



# SUSTAINABLE MARKETING: A SOCIAL IMPERATIVE

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## ABSTRACT:

Production and consumption are intertwined. Sustainable consumption implying more responsible consumption is equally obligatory for consumers as is sustainable production a business imperative for the producers. This article discusses the responsible role of consumers towards adoption of sustainability in their consumption choices by demanding eco-friendly goods and services, which will in turn lead the producers to imbibe sustainable practices in the production and marketing of their product/service offerings.

## KEYWORDS:

Sustainable Marketing, Consumerism, Environmentalism

## INTRODUCTION

Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) coined the term “Sustainable marketing” describing it as “a marketing approach that promotes sustainable development and protection of our ecosystem.” Kotler and Armstrong (2017) have defined sustainable marketing 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.”

There has been a sea of difference in the mindset of marketers and consumers in the pre-sustainability era and the sustainability world of today. In the pre-sustainability times, marketers worked on certain unexamined assumptions such as: (i) wants are natural, infinite and promote limitless consumption of products/services; (ii) planet earth’s resources are abundant and infinite; (iii) the carrying capacity of planet earth for waste and pollution is unlimited; (iv) an individual’s quality of life and happiness improve with increased levels of consumption and want-satisfaction. In contrast, the most-desired sustainable practices advocated today are based on more realistic principles viz. (i) wants are influenced by culture and shaped by marketing (ii) planet earth’s resource endowment is finite and fragile (iii) planet earth’s capacity of carrying waste and pollution is extremely limited (iv) an individual’s quality of life and level of happiness do not necessarily improve as a result of over-consumption or want-satisfaction (Kotler et al., 2011).

## SUSTAINABLE CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Consumer behavior is the study of various aspects related to consumers, such as their needs and wants, perceptions, buying motives and patterns, purchasing power, willingness to buy and so on, that influence their buying behaviour in the marketplace. Sustainable consumer behaviour that is a contemporary concept is a subset of the broader traditional consumer behaviour theory. It delves into the why’s and how’s of consumers endorsing and embracing more responsible, sustainable consumption practices that are extremely topical in the wake of ever-increasing global population and depleting natural resources. Sustainable attitudinal choices generally translate into positive, sustainable buying behaviour as conscientious consumers nowadays seek sustainable, eco-friendly brands.

Consumption is an economic phenomenon that looks into the individual’s needs and wants. It drives a nation’s economy through the collective consumption behaviour of people. It is a social and cultural construct as well through which individuals express their identity and build a place for themselves within the society. Consumption is also a physical process whereby resources are being consumed. What an individual eats, how he warms his home, how he travels to his place of work may seem to be nobody’s concern but that of the individual alone. However, the collective results of such consumption choices are the primary reason behind climate change that will have severe consequences for people, nations, resources, species, habitats around the globe.

Businesses will need to think sustainably if they have to survive and thrive in the present times. Interestingly, the major thrust for making the marketing practices more environmentally-oriented shall come from the consumers’ side alone. Overtime, the marketing discipline has seen consumers making their brand choices on the basis of the functional criterion (Marketing 1.0); then on the basis of emotional criterion (Marketing 2.0); and presently on the basis of a third criterion viz. how is the business firm fulfilling its social

responsibilities (Marketing 3.0). Today, the consumer community is grappling with the all-time new concerns, anxieties, fears and doubts. Especially after experiencing the mental and physical distresses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers have started thinking whether they will be able to keep their jobs? Will they be able to save sufficiently for their retirement? Will the traffic situation on road get worse? Will air quality further worsen? Will water in rivers get more polluted? Will products be manufactured by new methods that are environmentally safer and cleaner (Kotler et al., 2011)?

