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# Green marketing: legend, myth, farce or prophesy?

Green marketing

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – To review the history of “green marketing” since the early 1990s and to provide a critique of both theory and practice in order to understand how the marketing discipline may yet contribute to progress towards greater sustainability.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper examines elements of green marketing theory and practice over the past 15 years by employing the logic of the classic paper from 1985 “Has marketing failed, or was it never really tried” of seeking to identify “false marketings” that have hampered progress.

**Findings** – That much of what has been commonly referred to as “green marketing” has been underpinned by neither a marketing, nor an environmental, philosophy. Five types of misconceived green marketing are identified and analysed: green spinning, green selling, green harvesting, enviropreneur marketing and compliance marketing.

**Practical implications** – Provides an alternative viewpoint on a much researched, but still poorly understood area of marketing, and explains why the anticipated “green revolution” in marketing prefaced by market research findings, has not more radically changed products and markets in practice.

**Originality/value** – Helps readers to understand why progress towards a more sustainable economy has proved so difficult, and outlines some of the more radical changes in thought and practice that marketing will need to adopt before it can make a substantive contribution towards greater sustainability.

**Keywords** Green marketing, Sustainable development, Consumer behaviour

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

What has happened to “green marketing[1]”? In these early years of the new millennium, it is now some 18 years on from the Brundtland Report and the “euphoric” discovery of the environment by marketing practitioners and academics. Over those years, we have seen much research, many product launches and campaigns, and many books, papers and conferences. Despite all this, green marketing gives the impression of having significantly underachieved. Even to the most casual observer, the 1990s largely disappointed in their billing as the decade that would precipitate a “green revolution” in marketing. That decade began with eminently hopeful forecasts about the emergence of a “green tide” (Vandermerwe and Oliff, 1990) of consumers and new products. Yet, this has clearly not materialised as expected. Instead, consumers have become disillusioned; many of the groundbreaking green products produced by specialist firms have left the market; the dramatic growth in green product introductions at the beginning of the 1990s has subsided; and companies have become



cautious about launching environmentally-based communications campaigns for fear of being accused of “green washing”.

This poses the question about what type of “story” the history of green marketing to date represents. Is it a tragic story of failure, or of a prophecy concerning the long-term future of marketing whose time has not yet come? Would it be better catalogued under “myths and legends”, or will it be best remembered for its elements of farce?

In this conceptual paper, we seek to review and understand the green marketing story with reference to a landmark paper published 20 years ago in a leading UK academic marketing journal, the *Journal of Marketing Management*. Entitled, “Has marketing failed, or was it never really tried?” (King, 1985). This article was penned by a prominent marketing practitioner, King. Although not quite a horror story, King investigated the weak performance of marketing practice in the UK over the preceding 30 years. He placed the blame on four recipes for disaster or “false marketings” that companies had adopted. This paper follows King’s approach to try to explain the waxing and waning of green marketing during the 1980s and 1990s. It identifies five “false” approaches which have been labelled as “green marketing”, and appear to be typical of much industry practice, but which often have had little to do with either a marketing, or a green, philosophy. These, we argue, can help to explain the perceived failure of green marketing practice. In the final part of the paper, we conclude by offering a review of what has been learnt from the failure of these early manifestations of green marketing, and suggest how the theory and practice of green marketing might potentially be rewritten and advanced more successfully in future.

### **The rise and stumble of green marketing?**

Despite some attention in the 1970s, it was really only in the late 1980s that the idea of green marketing emerged. Early academic treatments of green marketing spoke of the rapid increase in green consumerism at this time as heralding a dramatic and inevitable shift in consumption towards greener products (Prothero, 1990; Vandermerwe and Oliff, 1990). Like any (relatively) new marketing phenomena, it was soon the subject of a great deal of market research. Much survey evidence from reputable research bodies was cited as identifying heightened environmental awareness, a growing consumer interest in green products, and a pronounced willingness to pay for green features (Roper Organization, 1990; Mintel, 1991; Worcester, 1993). Practical evidence for this came in the form of the highly effective global consumer boycott of CFC-driven aerosols, and the international success of publications such as *The Green Consumer Guide* (Elkington and Hailes, 1988). There were two key responses to this: one was a burst of corporate activity in the area of green marketing; the other was an upsurge in green business research and writing amongst academics.

