



Transformative green marketing: Impediments and opportunities

Michael Jay Polonsky*

School of Management and Marketing, Deakin University, 70 Elgar Road, Burwood VIC 3125, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Green marketing is not achieving its potential for improving the quality of life of consumers, while improving the natural ecosystem. The failure is the result of the inability of consumers, firms and governments to adopt systems thinking, in which macro-marketing perspectives are integrated into their respective micro-decisions, that is, the anthropocentric view of the natural world is disregarded. The paper discusses why the three groups above have had difficulties in embracing environmental issues, thus impeding real transformative green marketing from occurring. To address the difficulties three proposed actions need to be undertaken: (1) Marketers need to look for new ways of calculating and communicating value that integrates environmental value, thereby moving away from financial measures which have no real environmental meaning. (2) Change the discourse regarding the environment, highlighting the importance of action and inaction, which needs to be based on increased education about the human–environment interface. (3) Marketing needs to refocus its emphasis on want satisfaction, shifting away from the acquisition of goods, thereby enhancing how marketers create value. Making these changes will allow marketers to operationalize transformative green marketing so the human condition and the natural system that humans operate within are both improved and bring about transformative green marketing.

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1. Introduction

Marketing academics' and practitioners' interest in how environmental issues impact marketing activities continue to grow (Chamorro et al., 2009), but is certainly not new (Fisk, 1974; Henion and Kinneer, 1976). A range of marketing contexts examines the interface between the natural environment and; consumer behavior (i.e., Diamantopoulos et al., 2003), marketing strategy (i.e., Menon and Menon, 1997), public policy initiatives (i.e., Press and Arnould, 2009) and macromarketing (i.e., Kilbourne and Carlson, 2008).

Fisk (1974) suggests marketing is at least partly to blame for most of the world's environmental ills that often arise from consumption and over-consumption. Other authors suggest that marketing can assist in addressing environmental and other social problems (Sheth and Sisodia, 2006). Unfortunately, much of the existing research fails to embed environmental issues as a core tenet of marketing thinking. Thus, marketing strategists often incorporate environmental considerations as an extra feature to be leveraged for competitive advantage (Ginsberg and Bloom, 2004), rather than using the environment to shape strategy-improving market conditions and social welfare.

Scholars define green marketing using a range of terms (e.g., green marketing, ecological marketing, environmental marketing, and even responsible marketing). These definitions have a common focus on the

exchange process (i.e., choices and decisions), with a proviso that exchange considers and minimizes environmental harm (where all parties are assumed to be aware of all potential environmental harm). Whether or not these definitions (and associated practices) seek to improve the quality of life of the world's citizens, or improve the natural environment, remains unclear. An effective definition of green marketing, therefore, must integrate transformative change that creates value for individuals and society, as well as for the natural environment (i.e., environmental restoration and improvement). Thus, transformative green marketing is very different from a marketing perspective that focuses on not producing societal harm, as, at present, most marketers focus on meeting human needs rather than enhancing mankind's quality of life and improving the natural environment. Marketers and society rely on nature and natural resources; nature does not rely on humanity, even though society can negatively impact on it. Therefore, mankind (and, thus, marketing) and the natural environment are interdependent.

While some might debate the extent of mankind's contribution to environmental problems, if the doomsayers are correct, failure to act in the medium term will result in the inability of the ecosystem to support present day consumption, potentially eliminating marketing as presently practiced (and possibly mankind). Therefore, it is surprising that the practice of marketing (and business strategy more generally) does not explicitly integrate and address environmental issues and how they impact society (Smart, 2010). In the not-so-distant past, businesses were quick to respond to less significant marketing-related problems. For example, firms, consumers and governments reportedly spent hundreds of billions, if not trillions, of dollars dealing with the

* Tel.: +61 3 9244 6968, +61 3 9251 7083(International).

E-mail address: Michael.Polonsky@deakin.edu.au.

millennium bug, or Y2K problem, as programmers feared that at 12.01 AM on January 1 2000, computers would incorrectly believe the year was 1900 which would cause systems to crash. The process of greening marketing seems to be viewed with significantly less urgency on the part of most consumers, organizations and governments, even though the potential costs of inaction are much more serious and pervasive (Smart, 2010; Varey, 2010). Whether or not the marketing discipline (both academics and practitioners) truly understands and embraces the profound significance of environmental issues remains unclear.

A number of marketing academics call for a change in thinking about marketing, in which transformative green marketing would be included. For example, early in the discipline's history Kotler and Levy (1969) suggested that there needs to be a broadening of the marketing concept. More recently, others are questioning whether marketing needs to be reformed (Sheth and Sisodia, 2006). In the consumer behavior field, there is growing chorus of transformative consumer researchers (TCR) calling for marketing to make a positive social impact (Mick et al., forthcoming). The integration of environmental issues into marketing would extend the TCR view. For example, the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* has a forthcoming special issue focusing on TCR, and the *Journal of Macromarketing* recently published a special issue on sustainability, examining how marketing can assist in addressing the environmental ills faced today (Kilbourne, 2010). Transformative green marketing extends this perspective incorporating environmental issues into core marketing activity, in the same way mankind is part of the natural system and not separated from the natural environment (Fisk, 1974; Smart, 2010).

