



SUSTAINABLE MARKETING: A MORAL IMPERATIVE FOR A BEAUTIFUL TOMORROW

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ABSTRACT:

Sustainability has become a business value in the present day business world. Sustainable business practices are no more aspirational; they have become a compelling necessity for businesses to survive and thrive. Reflecting over the wellbeing of the environment and the society and weaving it in the business framework and strategies has become the call of the day. Businesses are morally obliged to revisit their actions and their impact on our planet and the life thereon. Sustainable marketing is a potent tool to put the business' sustainability agenda into practice. Firms that are able to create value for people by implementing pro-planet actions are truly sustainable, for they will prosper and help leave a clean and healthy ecological legacy for the future generations.

KEYWORDS:

Sustainable marketing, Sustainable value, Marketing ethics

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is the pressing global need of the hour. United Nations has very aptly and succinctly defined sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (<https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/sustainability>). Humanity needs to prioritize sustainable behaviour so that Mother Earth is not only able to foster the present generation but sufficient natural endowments are left for nurturing the future generations as well. We all have the capability to practise sustainable behaviour; what is needed is a strong sense of determination and willingness. A unified approach encompassing contribution from all stakeholders such as industry, academia, government, environmentalists, ecologists, ecopreneurs and society as a whole, is required to address the ever-aggravating ecological and societal challenges that the world is currently facing.

Practising sustainability universally, by one and all, has become an ecological imperative. Geoscientists and ecologists are constantly blowing whistle to awaken humanity to the complex yet urgent global environmental issues that have a direct impact on our survival and wellbeing. Global heating implying a sustained rise in the average temperature of our planet's atmosphere that leads to global climate change; acid rain; depletion of atmospheric ozone that screens our planet from ultraviolet radiation; accumulation of greenhouse emissions; seas and oceans dying from sewage, plastic pollution and other waste matter; erosion of surface soil leading to agricultural land being converted into arid deserts; rapid using up of non-renewable natural resources; vanishing of rainforests and extinction of species, have become global ecological concerns (Chandler, 1990 cited in Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

The growing population needs more industrial output for consumption purpose; majorly this exponential growth trend of population has been observed in poor, under-developed and developing nations that barely have resources for development. The increasing pressure of population adversely affects the biosphere as investments are made in housing, transportation, farming and industrial growth. It is not unknown that economic growth draws raw inputs from forestlands, soils, seas and waterways. The vital resource endowments are depleting to alarming levels because of unsustainable development works. The requirement of further economic activity will place enormous new burdens on our planet's ecosphere. Economy and ecology are getting highly intertwined at domestic as well as global level. Given this fact, marketing cannot isolate itself from the ecological problems that have ensued because of economic growth. Marketers must be concerned about the natural resources that are used in satisfying the needs of the consumers and the corresponding impact of this consumption on people's lives and the ecosystem. Sustainable development, therefore, necessitates "sustainable marketing" implying "marketing efforts that are not only competitively sustainable but are also ecologically sustainable" (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

MEANING OF SUSTAINABLE MARKETING

Of all the stakeholders, the foremost responsibility and pivotal role in bringing about sustainability as a universally-accepted phenomenon, rests on the businesses. Sustainability has come to be seen as a sterling business value. In order to embrace sustainability, firms will have to bring in major modifications in various functional areas of business performance such as research and development,

purchase, production, finance, human resource, marketing and the like. It may not be inappropriate to state that a firm's sustainable business practices are implemented primarily through its sustainable marketing programme. *Sustainable marketing* is a strategic approach that blends environmental and social aspects into marketing decision-making with the view to creating increased long-term value for businesses as well as society, while also preserving the environment in the process. Sustainable marketing has been described as "socially and environmentally responsible marketing that meets the present needs of consumers and businesses while also preserving or enhancing the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017). Simply stated, it is a holistic approach towards marketing that balances three vital variables namely, planet, people and profit. A delicate reconciliation of profit, people and planet implying "triple bottomline" (Charter et al., 2002) has to be achieved by businesses in order to remain sustainable in future.

