

Consumers and Corporate Social Responsibility: Matching the Unmatchable?

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Abstract

Research addressing the relationships between corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities and consumers-as-stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours is dispersed over a range of topics, subsumed under different marketing concepts, and in general surprisingly under-researched given the centrality of CSR in both the normative management literature and public discourse. This paper gives an overview of the past two decades of research on consumers, marketing and CSR, taking the classical consumer decision-making model as frame of classification. The analysis reveals a significant methodology factor and a serious lack of knowledge concerning the consequences of strategic CSR activities.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, Consumers as stakeholders, Marketing and consumer research

Introduction

Why do consumers perform altruistic acts such as financial contributions to charitable organizations, paying more for environmentally responsible products or even donating organs? One of the explanations is the desire to experience a "warm glow" (Andreoni, 1990), which contradicts the traditional economists' view of people as selfish utility maximisers. But do consumers also experience a "warm glow" vis-à-vis companies that perform altruistic acts and reward them, thus leading to enhanced corporate reputation, brand image and customer loyalty?

One of the central arguments in favour of corporate commitment to, and engagement in, social responsibilities is the "stakeholder" argument: a socially responsible company is supposed to address the concerns and satisfy the demands of its main stakeholders (e.g., Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Jones, 1995; Maignan, Ferrell & Hult, 1999; Waddock, 2000). Stakeholders are those actors who can, directly or indirectly, affect, or be affected by, corporate activities such as customers, suppliers, employees, shareholders, the media, investors, regulators, and interest organizations (cf., Freeman, 1984).

Among the key stakeholders of companies in the

marketing exchange process are, of course, consumers (Folkes & Kamins, 1999; Hunt & Vitell, 1992). However, research addressing the relationships between CSR activities and consumers-as-stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours is lacking. Moreover, as will be seen below, the few studies investigating consumers' responses to marketing management of CSR are concerned with a wide and not necessarily coherent range of issues. Studies explicitly investigating consumers' responses to the communication of CSR are scarce.

This paper addresses what we know so far as when, why, and how consumers respond to which CSR activities. This assessment is used to identify crucial research issues for organizations willing to engage in CSR activities and interested in communicating their engagement to their main stakeholders. A brief introduction to the history of CSR-related thinking in consumer and marketing management research provides the background necessary to understand the current state of research on CSR.

Old Wine in New Bottles?

Traditionally, and put very simply, marketing managers have conceptualised marketing performance in terms of sales, profit, or market share goals in relation to a

particular product or service within a particular time period, taking a *shareholder* perspective. However, the *stakeholder* perspective is increasingly gaining ground, and companies have been put under growing pressure to exhibit good corporate citizenship in each country in which they operate (Pinkston & Carroll, 1994), both in marketing and general managerial terms. Public discourse indicates that companies are today more than ever supposed to fulfil their economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary obligations not only vis-à-vis their shareholders but increasingly also towards employees, customers, other stakeholders, and the community at large (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Corporate social responsibility has thus become a popular concept with practitioners as well as academics (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Handelman & Arnold, 1999; Osterhus, 1997) and many advocate that CSR activities should be regarded as the entry ticket to doing business in the 21st century (e.g., Altman, 1998).

However, this suggestion is by no means new. Both the management and marketing literatures have discussed social responsibility for many decades, dating back to at least the 1930s (in the USA, e.g., Berle & Means, 1932). In the management literature, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a strong interest in CSR that has since surfaced at regular intervals. For instance, Austin (1965) argued that business leadership had to appraise the social effects of its strategic policy decisions and technological advances, not least to prevent too much governmental interference through regulations. Along similar lines, Grether (1969) suggested that social involvement of private business was necessary and should occur through the open competitive market system, thus meeting the requirements of both social performance and competitive market performance: "Inevitably, large, diversified national and multinational corporations interlinked so broadly and deeply at so many levels carry very heavy social responsibilities" (p. 41).

Similar concerns were raised in the marketing literature. For instance, Lazer (1969) called for a much broader understanding of the marketing concept that sees marketing responsibilities extending beyond the profit realm and as "an institution of social control instrumental in reorienting a culture from a producer's to a consumer's culture" (p. 3) – a perspective that later found resonance in the concept of market orientation (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). Similarly, Lavidge (1970) claimed that marketing not only had become broader in function and scope, but was

increasingly confronted with requests to redress irresponsibilities. He also underlined the dynamics of requirements: "History suggests that standards will be raised. Some practices which today are generally considered acceptable will gradually be viewed as unethical, then immoral, and will eventually be made illegal" (p. 25) – a statement that certainly holds true if one looks at the past three decades!

Another strand of the marketing literature is social marketing, i.e., the applicability of marketing concepts to the advancement of social causes (e.g., Kelley, 1971; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). Along similar lines, cause-related marketing has become a popular topic, defined as the "the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988, p. 60; see also Cornwell & Smith, 2001; Lafferty & Goldsmith, 2005; Strahilevitz, 1999). The 1980s and 1990s then heralded a more managerial approach to marketing, social responsibility and business ethics (e.g., Drumwright, 1994; Robin & Reidenbach, 1987; for a meta-analysis of the marketing and consumer research literature with a focus on environmental issues, see Kilbourne & Beckmann, 1998).

The marketing literature mainly uses the same understanding of the rationale of CSR as do other disciplines, namely the stakeholder approach. However, the elements that actually constitute CSR are less agreed upon, stretching from Carroll's (2000) "four faces of corporate citizenship," embracing economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic components, to Lantos (2001, 2002), who argues for rejecting altruistic (philanthropic) CSR, but including ethical and strategic objectives of CSR.

Mapping the Field of marketing and consumer research

Again, a brief historical overview assists in understanding the roots of the consumer perspective on CSR. Similar to the situations in the management and marketing literatures, consumer behaviour studies – in the Anglo-Saxon literature – can be traced back to the 1970s, most of them referring to Berkowitz's and Lutterman's (1968) profiling of the "traditional socially responsible personality." Typical of academic marketing research at that time, most studies focused first on

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