). The public had been led on to believe that the Volkswagen Jetta was a relatively eco-friendly car when the company was actually trying to hide how much nitrogen oxide the car was illegally releasing into the environment. Volkswagen and other companies who have actively participated in greenwashing have only served to bring discredit to companies who have successfully marketed their own sustainability efforts. Consumers have to be wary when giving value to sustainable products.

1. **Examples of Sustainable Marketing Campaigns**

Already, there are countless examples of how companies are benefitting from marketing what they are doing to increase sustainability. As previously mentioned, companies are profiting from making the switch to sustainability because of how it helps reduce general waste. Those companies that are going a step further and are advertising what they are doing are seeing even greater results. Tesla, a company built on advertising the sustainability of its cars now finds itself to be more valuable than GM and Ford and Nike is earning over a billion dollars by promoting its resource-efficient shoes (McKechnie, 2017). Brands are thriving because they are marketing the positive changes they are making and it is being shown through the increased publicity, and therefore profits, they are receiving.

Procter & Gamble’s Dawn dish soap is an especially obvious example of the positive impact marketing sustainability can have. Their marketing campaign to help save animals coated in oil ended up being hugely successful and greatly increased the company’s profits and publicity. Oil spills are ecological disasters that are occurring at an increasing frequency, destroying the environment where they occur and putting local wildlife in significant danger. Dawn made it their mission to help animals who were harmed by these incidents and chose to embed their work into their marketing campaigns in order to increase their impact. The brand began its oil spill cleanup campaign in late 2009 by showcasing Dawn’s ability to safely clean oil-covered animals in TV ads and by pledging that every time a bottle of Dawn was purchased, they would donate $1 to help further cleanup efforts (Newman, 2009). This encouraged consumers to participate in Dawn’s campaign by buying the company’s products, thereby adding significant value that other brands did not have. According to data from Ace Metrix, an advertising analytics company, the Dawn commercials topped its list of most creatively effective TV spots for the second quarter of the 2009 fiscal year (Mcclellan, 2010). Just months later in 2010, oil company BP’s had a devastating oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, causing mass contamination of the Gulf’s waters. At this time, Dawn was still running its oil spill campaign and the BP disaster only increased support for it. The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico caused Dawn’s Ace Metrix score for advertising to increase further as consumers began to respond to the message Dawn had created because they wanted to do something to help (Mcclellan, 2010). By marketing wildlife sustainability efforts that Dawn had been a part of since the 1980s at a crucial environmental turning point, Dawn was able to increase its visibility among the public.

Another company that has seen success in marketing its sustainable efforts is shoe brand, TOMS, which was built with the mission to make a social impact. Founded in 2006, TOMS created a unique business model where they would donate a pair of shoes to a child in an undeveloped country for every pair of their shoes that were purchased (Marquis and Park, 2014, p.28). This allowed consumers to be directly involved in giving back socially and the brand instantly became popular because of their mission. TOMS follows what has been coined the Buy-One, Give-One Model. Much of the success from this model comes from the high-value consumers have started to put on societal issues combined with how simple the marketing message is: by buying a pair of shoes for yourself, you’re also buying a pair for someone in need (Marquis and Park, 2014, p.28). It is a straightforward concept that consumers can easily understand and the Buy-One, Give-One Model directly markets the good a company is doing through sustainable efforts. This strategy allows a company to directly create a relationship with its customers because the two groups are working together to generate change (Roncha, 2016, p. 300). Being in the Consumer Relationship Era, the emergence of this business model with TOMS, completely differentiated the company from its competitors, the experience was not about simply buying a pair of shoes. By founding TOMS on values to further corporate social responsibility, the company was able to instantly stand out. Only four years after being founded, TOMS had already donated over a million pairs of shoes to children around the world who were in need of them (Bachnik and Szumniak-Samolej, 2013, p.644). By marketing its giving model and the success it has seen from it, TOMS has helped to encourage other companies to contribute to sustainable efforts. They were one of the first companies to use the Buy-One, Get-One Model on such a large scale and several other companies have adopted similar models in order to increase the progress that is being made.

The more that we can advertise initiatives like those undertaken by Dawn and TOMS, the more likely other companies are to participate in sustainability. As we progress through the Consumer Relationship Era of marketing, consumers’ values will continue to change. By making sustainability more common in how products are marketed, companies can steer marketing practices in a new direction. In the future, sustainability has the potential to continue growing as it becomes a more common term in society.

1. **Conclusion**

Marketing sustainability is not always the answer. Consumers place value on other characteristics of a product first and greenwashing continues to make it appear untrustworthy at times. But the competitive advantage of marketing sustainable efforts can bring to a company outweighs many of the negatives. In the Consumer Relationship Era, consumers value the work that companies do to try to improve environmental and social conditions. By advertising the sustainable initiatives that a company implements, that one company is giving other companies a reason to follow in its footsteps. Advertising sustainable efforts encourages more of the corporate world to work to create a better future for the planet.

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