In essence, consumers will choose to buy from businesses that care. Therefore, businesses will need to subscribe to environmental consciousness in their operations, for they will not want to appear indifferent to the larger good. The important question is whether the generally price-sensitive consumers will be willing to purchase more environment-friendly product/service offerings. The answer is 'Yes' if the price remains unchanged. However, it has come to be known that environmentally-conscious consumers, although few in number, will be willing to pay even more for environmentally-sound product offerings. For instance, some electricity companies charge slightly more than other competing companies for the reason that their electricity is sourced majorly from solar and wind energy. Interestingly, consumers are becoming more mindful of their erstwhile mindless consumption. Questions like (i) Is excess food being consumed? Is it the right kind of food? Are excessive quantities of sugar, salt and butter being consumed? Is the entire family adhering to a healthy diet? (ii) Is a fuel-efficient car being driven by them? Do they really need to own a car or use rental car services? (iii) Can household consumers save energy by employing more efficient lighting like LED, install solar panels and so on? (iv) Can household consumers sort the garbage more efficiently into biodegradable, non-biodegradable, electronic waste? (Kotler et al., 2011)

In the USA, some sophisticated, enlightened consumers have been referred to as LOHAS, an acronym that stands for Lifestyles Of Health And Sustainability (Environmental Leader, 2009 cited in Kotler et al., 2011). More and more consumers are joining the LOHAS category. The market for LOHAS products is ever-growing; it includes organic food items, energy-efficient gadgets, solar panels, alternative treatment therapies, yoga tapes, and ecotourism, among others. If a good number of households start endorsing the LOHAS orientation, then it will certainly have an impact on the marketing consciousness and practices of the manufacturers. Besides, the media will become more vigilant so as to report narratives of energy and material waste, hazardous ingredients, and the resultant damage to the planet. Marketers will have to determine what is to be produced, how is it to be produced, how is it to be distributed, and how will it be promoted. They will certainly not like to be exposed by watchdog consumers as well as whistleblower employees who may highlight their bad practices. In the present times of the pervasive social media, businesses cannot afford to behave irresponsibly with respect to production and marketing, and become a target of negative word-of-mouth publicity (Kotler et al., 2011).

The Government of India initiated a global campaign namely, "Lifestyle for the Environment – LiFE Movement" on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2022, urging individuals, communities and organizations worldwide to embrace environmentally-conscious lifestyle; for we have one planet, but actions to save it have to be concerted – "one earth, many efforts". The need of the hour is to address the challenge being faced by our planet by employing people-centric, collaborative efforts and robust action that promotes sustainability. The vision behind the LiFE campaign has been to persuade everyone to imbibe a lifestyle that aligns with nurturing the planet rather than harming it. Those who have adopted such lifestyle are referred to as 'Pro-Planet People'. Mission LiFE takes from the past, functions in the present and concentrates on the future. The age-old concepts of reduce, reuse and recycle have been blended into our life. The concept of "Circular Economy" is part and parcel of our Indian culture and lifestyle. An amalgamation of technology with tradition shall help take the vision of LiFE forward [Press Information Bureau | Press Release <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1831349> (accessed December 18, 2024)].

## CONSUMER ACTIONS TOWARDS PROMOTION OF SUSTAINABLE MARKETING

Sustainable marketing demands more responsible production and consumption; in other words, it seeks active participation of both business firms and consumers. It has come to be known that business and industry are the root cause for numerous economic and social ills; therefore, fundamental movements have come up overtime to keep businesses on the right track. Of these, two major movements are *consumerism* and *environmentalism*, whereby consumers by themselves can contribute their bit to sustainable marketing (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017).

**Consumerism** is an organized drive of the citizens and government authorities to enhance the rights and power of the buyers in relation to that of the sellers. The *traditional rights of the seller* include the right to launch any product (of any size/style), provided it is not posing a hazard to consumers' personal health or safety, and if so, then incorporate requisite security warnings. The right to ask for any price for the product offering, provided there exists no discrimination among similar buyers. The right to expend any amount on promotion of the product, provided it does not construe to unfair competition. The right to employ any promotional message for the product, provided it is not misleading or deceptive in content or communication. The right to employ buying incentive programmes, provided such programmes are neither unfair nor misleading.