2. The core problem: micronization of environmental issues

The natural environment is a complex, all-encompassing system that integrates the atmosphere (air), geosphere (land), hydrosphere (water) and biosphere (all living species) (Neace, 1995). Marketers understand the importance of business systems and use systems and network thinking extensively to address exchange issues, particularly in the business-to-business context (e.g., Håkansson et al., 2009). Marketers, however, frequently ignore such broader system approaches to understand or integrate the natural environment into strategy formulation.

The consideration of marketing's impact on the natural environment is often classified as macro-marketing, that is, how micro-marketing impacts society, society's influence on the broader macro-system and how systems interact (Fisk, 1982). Unfortunately, academics and practitioners sometimes perceive a disconnection exists between macro-marketing and micro-marketing, which lies at the core of green marketing's inability to become transformational. The traditional micro-formation of marketing (Sheth et al., 1988) cannot easily capture environmental issues because classical micro-economics suggests that consumers (or individuals more generally) seek to maximize their own welfare (Russell and Russell, 2010). Potentially, the welfare of society and the natural world is excluded unless they are embedded in individuals' values, that is, people integrate environmental issues in their decision-making because the environment is important to them. As will be described below, this perspective assumes that mankind controls their environment, which is clearly not the case.

The fact that sustainability and environmental issues are generally macro-focused is at the core of the dilemma that transformational green marketing faces (van Dam and Apeldoorn, 1996). How do marketers and society encourage micro-focused individuals and organizations to integrate broader macro issues and systems into their individual thinking? One might argue that this disconnection is one of the reasons why governments are forced to regulate activities to prevent distortions in the market from being exploited (Harris and Carman, 1984). The lack of a macro-focus may also be why social marketers need to encourage consumers to change their behavior to

create fewer negative personal impacts (Rothschild, 1999), as short-term self-interest appears to outweigh the longer term benefits. For example, the classic tragedy of the commons suggests that because no-one owns the shared communal space (i.e., the commons) no individual has an incentive to protect the shared space. Thus, the aggregation of self-interested, individualist behavior destroys the value (i.e., the shared space) for all (Libecap, 2009). As a result, some regulation of individual behavior is needed so that the commons are available in perpetuity for all users.

When considering environmental issues, the tragedy of the commons is a metaphor that can be translated to consumer behavior in markets, firms within countries, or even countries within regions, as in each case, the broader ecosystem is used by all but truly controlled by none. Are humans like the elephants in Africa? When unfettered by mankind, the elephants roamed the African plains with nature keeping their numbers in check. However, when they are artificially constrained on game reserves, culling is needed to ensure they do not eat themselves into starvation (van Aarde and Jackson, 2007).

The barriers relating to transformational green marketing arise from this fundamental conflict between benefits for the individual (person, firm, or nation) and benefits for society, more broadly defined as including the natural environment. The next section discusses how these economic actors' (i.e., consumers, firms and governments) lack of a macro-focus lies at the heart of the green marketing dilemma. Then the article offers suggestions as to how marketers can possibly assist in using transformational green marketing to address the issue, and ends with some concluding remarks.

3. Barriers associating with consumers, firms and governments

3.1. Adopting transformative green marketing

A network or stakeholder approach argues that within green marketing all economic actors are interconnected (Polonsky, 1995), and the actors have the ability to facilitate or impede green marketing from becoming transformational. Marketers usually discuss the role of three main stakeholders – consumers, firms and governments – in enabling or regulating exchange processes (Fry and Polonsky, 2004). The following three sub-sections seek to explain how existing (i.e., traditional) marketing perspectives inhibit the effective integration of the natural environment into marketing theory and processes, as well as identifying issues that need to be addressed for transformative green marketing to occur.

3.2. Consumers

The early green marketing research sought to better understand how to motivate consumers to behave in more responsible ways. Early authors initially placed an emphasis on motivating consumers to integrate environmental issues into their decision-making, for example, motivating people to recycle (Henion and Kinnear, 1976). While macro-marketers suggested such changes in consumer or firm behavior would lead to wider benefits to society, micro-marketers focused on whether such environmental values could be leveraged to better target new segments of consumers (Ginsberg and Bloom, 2004), thereby increasing loyalty (Shrum et al., 1995), reducing price sensitivity (D'Souza et al., 2007), or improving communication (Polonsky et al., 1997).

Classical economic and consumer behavior theory suggests individuals make consumption decisions that maximize their own welfare. This, however, is done within a framework in which consumers usually think of themselves as the central actor in the exchange system. In such a view, the natural environment is a resource to facilitate this satisfaction (Varey, 2010) rather than a stakeholder to whom consumers are responsible (Starik, 1995). Such a human-centered

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