Marketing’s Role in Sustainability

Ravi Parameswaran,
Oakland University, School of Business Administration
Professor of Marketing, Department of Management and Marketing, USA.
E-mail: paramesw@oakland.edu

Krishna Parameswaran
President, tfgMM Strategic Consulting, USA.
E-mail: kparameswaran0346@gmail.com

Steven Kooy,
SCS Global Services,
Director of Sales and Marketing for Environmental Certification Services.
E-mail: skooy@scsglobalservices.com

Susan Kuzee,
Account Executive/Project Manager,
DDM Marketing & Communications.
E-mail: suek@teamddm.com

Extended Abstract

This paper examines how sustainability concepts emanating within the organization can be channeled through the marketing function to evolve as a “top of consciousness” corporate aspiration permeating the organization and the world beyond. The concepts presented in this paper are then made concrete through reviewing the sustainable practices employed by Haworth Inc. (Haworth), a global leader in the design and manufacture of office furniture and organic workspaces based in Michigan and opportunities for applying sustainability concepts in the future are explored.

Based on the classic Brundtland Commission’s (1987) definition of sustainable development (intergenerational compact built on three pillars: economic growth, ecological balance, and social progress), we discuss how sustainability concepts are applied to other activities such as mining, manufacturing, agriculture, forestry, and the like in order to determine how these concepts can be applied to marketing before speculating on an augmented role for marketing in the sustainability debate.

In order for sustainability efforts to be comprehensive, it has to address all four basic economic activities within a society (Goodwin et. al 2007) -- resource maintenance (enhancing an economy’s productivity by preserving or improving its stock of capital resources – natural, manufactured, human, social and financial), production (conversion of resources into useful goods and services), distribution (the sharing of products and resources among people through exchanges and transfers) and consumption (process by which goods and services are put to final use by the society at large). Sustainability in the two former activities is usually engendered through conservation of natural resources and energy, mitigation of environmental impacts and engagement of stakeholders. In contemporary business, the latter two activities are commonly associated with the marketing function. Marketing with its generally perceived focus of stimulating demand for products (Kotler and Keller 2009) can be unfavorably viewed as fostering unsustainable levels of consumption but market mechanisms can be used to address environmental and social problems. This paper highlights what sustainable practices are as applied to marketing and how to avoid or mitigate behaviors that are unsustainable. In other words, the role of marketing has shifted from a purely value delivery mode to a value exploration (a company identifying new value opportunities), value creation (a company more efficiently creates promising new value opportunities) and a value delivery (company uses its capabilities and infrastructure to deliver these new offerings more efficiently) foci (Kotler, Jain and Maesincee 2002).
As the central and critical nature of marketing in the business domain is increasingly appreciated, the dual roles of marketing have also crystallized. In addition to marketing’s role as a function within the organization, it is also recognized as a set of values and processes that all functions within participate in implementing (Moorman and Rust 1999). This recognition of marketing as “the function of business” (Haeckel 1997) is known as the firm’s marketing orientation. Therefore, marketing is both an orientation and a function within an organization. Moorman and Rust delineate the impact of both these roles for marketing in their Journal of Marketing (1999) article.

It is this thesis, and demonstration through a case study using Haworth, of the potential dual role of marketing in the elevation of sustainability consciousness within organizations, that is the primary focus of this paper.

References