Corporate interest in green marketing was indicated by early market research findings suggesting major changes and innovations. Vandermerwe and Oliff’s (1990) survey found that 92 per cent of European multinationals claimed to have changed their products in response to green concerns, and 85 per cent claimed to have changed their production systems. Green product introductions in the US more than doubled to 11.4 per cent of all new household products between 1989 and 1990, and continued to grow to 13.4 per cent in 1991 (Ottman, 1993). Similarly, the volume of green print ads grew by 430 per cent, and that of green TV ads by 367 per cent, between 1989 and

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1990 (Ottman, 1993). Stories of companies such as the Body Shop, Ecover, Volvo, 3M, and even McDonalds became ever more cited in the green business literature to illustrate how and why green marketing initiatives could pay. Iyer and Banerjee (1993) responded to these developments by pronouncing that “green is in, no question about it” and throughout the 1990s writers continued to aver that the “green market appears to be real and growing” (Menon and Menon, 1997), and “expanding at a remarkable rate” (Schlegelmilch *et al.*, 1996).

Despite this optimistic picture, by the mid-1990s new market research evidence began to emerge which was less unequivocal about the growth of green consumerism. Mintel’s (1995) follow-up report on the environment recorded only a very slight increase in green consumers since 1990, and identified a significant gap between concern and actual purchasing – a picture replicated in subsequent management research (Wong *et al.*, 1996; Peattie, 1999; Crane 2000). The frequency and prominence of green claims was also found to be in decline (National Consumer Council, 1996), and green products looked to have achieved only limited success (Wong *et al.*, 1996). Specialist brands such as *Ecover* and *Down to Earth* failed to sustain the growth they enjoyed in the early 1990s, and the specialist green ranges of some major companies such as Lever Brothers and Sainsburys were discontinued. Although green product growth continued strongly in certain markets, such as food, tourism, and financial services, across the majority of markets there was no longer talk about the impressive growth in green product introductions.

So, has green marketing failed to change how businesses behave and to move the economy towards sustainability? Some of the research evidence can be interpreted either way. Critics can point to a reduction in advertising claims as proof of its decline, while others might see this as an improvement on the late 1980s when a wave of often ill-judged advertising campaigns were mounted by companies in a way that drew widespread criticism. Similarly, a reduction in specialist products can be interpreted as a failure, or it can reflect the mainstream market improving its environmental performance to the point that reduces the demand for specialist green products. Perhaps the most damning market research evidence in the case for the decline of green marketing is the alarming cynicism being displayed by consumers about green products, green claims, and the companies behind them (Kangun *et al.*, 1991; National Consumer Council, 1996). The marketing philosophy and process is built around the customer and the relationship between the company and the customer. If this is characterised by cynicism and distrust, then companies are unlikely to be able to bring customers along with them through the changes needed to move towards sustainability. Green marketing will not work in the face of consumer distrust, but then that distrust may be partly a product of the types of “green marketings” that companies have relied upon so far.

### **Green marketing – guises and disguises**

For King (1985), failures in marketing in practice were often due to the existence of “false marketing”, the manifestations of which he categorised as “thrust marketing”, “marketing department marketing”, “accountant’s marketing” and “formula marketing”. What he meant by this was that much of what companies called “marketing” was not really marketing at all, in the sense of being underpinned by the principles and philosophy of marketing. It is interesting to look back at King’s

categories because they exemplify several critical issues that have also dogged the development of green marketing which are as follows.

*Sales orientation*

King presented “thrust marketing” as a highly sales-based approach. In green marketing too, firms have frequently only used the environment as an additional promotional dimension without any attempt to analyse, or modify, the underlying product itself and its environmental impacts.

