

The Power Play: Marketers vs. Consumers in the Fight Against Climate Change

Episode Description

The podcast episode this week will cover the debate as to who has the greater power to have a positive impact on climate change: consumers or marketers? Hearing arguments raised by two experts in the field, concerning points such as rising consumer pressure, Ecopreneurship, and marketing sustainability. This not-to-miss podcast takes a contemporary and relevant take on the discourse, featuring current examples from the real world of business to bring the debate to life.

Transcript

Introduction

Welcome to our another thought-provoking episode of “Marketing & Climate Change”. I am Aleks and I am Ava, your hosts. In this podcast, we dive deeper into the ongoing issue of climate responsibility. With the extreme flooding events, record high temperatures and increasing pressures for climate action, this question is now more relevant than ever: who has the power and responsibility to tackle climate change effectively?

Some argue that individual choices and actions have the power to initiate positive environmental change. On the other hand, the opponents say that large companies effectively shape consumer demand through their products and marketing strategies. So, they should take the lead in the reinforcement of sustainable practices.

So, who sets the stage? Who can change the world as we know it, to halt climate change and enter the path of sustainability? Our guests, experts in marketing and consumer behaviour Amy and Ben will aim to provide an answer for all those burning questions. So without further ado, let the conversation begin!

Consumer Point 1: Consumer Pressure

Firstly, in today’s world, consumers are seen as a major source of pressure with rising propensity and environmental values. As a result of consumer expectations towards more stringent environmental, social, and governance (ESG) endeavours, there is a newfound pressure on distributors and brands to respond accordingly to change outdated practices, even among economic downturns (Babbage, 2023). Statistics show that over several years, there has been a trend in consumers’ stance on and conduct towards sustainability, and Eco-Actives, those who show concern for the climate and do what they can to reduce their carbon footprint, has risen to 22% of the worldwide population, as compared to 18% in the previous year, and account for \$456 billion in expenditure, with the projection of continual growth in the coming years, showing it is not a temporary fad (Babbage, 2023). Similarly, it is clear that consumers are pressing brands so that they can build a sense of trust in them, and in tapping into the requirements and values of eco-conscious consumers by offering more sustainable alternatives, brands are able to capitalise on a fast-growing market segment, or otherwise risk being left behind.

For example, consumers are putting more responsibility on the government rather than fast-moving consumer-goods manufacturers to lead sustainability initiatives, an increase from 27.6% in 2016 to 39.8% in 2023, showing a significant shift in mass opinions towards sustainability. Moreover, another prominent example of consumer propensity is the trend towards second-hand consumption in the

fashion sector. Hur recognised the key values of economic, self-expressive, hedonic, environmental, and social contribution as being varied among second-hand shoppers (Hur, 2020). These changing attitudes are fuelling the environmental imperative and opening up more sustainable consumption markets.

Therefore, it is obvious that consumers have more power to positively impact climate change than the marketers themselves in this scenario, because markets are shaped by consumers' desires, and only by adjusting their efforts to meet the changing customer demands, will they advance a future with greater sustainability.

Consumer Counter 1: Marketers Scale up Trends

I agree with you that consumers drive market trends like second-hand shopping and veganism. However, marketers still possess the power to amplify and scale up these trends. Their influence, especially through social media platforms broadens choices and intensifies competition. For example, the widespread adoption of dairy alternatives by meat-eaters showcases how marketing can attract a broader audience, challenging the idea that consumer awareness alone drives these trends (Stannard, 2018).

Consumer Counter-Counter 1: Attitude/Behaviour Gap

However, there are ways proven to counteract the attitude-behaviour gap. For example, if consumers are encouraged to establish their own "implementation intentions" in which they mentally plan out how they will shift from intentions to actionable steps given a specific scenario, such as through visualisation of the setting and aligned actions at the point of sale (Carrington, 2010). As a result, sustainable consumers can have a positive impact by changing their purchasing habits and closing the divide of this gap.

Consumer Point 2: Buy-and-Boycott

Secondly, consumers have more power to positively impact climate change because, with their green scepticism, they can choose to boycott in positive instances or boycott organisations that are playing on human psychology and manipulation through greenwashing.

Socially responsible consumers, and more specifically "green consumers" are sceptical towards publicity efforts, question corporations' true intentions, and disregard promotional messages (Paek, 2009). "Boycotting", as an act of 'approach' where consumers decide to buy products, and "boycotting", as an act of 'avoidance' where consumers decide not to buy products relates to how individuals honour or condemn brands in relation to their apparent social obligation (Kam, 2020). Collective action occurs where consumers engage in political affairs during a boycott as a counteraction towards unethical behaviour, essentially forcing businesses towards sustainability, and this is happening more and more since technology has made the transfer of information much quicker and easier on a grand scale (Kam, 2020). Therefore, consumers have the most influence because for as long as boycotting continues, brands will lose loyal customers and not be able to generate revenues. Statistics reveal that 73% of Americans surveyed would boycott a brand's goods if it was discovered that they are negligent towards the environment, and 86% would divert to a different brand (Paek, 2009).