		Needs of business	
		Now	Future
Needs of consumers	Now	Marketing concept	Strategic planning concept
	Future	Societal marketing concept	Sustainable marketing concept

Figure 1: Sustainable Marketing

[Source: Kotler, P & Armstrong, G (2017). Principles of Marketing, (17th ed.). Pearson, (Chapter 20).]

Based on the present and future needs of the consumers and that of the businesses, the various marketing models/concepts that have been in place so far are depicted in Figure 1. The *marketing concept* holds that firms must determine the current unfulfilled needs and wants of the target consumers and produce product/service offerings that satisfy the unmet needs of the consumers better than the competitors. The focus is on serving the present needs of the consumers and thereby meeting the firm's short-term sales, growth or profit targets. However, serving the immediate needs of the consumers does not imply that the future best interests are secured, both of the consumers as well as the business. The marketing concept emphasizes on serving the present needs of the consumers and the business firm. However, it can at times lead to risking and compromising the future best interest of both the stakeholders viz. consumers and business firm. Businesses must ponder beyond satisfaction of consumers' current needs and short-term performance of the business. They must adopt sustainable business practices that preserve the long-term interest of both the consumers and the business; in other words, preserve the world with all its beauty and natural resources, for the future generations. *Sustainable marketing* is the expedient to fulfill the present needs of the consumers in a manner that safeguards the interests of the future generations of businesses and consumers. While *societal marketing* takes care of the future interest of the consumers, the *strategic planning concept* looks into the future interest of the business firm. Interestingly, sustainable marketing embraces the long-term interest of both the consumers as well as the businesses (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017).

EVOLUTION OF SUSTAINABLE MARKETING

From the standpoint of how marketing as a physical system impacts the ecological balance of the planet, the marketing thought has evolved overtime. Marketing's ecological evolution that concentrates upon the societal and environmental impact of marketing has gone through the following stages viz. (i) ecological marketing (1970's and 1980's) (ii) green marketing (1990's) (iii) sustainable marketing (2000 onwards). *Ecological marketing* was concerned with addressing the negative effects of ecologically hazardous production and marketing activities. Decision-making was sought in the area of legal company defence as also in the area of technology; but it was generally limited to incremental innovations and technological additions to an existing manufactured product that was produced in the old way (Katrandjiev, 2016).

Green marketing focussed on specific fields (such as coal mining, chemical industry, petroleum industry) that have a direct impact on the planet's environment. The scope of industries wherein decision-making regarding environment become imperative had been widened during this era. Global issues including extinction of flora and fauna species, devastation of particular ecosystems, poverty in developing nations and so forth became relevant for marketing. The product and service range widened for consumer products such as cleansing agents, furniture, organic food and the like. The scientific growth of the concept was observed whereby a systematic approach to marketing (as expressed in firm's business philosophy) was sought to be adopted by the business firm that is seen as a system connected with other systems (such as environment, society and so on). It is pertinent to mention that "green" products are those "products that are lighter in their environmental footprint over the total life-cycle, including the production and post-use phases" (Sheth et al., 2011).

Finally, *sustainable marketing* strongly advocates a futuristic orientation, justice and fairness for all, as well as an emphasis on fulfilling the fundamental needs and wants of the planet's population. It may be noted that while greener marketing is distinguished by an emphasis on environmental concerns and how to minimize environmental harm, sustainable marketing is the natural next landmark in the journey, with a focus on sustainable development by achieving the "triple bottomline" through manufacturing and delivering sustainable offerings with high net sustainable value alongside continually satisfying consumers and all other stakeholders (Charter et al., 2002).

INSTRUMENTALITY OF MARKETING IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Marketing triggers all other economic activities as it stimulates people to consume goods and services for satisfaction of their needs and wants. Nevertheless, marketing assumes a critical role in the present day world wherein through sustainable marketing an attempt is made to "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). Marketing should aim at maximizing the quality of life of people through want-satisfying products and services. It is interesting to

note that quality of life is assessed not just by the quality and quantity of consumption offerings; it is also reflected through the quality of the natural environment in which we all dwell.