*Compartmentalism*

“Marketing department marketing” represented a lack of integration between marketing and other business functions. Equally, with green marketing, many firms have sought to address consumers’ needs, but their interest in the environment has been limited to the marketing department, or the production department, or some other individual function. This has prevented firms from developing a broad, holistic approach to green marketing.

*Finance orientation*

King’s notion of “accountant’s marketing” was characterised by a fascination with short-term profitability and limited concern for long-term brand building. With the environment too, many companies have been enthusiastic about green marketing when it has involved short-term cost savings (e.g. packaging reductions or energy savings), but lukewarm when it has come to investing money in order to develop more sustainable products and processes.

*Conservatism*

When King wrote about “formula marketing”, he meant that rather than embracing innovation and imagination, much marketing activity had emphasised control, risk aversion, and the use of tried-and-tested recipes for success. Clearly, much green marketing activity also has focused on avoiding any significant change, and focusing instead on marginal, incremental improvements to existing products and processes (for example through an emphasis on packaging reduction rather than on changing core products or production processes).

**Five routes to failure**

Reviewing King’s analysis, it seems clear that many of the problems that have hampered the development of effective mainstream marketing in the past have returned to hamper the development of green marketing as well. These problems have contributed to the emergence of five failed manifestations of green marketing. These are: green spinning, green selling, green harvesting, enviropreneur marketing, and compliance marketing.

*Green spinning*

Many of the firms that have most publicised their green stance have been those that have been in the frontline as targets for criticism, such as those in “dirty” industries such as oil, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and automotives. In response, they frequently went on a PR offensive, using glossy brochures, lobbying, and countless press releases

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in order to persuade the sceptical public of their environmental credentials. Menon and Menon (1997) characterise the early response to environmental concern of many companies as typified by the establishment of specialist environmental functions, and in marketing terms, “public relations and publicity (begins) to play a bigger role in a firm’s marketing communications strategy to allay public concerns to mollify and, if possible, co-opt interest groups and regulatory agencies”.

This reactive approach, focused on reputation management and risk management, suggests a compartmentalisation of green marketing within the PR function, a place where there is little opportunity to affect product, production or policy decisions. Nor is there much scope for developing a customer focus when so much effort is expended on putting forward the position of the company or industry. We can also identify in the green spinners a significant degree of conservatism. Their failure to actually go out and engage, debate with, and listen to various stakeholder groups suggests a rigid adherence to common practices and established mindsets. By seeking to deny or discredit dissenting voices, they made the classic marketing error of looking inward when many of the answers they sought were to be found by looking outside of the organization. Public relations is but one aspect of marketing, and companies basing their approach on this one element have clearly not embraced the philosophy of green marketing to any significant extent. Green spinning was always going to fail because unless they are involved and consulted, contemporary consumers and pressure groups are unlikely to be fully convinced by the protestations of commercial enterprises.

#### *Green selling*

The growth in market research identifying consumer concern about the environment during the 1990s meant that it was taken for granted in many quarters that “green would sell” and many firms responded by rapidly adjusting their promotional campaigns. This led to what we refer to as a “green selling” approach, namely a post-hoc identification of environmental features in existing products, thus prompting a (usually short-term) hop onto the green bandwagon. This reflected a typical sales orientation, since interest in the environment tended to be limited to promotional activity, with little or no input into product development. The same products continued to be produced, but green themes were added to promotional campaigns in order to take advantage of any environmental concerns of consumers. However, there was little market research by firms to track customers’ actual needs and responses. Even when these were investigated, the response was often focused on identifying the environmental benefits of existing products, rather than seeking alternatives to those products.