On the other hand, consumers buy more from corporations in honour of their ethical behaviours, and research shows hedonic individuals actively engaged in boycotting feel that their social and personal interests are in harmony, since it provides the chance and rationale to consume, and transforms ecological values into an increased willingness to engage (Hoffmann, et al., 2018).

The Volkswagen emissions scandal in 2015 was seen as one of the most catastrophic corporate social responsibility missteps in many years (Juoperi, 2017), in which the motor company were caught in the

act of adjusting the amount of pollution that was being emitted in their vehicle trials to avoid legislation and increase their revenues (Schiermeier, 2015). As a result, outrage from stakeholders through negative word-of-mouth, protesting and suing ultimately led to boycotting the brand (Juoperi, 2017).

Consumer Counter 2: Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde

That's true, but this type of action relies on people's environmental awareness and their individual beliefs which undoubtedly shape the market demand and its values. However, Paul Stiles social critic argues that the market is like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, as here quoting "If the market is surrounded by good values it can become a good physician, but when it's not it can become a predator." This way Stiles suggests that the market and its marketers have an enormous potential to shape consumers' behaviour and their values. Especially, as nowadays individuals accept market values over social values without any critical thinking (Stiles, 2005).

Consumer Point 3: Voluntary Simplicity

In a world bombarded by ads telling us to buy more and more, a growing number of people are saying, "Enough is enough!" They're diving headfirst into what's called 'Lifestyles of Voluntary Simplicity' and leaning towards a 'Less is More' lifestyle. It might be surprising as consumers are surrounded by marketers promoting shiny new products, however, research proves people aren't buying into the more the better, but opting for a simpler, more thoughtful way of life.

Research by Elgin talks about the idea of sustainable shopping and is suggesting that people should think about how society and culture shape what you buy. According to Elgin, changing just one person's shopping habits won't cut it if we're aiming for widespread sustainability (Elgin, 2013).

The 'less is more' lifestyle is not just a cool trend, like becoming vegan just because your mate is, but a response against marketers nagging to buy, buy, buy for purely just economic growth. This alternative lifestyle puts well-being, deep connections, and harmony with our planet a priority (Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin, 2005). Those who live a more simplistic lifestyle can argue that constant pressure from marketers to buy more only serves to keep driving economic growth and benefiting wealthy multinational corporations (Kumar et al, 2019).

Hausen argues that living a simple lifestyle of simplicity often leads to a more contemptuous happy life. Choosing a simpler life isn't just about having less materialistic goods, but it's about gaining more fulfilment and opportunities that consumer-driven living can't provide (Hausen, 2018).

Consumer Counter 3: Marketers Shape Consumer Wants

Again, you are making a good point here. However, don't you think these trends, ideas of simple lifestyle and popular slogans of "Less is more" is a good marketing strategy? Effectively used by marketers to collaborate with consumers, respond to their needs and promote more sustainable practices (Emery, 2020). It is more of a dynamic interaction, a kind of dialogue where consumers set the tone, and marketers provide a strategic response that aligns businesses with the ever-growing demand for greater sustainability. The perfect example is the growth of second-hand online platforms like Vinted or Depop. One would say that second-hand shops were always there, that's nothing new. However, they never succeeded very well, because they have always been associated with a sense of poverty or a status of lower class in the society (Armstrong et al., 2015). But the development of these types of second-hand platforms allowed marketers to disenchant that traditional point of view, through advertising - effectively promoting sustainable practices.

Marketing Point 1: Ecopreneurship

Following this, the shift to more sustainable business models is not just stemming from growing consumer demand, but businesses themselves are realising the opportunities of sustainable practices and initiating the change for themselves. Known as Ecopreneurship, it examines how many businesses of today are seeing sustainability as an opportunity rather than a threat and shifting their operations to put sustainability at the forefront (Emery, 2020). There is increasing evidence that sustainability and good business now go hand-in-hand (Cooperrider & Fry, 2012). Accenture reports that companies with higher ESG performance ratings experience operating margins 3.7 times higher than others (Hannaes, 2022). When businesses take the initiative to prioritise sustainability, they act as agents for world change (Cooperrider & Fry, 2012) and have a greater ability to work towards saving the planet than consumers alone.

A company taking sustainability to the next level is Passenger, this clothing brand uses recycled materials and plants a tree for every order placed. Its success is evident in its growth, sales have quadrupled from 2019 to £11 million in 2021 (Brightpearl, 2022). Passenger, however, puts purpose over profit; they want their brand to represent the environment that it lives in.

Marketing Counter 1: Consumer Decision

You could say that businesses are seeing the value in ethical production and are becoming more sustainable, however, ultimately it is down to whether the consumers decide to purchase a product or not. Not only that, but the most prominent downside of almost all sustainable companies operating in a linear economy is that more costly ethically sourced materials are reflected in the price tags, making it difficult for businesses to compete within the market dominated by fast-fashion and more affordable options (Gomes de Oliveira, et al., 2022). The power remains in the hands of the individual consumer, as for example with Passenger, the clothing brand relies on actual sales to give back to the environment and plant trees.