Certainly, marketing has to adopt a more responsible role and vanguard position for bringing about sustainable development. Two tasks of utmost importance have to be executed by the marketing function. *Firstly*, moulding the needs of the consumers and channelizing them towards ecologically-benign products, services and/or processes. Transforming the pattern of consumption may require positive incentives, development of new products and/or processes as well as price or non-price disincentives against certain consumption practices by consumers. *Secondly*, the more important role of marketing is to recognize and create such consumption choices for people whereby current needs are satisfactorily met without compromising the ability to meet future needs. In other words, marketers have to not just content themselves with green products that do not harm the environment but have to develop such innovative products/services also that will help ameliorate the poor state of our environment. Such environmentally-safe products must become the first choice of consumers as they not only satisfy the consumption needs of the people but also address their need for a healthy, safe and sustainable physical environment. It is pertinent to accept conclusively that consumer needs and environmental needs are not, and should be not, inconsistent and contradictory. Rather, they occur simultaneously. People certainly want to coexist with Nature, vibrant with all its beauty and health. Firms that perform these radical tasks will not only engage in pollution prevention at their end but depict a sustainable approach in all their tasks. They will produce and distribute products/services in a more efficient manner; be concerned about their products lifelong impact on the environment; will plan for the recycling of the products and would ensure that their suppliers of raw inputs also earnestly adhere to such environmental concerns. All this may be challenging and will necessitate a novel mindset, new processes/procedures/equipments and organizational adjustments (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

Clearly, the role of business and particularly that of marketing is instrumental in nurturing a more sustainable future. It is imperative for firms to prioritize sustainable business practices in order to attain profitability and favourable societal outcomes. A firm that begins the journey of improving its social and ecological performance faces a turbulent and tough time. This is because henceforth, the projects need to be viewed in different ways. Also, inter-disciplinary skills are needed. Execution of plans and strategies has higher chances of success if the staff members participate in decision-making and harbour a sense of ownership of such decisions. Therefore, *internal marketing* programmes must be introduced with due care and monitored regularly to ensure that the projects are accepted and endorsed by the top management and employees. All initiatives must be lucidly explained to the employees; they should be informed about the sustainability issues through workshops, presentations, web resources, newsletters etc. and motivated to take part in social and environmental programmes. It may be noted that though the employees may give their support to socio-environmental programmes, the idea of sustainability and its many facets are still not widely comprehended by the society. Therefore, it behoves the top management to not only inform and educate the employees regarding major socio-environmental concerns but also professionally communicate the firm's response thereof and its significance (Charter et al., 2002).

Demarketing strategies that work with the four fundamental P's of marketing, but in an opposite manner, should be adopted to discourage harmful consumption behaviour. It is well-known that the aim of traditional (commercial) marketing has been to sell goods and services that fulfill consumers' unmet needs and wants, at a profit, sans assessing the correctness of those needs. Marketers must employ *social marketing* strategies to modify, mould or transform customer needs if they are injurious to the customer himself/herself, other people or society in general. Thus, in the wake of rising sustainability concerns, as a corrective measure, social marketing may be employed to rectify the flaws of socio-environmentally harmful commercial marketing practices. Additionally, social marketing also seeks to urge people in prosperous nations to minimize their consumption of goods and services on the reasoning of "less is more" Kotler (2022). More of social marketing campaigns are being undertaken by marketers as part of their corporate social responsibility initiatives to discourage electricity consumption, water usage, heavy packaging with non-biodegradable material like plastics and so forth.

In the present state of global environmental crisis, it becomes extremely necessary to save our planet earth; therefore, the emerging objective of social marketing has come to be: *degrowth*. Traditional business frameworks and practices concentrate upon endless growth in a bid to enhance shareholders' wealth and profits. Academia proposes "stakeholder-centric" (Kotler, 2024) approach instead of the shareholder-centric model of doing business. It may be appropriate to mention that degrowth has emerged as a novel concept to globally balance the population and economic growth with ecological requirements. Degrowth is elucidated as "an equitable downscaling of economic production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions" (Schneider et al., 2010 cited in Lloveras et al., 2022). Degrowth has become a topical theme for academic research and deliberation. Interestingly, the veteran economists who had initially discussed about economic growth had never regarded growth to be an interminable process, but rather considered it as a necessary phenomenon only for a definite period of time (<https://degrowth.info/en/history>, retrieved on 15/1/2025). Just as uncontrolled growth of cells in human body may lead to various biological malignancies; just as an automobile with an accelerator but no brakes is life-threatening for the passengers; likewise, economic growth without incorporating sustainable practices is detrimental for the planet and the people inhabiting it. Therefore, the idea of zero-growth or modest growth has also come to be reckoned as an environmentally-viable business goal.

STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE MARKETING

Sustainable value is the sum-total of the impact of a firm's product/service/system throughout its life cycle on the profits, planet and people. These economic-ecological-social impacts may be favourable or unfavourable; the *goal* is to incessantly better the net sustainable value. It emphasizes on delivering value to all stakeholders who are engaged in producing and delivering sustainable outcomes. *Sustainable product design and development* is the managerial *process* that seeks to incorporate sustainability concerns and impacts in the process of creation of sustainable solutions, right from the stage of generation of idea through the launching of the product and even beyond. The target is to maximize net sustainable value and deliver satisfaction to consumers as well as all stakeholders. *Sustainable solutions* are the *outcomes* in the form of products/services/hybrids/system changes that seek to minimize the unfavourable impacts and maximize the favourable impacts throughout the product system life cycle while also addressing acceptable societal needs. Figure 2

depicts how a firm can operate in a more responsible manner with regard to the sourcing of raw inputs, production, retrieval/recall of the product after its useful life, and its disposal. Incidentally, the concerted efforts of multiple stakeholders are needed to build sustainable solutions that may even require paradigm shift in production patterns and the ensuing consumption habits. Interestingly, the changes may be incremental (product-level changes) or radical (system shifts), if required (Charter et al., 2002).

Building sustainable marketing strategies may pose new challenges afore marketers. The familiar traditional marketing tasks such as finding out the unserved needs of consumers, their tastes and preferences and expectations as well as analyzing the firm's ability to fulfill them relative to the competitors have to be performed as usual. Additionally, new type of data on the attitude of the various stakeholders towards sustainability issues concerning sourcing, manufacturing, use and disposal of product is also needed. Important strategic decisions will include identification of markets that have a likelihood of growth due to ongoing sustainability concerns; also, decisions regarding products/services that may be positioned in sensitive markets as market leaders based on their socio-environmental performance. To be successful, a shift in focus will be needed in many markets; departing from products per se and embracing services or a package of product/service. For instance, moving towards offering sustainable transportation solutions such as cab services instead of providing automobile cars; this will involve transforming the outlook to fulfill the needs of the consumers by way of offering functional solutions (in the form of services) rather than (tangible) products per se (Charter et al., 2002).

- **E Environmental materials.** Many marketers—from greeting cards to plastic soda bottles—now use recycled materials to help keep trash out of landfills. Most report little negative consumer reactions and positive consumer responses from some market segments.
- **C Content reduction.** Using less materials in the first place can save money as well as trash. Procter & Gamble undertook this step when it eliminated its boxed packaging for Sure and Secret deodorants, saving 3.4 millions pounds of packaging trash each year.
- **O Overtime product use.** Replacing disposable products with reusable products or refillable containers provides new opportunities as well. Returnable soda bottles and reusable diapers are two products on the way back to popularity.
- **L Longer-lasting products.** Higher-priced, more durable products can sometimes replace throw-aways, as the success of Gillette's Sensor shaving system shows.
- **O Ordinary repairs or recycling made easy.** Products can be designed for ease of repair, as with Electrolux vacuum cleaners, or for ease of recycling, as with Heinz' squeezable plastic bottles.
- **G Gathering products for recycling.** Profitable and promotable programs are possible, as used products can supply a low-cost source of recycled materials. For example, Exide (the largest maker of auto batteries) has teamed up with K-mart to pay consumers for old batteries: it thereby gains a source of lead while helping to save the environment; consumers get something back; and K-mart gains new battery sales.
- **I Incinerator-safe packages and products.** Ensuring that disposed products are safe for burning (or for landfills) directly helps. Ever-ready batteries, for example, were redesigned with this in mind.
- **C Compostable packages.** Biodegradability is an achievable goal for many types of papers and plastics, including Warner-Lambert's new form of plastic packaging, Novon.