The *traditional rights of the buyer* include the right to not buy the product offered for sale. Also, the fair right to expect that the product is safe and that it shall perform as claimed in the promotional messages. On a comparison of the rights of the sellers and those of the buyers, it appears that the balance of power rests on the seller's direction. Although the buyers can refuse to buy the product, yet in the absence of sufficient information, knowledge and protection to make informed, prudent decisions, they stand weak in front of the sophisticated sellers. Therefore, the promoters of consumer rights seek *some additional consumer rights* such as, the right to be fully informed about the various important aspects of the product offering. The right to be safeguarded against questionable product offerings as well as marketing practices; the right to exert influence on product offerings and marketing practices in such manner that shall improve the quality of life of people in general; the right (and in fact, responsibility too) to consume presently in such a manner

that preserves the world’s resources and natural beauty for the future generations of consumer community as well. Incidentally, the Government of India has addressed this concern by including in the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 “the right to consumer awareness” (Consumer Protection Act, 2019, The Gazette of India, Extraordinary Part II, Section 1).

Each of the suggested additional buyer’s rights has resulted in more specific *proposals* by consumer groups as well as consumer protection provisions mandated by government. The right to be fully informed embraces among other things, the right to be aware of real unit cost of a brand (implying unit pricing); ingredients in an edible product (implying ingredient labeling); nutritional worth of food products (implying nutritional labelling); product freshness (implying open dating on perishable foods); and real merits of product (implying truth in advertising). As far as consumer protection is concerned, the proposals incorporate necessitating greater level of product safety; ensuring privacy of all kind of customers’ information; and empowering the government agencies furthermore. Proposals in relation to improved quality of life of people include exercising control over the ingredients that make up particular products and their packaging; and mitigating the extent of advertising “noise”. Proposals for preservation of the world, implying conservation of ecology and environment, comprise of promotion of utilization of sustainable, biodegradable, eco-friendly ingredients; re-cycling, up-cycling and reducing solid waste; and managing the consumption of energy by resorting to renewable sources of energy such as solar and wind energy.

Sustainable marketing equally applies to consumers as it does to industry and government. Consumers have the right as well as the responsibility or duty to safeguard themselves rather than leaving this task on the government or consumer agencies. Consumers who feel that they have got a poor deal have many remedies by their side: they may contact the company for recovery; make their voice heard through media/social media; apply in consumer grievance redressal forum at district level, state level or national level, as applicable. Consumers ought to make good consumption preferences and choices by patronizing the companies that function in environment-friendly manner and reject those companies that do not conduct business activities responsibly. In the ultimate analysis, it is the consumers who are at the helm of decision-making when it comes to shifting from the traditional (irresponsible) consumption to sustainable (more responsible) consumption (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017).

**Environmentalism** implies an organized drive of conscientious citizens, industry and government designed to safeguard and improve people’s present and future living environment. The environmentalists are simply concerned with the effect of marketing activities on the ecology as well as the ecological costs or externality costs such as pollution, water shortage (Kotler et al., 2011) of serving the needs and wants of consumers. They are not opposed to marketing and consumption; rather they seek marketers and consumers to become more responsible of their production techniques and consumption choices respectively; they want them both to operate with greater care for the ecology. They propagate mindful, more responsible consumption instead of reduced consumption. The environmentalists believe that marketing must not aim at maximizing consumption and consumption choices that may lead to customer satisfaction; rather it should aim at maximizing the quality of life of the people. The quality of life implies not only the number and quality of products and services offered to consumers but also the quality of the natural environment as of now and the ecological legacy that will be transferred to the future generations.

Environmentalism is basically concerned with the irreparable damage caused to the ecosystem by ever-increasing global warming, depletion of natural resources, generation of toxic and solid waste, mounting litter and so forth. This has resulted in loss of recreational spaces and increased health issues caused by poor air quality, polluted water and adulterated, chemically-treated food stuff. Over time, such concerns have resulted in environmental laws and regulations governing those industries that severely damage the environment. Many companies resented and resisted such regulations arguing that the heavy costs involved make their industry less competitive. Such companies responded to the grave environmental concerns by doing bare minimum that was needed either to avert the environmental regulations or to quieten the environmentalists. However, more recently many companies have recognized the threat to global environment caused by commercial activities; they have accepted the responsibility for not causing harm to the ecology. Many companies are adopting the agenda of environmental sustainability by transforming their viewpoint “from protest to prevention” as also “from regulation to responsibility.” *Environmental sustainability* is a corporate philosophy that advocates developing strategies that not only help save the planet by sustaining the environment but also generate profits for the company. Today’s responsible companies are imbibing environmental sustainability not because it is imposed upon them, but because it is the right approach to adopt to save the planet’s environmental future, bring about consumers’ wellbeing and corporate prosperity (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017).