Marketing Point 2: Sustainability as the Default

Another point is that, although nowadays, many consumers would love to be green and act sustainably (Johnstone & Tan, 2015), there has not been an actual shift in actual consumer behaviour. This attitude/behaviour gap explains why it is up to marketers to push the way forward for sustainability in business. Often, consumers' sustainable attitudes and green sentiments are overcome by desires for convenience, cost-effectiveness, and general habits (Agerup & Nilsson, 2016). Marketers have now taken the initiative to make sustainability the default (Theotokis & Manganari, 2015), which ensures sustainability in a myriad of ways. Most recently, there has been an overarching trend for consumers to feel pressure to be green, or rather to be seen as being green (Agerup & Nilson, 2016). This social pressure means that consumers are less likely to opt out of a business's green practices because they fear the social repercussions.

Tying into the idea that guilt plays an essential role in sustainable consumer behaviour (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014), consumers will be less likely to opt-out because they will experience the guilt of having to choose against the environment. Along these same lines, pride is also an important emotion and plays a role in sustainable behaviour, by enabling consumers to have a 'feel-good' sensation when they act sustainably (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014). Consumers will then be more likely to re-evaluate their life choices and act sustainably in other areas as a way to continue this feeling (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014). Therefore, when marketers take steps to incorporate green values into the core of their business and make sustainability the default, consumers will be able to act upon their green attitudes and overcome this behaviour gap. Illustrating how marketers have the ability to ensure a greater success rate of sustainable actions by making sustainable behaviours easier for consumers to accomplish.

Leon – the popular food and drink spot, for example, prioritises sustainability at the heart of their organisation. They replaced single-use plastics with biodegradable alternatives and over a third of their menu is vegan (Price, 2019). This aids consumers to act sustainably and could lead them to make more

sustainable choices on their own accord by exemplifying sustainability, and after seeing the success of their practices, other businesses may be incentivised to follow their lead.

Marketing Counter 2: Guilt Marketing

I see where you are coming from with the idea of guilt marketing, but what about the ethics around this technique, where consumers are essentially being psychologically manipulated into achieving unattainable standards (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014)? Promoting sustainable behaviours through these negative emotions is morally wrong, and could instead result in unforeseen adverse effects, the opposite of what marketers were trying to achieve in the first place.

Marketing Point 3: Marketing Sustainability

Most importantly, sustainability marketing has the potential to shift the cultural values of consumers, addressing environmental issues, making consumers aware of and gaining an understanding of the environmental impact of consumption, and promoting sustainable ways of consumption at the same time (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019).

Companies will be able to encourage consumers to develop resource-efficient ways of consumption, re-evaluate their consumption choices towards sustainability, and reduce waste (Calvo-Porrall et al., 2019). Marketers can enable consumers to act sustainably, encourage and engage them, and also exemplify sustainability itself – this framework allows marketers to transition society down the road to sustainability (Emery, 2020). This capability means that marketing has a greater potential to have a positive impact on the environment.

Patagonia is the obvious example, their ‘don’t buy this jacket’ campaign – is the epitome of marketing sustainability. Patagonia encourages consumers to repair their old garments, reduce purchases, reuse-and-repurpose items, and recycle products at end of life (Calvo-Poral et al., 2019). This form of sustainability marketing highlighted the need for a cultural change in society and illustrated that marketers have this ability to communicate with consumers and establish sustainable practices at the forefront of their mindsets.

Marketing Counter 3: Consumer Habits

To counter that argument, our daily routines encompass sustainability consequences such as the food we eat, mode of transportation, power consumption, spending, and recycling and these habits are ingrained in us (White & Hardiistry, 2019). Therefore it is often too difficult or takes too much effort to break down and shape new ones, particularly if efforts are downstream and in formative (Verplanken & Wood, 2006). As a result, marketers are helpless in breaking habits that have formed part of consumers’ identity, and in trying to force changes, consumers will only be pushed further away.

Conclusion

All in all, the complex issue among consumers and marketers in the domain of sustainability is eventually going to determine the fate of our planet. Consumers are a major force behind change, pressuring firms to embrace sustainability. In any case, marketers are not just observers, they shape and intensify the trends and development. Effective models like Traveler and Patagonia show that organisations can flourish by incorporating sustainability into their core.

However, there are challenges, such as the ethical load and the disconnect between views and deeds. To tackle this issue, tactics are required, such as making sustainability the default choice and motivating consumers with feelings of pride.

In this perplexing topic, the two shoppers and marketers hold the keys to a supportable future. The excursion towards a green, more moral world requires a coordinated effort, understanding, and a common obligation to adjust the requests of trade with the prosperity of our planet.

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