This was obviously a very opportunistic response to environmental concerns. Marketing managers could scrutinise their products and production processes searching for an indication that their product was high in something environmentally good, and if not, at least low in something environmentally bad. It was this kind of mindset that led to the concern amongst regulators and consumer groups over the green claims that emerged in the early 1990s. Facile, meaningless, and unproven green claims were slapped on unchanged products in failed attempts to boost sales, leading to mounting consumer cynicism and suspicion, and concerns about a potential consumer backlash. It is therefore not surprising that green products have often underperformed significantly. Some firms identifying these trends have realised that their (and their suppliers’) claims lacked independent authentication, and have since

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attempted to develop certification programmes in order to regain customer confidence. However, problems remain. There are now a host of different logos allegedly certifying various environmental benefits, and consumers are understandably confused. Even in Denmark, a country with a population of highly concerned consumers, only 16 per cent could recognise the EU “flower” as an eco-label (DEPA, 2001). Mistrust of green claims also still endures to the extent that many firms will now choose not to make any green claims at all for risk of alienating customers. Failure to turn a selling orientation into a marketing one has therefore meant that green is now often seen as a fruitless marketing strategy amongst many major businesses, regardless of the environmental qualities of their products.

#### *Green harvesting*

Not all firms have tried to use environmental claims to boost sales, and in fact, many now are consciously choosing not to. However, short-term profit has remained the key objective of many firms and marketing managers. Not surprisingly then, when it started to become apparent that greening could create cost savings, many marketers became enthusiastic about the environment. Economies in terms of energy and material input efficiencies, packaging reductions, and logistics rationalisation provided strong incentives for firms to develop their environmental programmes. However, although this may have meant that products were now costing less to produce, these savings did not tend to filter through to customers in terms of cheaper, greener products. Indeed, on the contrary, green products have almost always been priced at a premium over conventional offerings. Sometimes this reflects the realities of the production costs involved, because of the internalising of traditionally external socio-environmental costs associated with a product. In other cases, it relates less to the costs involved, and more to pricing strategies that seek to establish green products as premium products serving niche markets. Overall, the tendency of green products to be perceived as expensive has severely hampered their market penetration.

Having plucked the “low hanging fruits” of greening, many firms found themselves in a position where, if they were to move any further towards sustainability, they had to embrace more radical change and invest more management time and money to achieve it (Shelton, 1994). However, in green harvesting firms, we can usually recognise deep cultural fixations on cost reduction, short-term profitability, and shareholder value. In this, they tend to exemplify a typical conservative, finance orientation. There is, therefore, a profound reluctance in such companies to make strategic investments in green marketing initiatives, particularly when the market research data is equivocal. Hence, what happens is that greening starts to look less and less of an attractive option, the whole agenda loses momentum, and this particular guise of green marketing ultimately fails in the medium to long-term.

#### *Enviropreneur marketing*

Another failed approach to green marketing has been enviropreneur marketing, whereby a committed individual, section, or company seeks to bring innovative green products to market (Menon and Menon, 1997). Here we have seen the emergence of new green brands in a wide range of markets such as cleaning products, paper goods, cosmetics, and food. There are two types of enviropreneur marketing. Boutique enviropreneur marketing has involved the marketing of innovative green products by

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small start-up firms that only produce ostensibly green products, such as Ark, Ecover, Tom's of Maine and the Body Shop, which began to rise to prominence during the 1980s and 1990s. Corporate enviropreneur marketing by contrast occurred within large organizations that produce many non-green products as well as green brands. Hence, in the early 1990s, major mainstream firms such as Lever Brothers, Boots and Sainsburys supplemented their existing ranges with green brands.

The fate of enviropreneur marketing is particularly instructive. The growth of many boutique firms stalled, and a large proportion of the corporate brands have been deleted and/or absorbed into conventional ranges. What transpired was that in their rush to bring greener offerings to market, and in their belief in the inherent worthiness of such products, the enviropreneurs appear to have made one fatal error they forgot for a time a key constituency – the consumer. Now of course, there were countless market research studies saying that consumers were ready, willing, and able to buy green alternatives. So, in that sense the enviropreneurs were just making a rational response to this evidence. But this misses the point in three important ways. First, much of the market research was poorly conceived and based on hypothetical situations, with too much scope for respondents to give unrealistic, socially desirable answers. Second, much of the research focussed on general environmental concern, while in practice it is concern about specific environmental issues that will drive the markets for specific green products. Third, few companies carried out the extensive product-specific market research necessary to ensure their products' success. Knowing that consumers want greener products is not the same as knowing exactly which products consumers are going to want, what kind of price-performance trade-offs they may be willing to accept, and what marketing approach they will find respond to.