Figure 1 depicts a matrix that businesses may employ to assess their progress towards the goal of environmental sustainability. It includes today’s “greening activities” (both internal and external) that payoff in the short-term (both for the business firm and environment); tomorrow’s “beyond greening activities” that shall payoff in the long run.

	Today: Greening	Tomorrow: Beyond Greening
Internal	Pollution prevention	New clean technology
External	Product stewardship	Sustainability vision

[Source: Based on Stuart L. Hart, “Sustainable Value,” [www.stuarthart.com/sustainabilityvalue.html](http://www.stuarthart.com/sustainabilityvalue.html), October 2016, cited in Kotler, P & Armstrong, G (2017). Principles of Marketing, (17<sup>th</sup> ed.). Pearson, (Chapter 20).]

**Figure 1: Environmental Sustainability and Sustainable Value**

The starting point in incorporating environmental sustainability by a company is by practising *pollution prevention* that is a lot more than pollution control that is concerned with cleaning up waste after its creation. On the other hand, pollution prevention implies eliminating or mitigating waste *before* its creation. Pollution prevention can be executed by undertaking internal green marketing programmes such as designing and developing environmentally-safer product offerings, biodegradable and recyclable packaging, improved pollution control mechanisms, and greater energy-efficient operations such as reduced energy and water consumption, reduced green house gases emission and so on.

As the next step, companies may practice *product stewardship* implying reducing not only pollution generated due to product design and production but also mitigating all ecological impacts all through the “Product System Life Cycle” (Fuller, 1999) while minimizing the costs simultaneously. Environmentally-conscious companies have imbibed “Design For Environment” (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017) and “cradle-to-grave” practices (Charter et al. 2002). These revolve around thinking beforehand to configure and design products that are relatively easier to recover, recycle, reuse or safely return to Mother Nature after usage, thereby becoming a part of the ecological cycle. Such practices help in sustaining the environment as well as they may be highly profitable for the business.

Today’s “greening activities” lay emphasis on improving what industry already does to the product offering and the environment. Tomorrow’s “beyond greening activities” gaze into the future. First of all, internally, *new clean technology* may be planned for by the companies. Many businesses that have achieved good sustainability progress are yet constrained by existing technologies. In order to create completely sustainable strategies, such businesses will have to develop innovative, novel technologies.

Ultimately, businesses need to formulate a *sustainability vision* that may serve as a guide for the future. It may reflect how the firm’s products/services, business processes and policies should evolve; and what novel technologies should be designed to accomplish these aspects. The sustainability vision lends support to and provides a framework for the other three variables in the quadrant namely, pollution control, product stewardship, new clean environmental technology. This framework would be useful for the business firm as it may not only address the challenges with regard to the natural environment but may also highlight the significant opportunities for employing environmentally-sustainable practices and strategies to build *sustainable value* for the business firm and its markets.

Majority of companies today pay attention to and invest heavily in the pollution prevention strategy. Some forward-looking, innovative business firms engage in product stewardship and devise new, environment-friendly technologies. However, focusing on a couple of quadrants of the environment sustainability matrix can be myopic. Patronizing only the left side of the matrix may place a firm in favourable position today, but it will be left vulnerable in the future. On the other hand, too much focus on the right side of the matrix is suggestive of the fact that the business firm has good environmental sustainability vision but lacks the skills required to execute it. Therefore, it behoves businesses to work on all the four aspects of the environment sustainability matrix to derive the desired results (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017).

Businesses that imbibe sustainability will have to revisit their working and make some fundamental changes in their production system and marketing practices. Sustainability-driven firms will need to explain as to how they would revise their goals and operations in pursuit of sustainability. They will need to come up with new and broad-based criteria to direct the new product development programmes, make greater investment in reuse and recycling, and persuade all stakeholders viz. suppliers, channels, employees, investors towards acceptance of the sustainability paradigm (Kotler et al., 2011).

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