

Sustainability vs. Marketing



France du Buisson, director of Oxford-based strategic marketing consultancy Change Up explains how marketing is contributing to a more sustainable future.

'Sustainability' – it is difficult to spend a day without hearing or reading this word in the media, in corporate presentations or at dinner tables. This is a good thing, as far from being fashionable as some still think, sustainability is vital to the future of our world and that of our children.

It was no different at a recent meeting of the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), where the need for updating the definition of marketing was debated. And so it was suggested, amongst other points, to add the word 'sustainable' to what marketing does for organisations.

Some people, however, argue that the marketing profession is to be held responsible for hindering the worldwide efforts to achieve a more sustainable society by encouraging consumerism. What a compliment to the art of advertising! Unfortunately, it does not pay great tribute to people's ability to make intelligent choices nor does it take into account the full remit of marketing.

It is on the contrary easier to demonstrate how a professional marketer can initiate and promote the efforts of organisations to contribute to a more sustainable future. Here are only a few examples of how a marketer can place sustainability at the heart of an organisation:

- **Firmly embed sustainability in the company brand values;** as I was driving out of Oxford last week, I noticed that on the delivery van in front of me was the name of a courier company, with the simple words "a carbon neutral courier" – no mention of speedy deliveries, service standards or attractive prices! The value that Courier Systems put forward is their claim to a greener environment.
- **Incorporate sustainability in internal marketing strategy:** empower employees to deliver the brand values through a programme of internal communications, contributing to a more sustainable attitude in the place of work, but also at home. If a company promotes simple energy savings actions, such as switching off computers, printers and other electrical appliances at night and the recycling of office paper, it is more likely that its employees will adopt a similar attitude at home.
- **Carefully research customers' needs to understand your target markets' expectations about sustainability and respond to them;** research shows that it is the customers who are driving the interest in sustainability when they lobby for locally sourced produce or energy efficiency.
- **Innovate in sustainable concepts;** Yeo Valley's organic products are packaged in such a way that the consumer can separate packaging material to make recycling easier.
- **Take advantage of today's technology and of media's fragmentation** when elaborating the organisation's external communication programme; the onus is now more and more on the consumer to find the products he needs. This reduces resources such as advertising material, promotional packaging or point of sale displays.
- **Enhance the relationship that the organisation develops with its customers** through affinity or loyalty programmes. This enables an organisation to better know its customers and to adapt to its needs in a more efficient way, mitigating the resources needed for separate research and further new product development.
- **PR managers will promote their organisation's sustainable policies and actions, often educating their audiences** rather than encouraging consumerism; many adolescents (and their parents!) will have encountered the "Ben & Jerry's climate change college", which aims are to inspire and mentor young people who want to be part of the solution to climate change – a fine example of putting the company's values into practice.
- **Check that suppliers apply the same principles for sustainability, so that your company's reputation cannot be jeopardised by their actions.** There are too many examples of this happening to well established businesses.

I would go even further and suggest that marketing not only is a good tool for a more sustainable future, but that it also has a role to play in the wider arena of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which adds a more humanitarian dimension to sustainability. Here are two examples of how it can work: a good communication plan should respect and value cultural differences, whilst a brand carefully highlighting its company's ethical values will go a long way towards educating customers on how to make a social difference: sales of Fairtrade products are doubling every two years in the UK, giving hundreds of thousands of producers in developing countries the chance to compete in global markets, and build a better future for themselves and their families.

The suggestion of the Chartered Institute of Marketing to articulate the definition of marketing around the three areas of science, arts and humanities, envisaging that students could study and embrace a career in 'Social Marketing' reinforces this opinion.

The CIM should therefore be confident in bringing sustainability as a prominent feature of its role – and company executives should, in turn, seek the help of marketers to optimise their contribution to a more sustainable future.