Many of the enviropreneur firms were actually working from a production orientation. All their efforts were focused on producing the most environmentally benign products, rather than the products that consumers actually wanted. Thus, they ended up producing products that were perceived as either under-performing, over-priced, or just too worthy and “unsexy”. The average consumer would not understand that the reason their green detergents did not get their clothes “whiter than white” was that they lacked the optical brightener additives which conventional detergents deposit on clothes (which hardly qualifies as “cleaning” them). Similarly, they would not understand that green washing-up liquids would not produce a big fluffy bowl of soap bubbles because they lacked polluting, cosmetic sudsers. So, the enviropreneur marketers may have meant well, but whilst they had the right environmental goals, they were always destined to have problems establishing a significant market presence in the long-term because they failed to successfully research, understand or educate their customers.

#### *Compliance marketing*

Our final green marketing disguise is compliance marketing. This category includes those firms whose environmental initiatives do not go beyond responding to regulation (both planned and expected). Many such firms have seen simple compliance with environmental legislation as an opportunity to promote their green credentials. Hence we have had the rather curious spectacle of firms promoting the absence of banned CFCs as a customer benefit, or a US firm nominating itself for an environmental excellence award on the sole basis of complying with all relevant environmental laws.



Clearly, compliance marketing is green marketing in a very conservative guise – the firm seeks to travel the path of least change and will only go beyond compliance when there is a very real expectation of imminent legislation.

Some compliance marketers have however developed a more progressive approach, albeit reluctantly and not without a certain guile. A number of firms have adopted a “two-handed” approach where they simultaneously respond proactively to the pressures for change, and also reactively shore up their barricades against any further legislation. For example, some automotive firms have divided their efforts between clean car design (e.g. design for recycling or alternatively fuelled engines) and lobbying regulators in order to avert stricter greenhouse gas measures. Unfortunately for the two-handers though, pressure groups and the media have been quick to portray such strategies as hypocritical. In fact, there has probably been more attention focused on hypocrisy in green marketing than there has on any simple failure to comply with existing legislation. Whichever approach the compliance marketers have taken though, they have never had much hope of appealing to the environmental concerns of increasingly savvy customers, or of making any significant advances towards sustainability. Any progress will only come after a period of denial and counter-argument, and after they have been forced into change through legislation. The free market will thus never be able to turn our compliance marketers into genuine green marketers. Of course, this raises the question of what exactly genuine green marketing is. If this paper is premised on the idea that the five categories discussed here are false green marketings, then on what basis are we saying that something is neither “green” nor “marketing”?

#### **File under fiction – why most of the 1990s green marketing was not really “green” or “marketing”?**

The proponents of any management philosophy that runs into difficulties are prone to claiming “Ah, the problem is that people aren’t implementing it properly!” Clearly, this is a rather weak defence. Our critique of “green marketing” practice is not intended to be a rerun of this kind of defence, but an attempt to highlight how little of this activity has had to do with either marketing or the environment. Baker’s (1999) analysis of King’s “failed marketings” suggested four essential features of “real” marketing, which, perhaps except for the first, assume even greater importance in a green marketing context.

##### *It starts with the customer*

It is not easy to find evidence of companies whose green marketing strategies began with comprehensive market research into customers’ wants, needs, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge. Indeed, some of the most successful green brands such as Body Shop and Ecover clearly did not start with the customer in the traditional marketing sense, in that they represented the vision of an entrepreneur rather than a reflection of the market. One interesting challenge in the green marketing agenda is to start with the customer, but then to think more broadly in terms of researching the needs of the company’s other stakeholders and considering future generations of customers as well.