Figure 2: "Eco-logic" framework for sustainable marketing

[Source: Wilkie, 1994 cited in Murphy et al., 2005]

In the wake of adoption of sustainable marketing by a business firm, marketing practices with regard to the four P's shall need to undergo a change. In other words, a *sustainable marketing mix* shall need to be developed. *Product*: Marketers and product developers shall need to keenly look into the sourcing and carbon footprints of the raw materials used in manufacturing goods. The packaging should consist of essential, not ostentatious packages that are made from biodegradable, environmentally-safe packaging material. *Price*: Firms may build a list of product offerings based on their environmental friendliness and fix corresponding prices. Environmentally-conscious buyers may be willing to shell out more money for sustainable offerings. Firms should also impute the externality costs that they create in the course of production, while setting the prices of their offerings; for sooner or later, environmental laws and regulations may require them to do so. *Place*: Firms shall have to determine where to locate their production units and distribution centres. Environmentalists and sustainability proponents recommend more locally-based production that will necessitate decentralized production. Marketers may rank potential channels of distribution based on their adherence to sustainable practices. Online selling may be promoted by firms to discourage customers driving down to retail outlets for the purpose of purchasing goods. *Promotion*: Firms may consider transforming more of their promotion material from the print to the online, because printing employs paper and other resources. Firms may want to highlight their adherence to sustainable practices implying being a good citizen committed to sustainability, in greater number of their

advertisements. Product labelling shall have to be more detailed about the ingredients used and their carbon footprints (Kotler et al., 2011).

SUSTAINABLE MARKETING AND MARKETING ETHICS

Ethics and morals are the foundation of sustainable marketing. Unethical marketing injures the consumers and the society in the long run. Finally, it erodes the goodwill of the business firm, bringing its very survival at stake. Therefore, the goal of sustainable marketing of bringing about long-term welfare of the customers and business may be accomplished only through the expedient of ethical marketing practices. Implied by its responsibility towards the society, the American Marketing Association has promulgated ethical norms and values for marketing practitioners that seek to guide and govern their behaviour. These are (i) “Do no harm” implying consciously forego harmful actions/omissions by imbibing high ethical standards as well as abide by applicable legislations and regulations in all marketing decision-making. (ii) “Foster and maintain integrity” implying endeavour for fairness and transparency in each and every aspect of marketing ecosystem viz. design of the product/service, its price, promotion and distribution. (iii) “Embrace ethical values” implying create relationships and improve stakeholder trust by imbibing the fundamental values of truthfulness, ecological and societal stewardship, equity, fairness, respect, openness, unambiguous communication and sense of citizenship (<https://www.ama.org/ama-statement-of-ethics/> retrieved on 21/1/2025).

CONCLUSION

The cornerstone of marketing is the basic understanding that those firms that satisfy consumers’ needs shall prosper. Business firms that fail to serve the needs of the consumers; knowingly or unknowingly impair the interest of consumers, society in general, or the future generations; shall sooner or later perish. Sustainability has become a business trend now; increasingly, businesses and top management will be evaluated on the immediate results as well as on the basis of the long-term impact of their actions on societal wellbeing. Sustainable businesses are referred to as those firms that build value for consumers by way of engaging in environmentally, ethically and socially responsible deeds. Sustainable marketing goes one step further from the traditional marketing approach; it seeks to fulfill the unserved needs of present consumers and also cares for future generations of consumers by ascertaining the survival and prosperity of the business, owners, workers and the broader world that they inhabit. In other words, it implies striving to attain shared value and care for the people, planet and profits. Thus, sustainable marketing offers the backdrop wherein firms may create rewarding relationships with customers by creating value for them in a bid to capture value from them in return (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017). All firms aim to grow, but the pathway to growth must be sustainable, for it is businesses’ bounden duty to ensure that resources are wisely put to use presently so that sufficient natural endowments and clean environment are gracefully handed over to the future generations.

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