Abstract

The main aim of this study is to contextualize sustainability and call for its consideration in firms’ management, namely via green marketing and green brand. Although the concept of sustainable development appeared in the 1970s, only recently has it been incorporated by firms. Development, to be sustainable, has to satisfy the needs of current generations, without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy theirs. This requires a balance in managing social, economic and environmental aims, both current and future. Given the increasing evidence of environmental problems, the awareness of the need for sustainability has been expanding, at the individual and at the corporate level. Environmentally responsible firms obtain multiple benefits, such as cost reduction (due to the lower resource consumption, such as water or energy), profit increase (from recycling and residuals reuse), production process enhancement (given the cleaner and more efficient technologies), corporate image upgrading, improvement of brand awareness and value as well as performance. Oppositely, firms associated to non-sustainable actions are impaired in those areas. In the scope of a green strategy, a green brand obtains attributes and benefits related to the reduction of the brand’s environmental impact. As such, it should promote the perception of an environmentally healthy brand and disclose such benefits to the more environmentally aware consumers. We present the case of Toyota, a brand with patent and acknowledged efforts in what regards sustainability. It is a worldwide reference of corporate responsibility and of a successful use of green marketing. The brand’s challenge to reach important environmental goals until 2050, demonstrates its commitment and endeavor in multiple crucial aspects of sustainability management. Therefore, Toyota is in a prominent position as a “global green brand”.

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1. Introduction

Last century’s accelerated demographic, technological and industrial development intensified the magnitude of human activity’s effects in the environment [1]. In fact, environmental consequences such as global warming, ozone layer depletion, climate changes, biodiversity loss, acid rain, ground, water and air pollution became a global problem for humanity and life in general [2, 3]. For Costanza and colleagues [4] there are five clear evidences that our Planet is at the breaking point in terms of supportability: (1) human’s biomass appropriation, (2) climate changes, (3) ozone layer depletion, (4) planet degradation and (5) loss of biodiversity. These current and future environmental impacts rendered sustainability issues as one of contemporary societies’ most striking and worrying problems. Although the signals are not recent, environmental and sustainability questions only got into the international agenda in the 1970s. This global environmental awareness resulted from the disclosure and seriousness of various environmental accidents, the organization of events (and reports) with worldwide impact and the interest of organizations and governments as far as environmental issues are concerned. From then forward, the concern with the environment transcended frontiers and became global, attracting academic, business and social attention.

In this context, the concept of “sustainable development” emerges. This concept became widely known in 1987, through the publication of a United Nations document, the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development entitled “Our Common Future” [5]. Sustainable development was defined as the development that is able to satisfy the needs of current generations, without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs. One thing to notice is that sustainability is seen within three pillars, (a) the environment, (b) the economy, and (c) the society, being organizations’ social responsibility included in this trilogy [6]. In this regard, if a large part of the environmental disasters are related with firms’ activities, then firms need to be part of the solution. Therefore, it’s also up to firms’ management to contribute to this goal. The challenge is to discover sustainable methods of manufacturing, consuming and living.

Marketing emerges as one of the strategic areas firms can use to make current and future social wellbeing and respect for the environment compatible with their operations. Green marketing focuses on developing and marketing products and services that satisfy customer needs while taking into account environmental sustainability [7]. It allows to build a bridge between what the markets and customers want and the firms’ environmental-friendly engagements and technological offerings [8]. Firms can focus on developing new and “cleaner” products. Yet, if those products are perceived as of lower quality, overpriced, or fail to deliver on the environmental benefits, they will not attract customers, and result in a negative turn on firms’ performance [9, 10]. Hence, firms with green marketing try to look for specific customer needs, environmental aware customer profiles and ways of incorporating these insights into its offerings [11]. While doing so firms can find ways to differentiate their products and even assist the foundation of known green brands.

This article aims to present the link between sustainability and firm management, introducing green marketing and brand management as a relevant and integral element of this relationship. Additionally we present the case of Toyota as the example of a brand that has incurred in an acknowledged effort of sustainability, and has assumed a worldwide prominent position as a green brand.
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