##### *It has a long-run perspective*

The pursuit of sustainability needs to go beyond long-term to become open-ended. However, many green marketing initiatives have clearly been rather shortsighted, such

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as the promotion of recyclable containers in areas that lack recycling facilities. Elkington *et al.* (1991) noted that many green technologies remain uncommercialised simply because their payback period is often longer than that of conventional alternatives. It is in this area that sustainability represents a major challenge to marketers. After decades in which the emphasis was on immediate benefits for the individual consumer, it is difficult to now balance this with an emphasis on delivering benefits to others in the future (including future generations of consumers).

*It involves full use of all the company's resources*

Green marketing needs to be reflected throughout the company so that the actions or policies of any part of the company or its supply chain do not compromise the eco-performance of products. Such a holistic approach is fundamental to the greening of marketing (Peattie, 1995) but it has proved difficult to achieve in practice. Shelton's (1994) research into major green pioneers revealed them running into problems because environmental concerns did not mesh well with traditional corporate cultures, and senior management lost interest in environmental initiatives once the "low hanging fruit" had been picked.

*It is innovative*

Regardless of the possible benefits of a radical "clean slate" approach, companies have still preferred an evolutionary approach to greening involving familiar "end-of-pipe" technologies. Innovation is being seen very narrowly in terms of product and production system technology. However, customer wants and needs can often be effectively met in ways that create environmental improvements by innovations in market structures and supporting services. This can allow needs to be met through renting rather than owning products, improving product longevity through service and maintenance, or reducing environmental impact through better product disposal.

**A mystery: why has progress been so difficult?**

Ten years ago, there seemed little to stop the progress of green marketing. Market research showed that consumers were expressing environmental concern, and wanted to purchase greener products from greener companies, even at a small financial premium. The emergence of the "win-win" philosophy articulated by the likes of Porter and Van Der Linde (1995) and Elkington (1994) gave companies good reason to move beyond their traditionally reactive and compliance-orientated approach to the environment. There was also an emerging literature that aimed to help companies to make their products and operations greener, and to capitalise on those changes through marketing.

It is therefore something of a puzzle as to why the products and companies within the world's economies today do not look more radically different to those that made up the economies of 1987, whose unsustainable nature was the focus of the Brundtland Report. This is not to say that all green marketing efforts have failed, or that there have been no examples of innovation, improvement, or radical change. There is a great deal of good practice in many markets that can be identified. However, it is difficult not to conclude that these represent exceptions rather than the majority. Although some green brands were significantly more sustainable than conventional offerings, the degree to which they made substantive progress towards sustainability is very

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doubtful. In one way, they may have acted as a “pressure valve” allowing concerned consumers to moderately change their consumption behaviour in a way that made them feel as though they were “doing their bit”. This reflects the concerns of Smith (1998), that green marketing has acted as a bridge between the gap that has emerged between people’s environmental concern and their desire to maintain the western consumer lifestyle. What we need is green marketing to act as a bridge between that current lifestyle and the marketing which both serves and drives it, and a future of sustainable marketing based around more sustainable production and consumption.

After the first wave of green marketing activity, marketing scholars during the latter half of the 1990s began to move beyond the original green marketing agenda and its focus on the pursuit of environmentally-based competitive advantage. Ideas about what might constitute sustainable (or at least more sustainable) marketing began to emerge (Peattie, 1995; Van Dam and Apeldoorn, 1996). This indicates that more substantive progress will require a number of elements of marketing thought and practice to be reshaped, including:

- *A redefinition of the “product”* – to encompass the means of production and the broader activities of the producer. Consumers who buy organic food or fair trade products are basing their decisions on issues beyond the tangible product. A greater focus on how the product is made will be required to promote more sustainable production and consumption.
- *A willingness to change markets* – as well as changing products. A more sustainable economy will require more than new product development; it will require new types of market in which material flows become more circular through product take-back and recycling; where services are increasingly substituted for goods; and “alternative” forms of production and consumption (such as farmers’ markets) are created or rediscovered.
- *An emphasis on benefits from product use* – rather than on the joys of product ownership. In many markets, more opportunities to use hired or community owned products would allow significant dematerialisation within the economy while still delivering the same level of consumer benefits.
- *Marketing communication that aims to inform rather than just impress* – because communicating about environmental issues is difficult for marketers and involves complex issues without simple solutions, and messages which are difficult to reduce down to fit onto a label, or into a 30 second TV commercial (Prothero *et al.*, 1997). However, given the lack of environmental literacy amongst consumers, progress will be difficult unless formal sustainable development education in schools is reinforced in the rest of society and life.
- *A focus beyond current consumer needs* – which encompasses current and future stakeholder needs. Marketers can see a single-minded focus on the customer as a virtue but production and consumption decisions have significant impacts on non-consumers.
- *A willingness to manage demand and expectation* – downwards! More sustainable consumption will only be achieved in many markets if demand and expectations about cost, availability, and convenience are managed downwards. This will be an unwelcome thought for many marketers, but

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realistic expectations about the nature, total costs, and consequences of consumption and production need to be instigated.

- *An emphasis on cost instead of price* – many key products such as cars, houses, and computers continue to be marketed through competition based around price, not competition in terms of overall costs of ownership and use. An emphasis on issues like energy efficiency within the context of total costs would mean that our homes and highways would probably look very different to the way they do now.
- *Taking more responsibility* – companies often shelter behind the idea that they are essentially the passive servant of consumers and their desires, but this prevents them from adopting greater social responsibility. Given the persistently low levels of environmental literacy amongst consumers, it is unrealistic and irresponsible of marketers to entirely devolve responsibility to them. More sustainable marketing will require a greater willingness among marketers to also consider consumer and societal welfare, and to take some responsibility for guiding their consumers towards more sustainable behaviour.

This agenda for change is a radical and challenging one for marketing in terms of thought, practice and market research. However, without addressing these issues, marketing will continue to act as an obstacle to progress towards sustainability. Such progress will depend on the combined efforts of marketing practitioners, researchers, scholars, and public policy makers. It will also depend on convincing consumers that the changes required are necessary and worthwhile, and that the benefits and motivations involved are genuine (Peattie, 1999).

### Conclusions

How does this discussion help us to understand the story of the evolution of green marketing? It certainly highlights elements of tragedy in how the opportunities to make substantive progress towards sustainability have been squandered because of the inappropriate focus of much “green marketing” activity. Firms’ orientations have centred on production, selling, costs, legislation and PR, whereas the customer has frequently been of marginal interest. Moreover, firms have compartmentalised green marketing rather than developing a holistic perspective that embraces all aspects of the company, the product, and the means of production, consumption, and disposal. Without changes, cynicism and accusations of hypocrisy will continue unabated.

Green marketing has also developed its own mythology, and within companies, legends abound about the difficulties posed by customers, colleagues, and corporate cultures when trying to develop greener strategies. The practical implementation of green marketing has often worked on the assumption that since greening was what customers wanted (or at least professed to want), marketers would follow their lead, and that the rest of the organisation would be happy to support them. This would work in a world of entirely marketing orientated firms, but neglects the internal environment. Internal resistance has often been widespread, and authors such as Walley and Whitehead (1994) and Shelton (1994) have shown that green strategies can become progressively more unpalatable for all but the most environmentally committed companies.

The need to address sustainability is a serious issue, but there have also been moments of farce, particularly in terms of some of the early green marketing claims. Moreover, there has been an ironic element to much of the discussion about green marketing to date because, from a theoretical point of view, green marketing has been severely restricted by its emphasis on the purchasing component of the consumption process. Environmental amelioration has been largely portrayed as a question of consumers expressing their concerns by purchasing new greener products. The paradoxical proposition is that the way through the environmental crisis created by excessive and unsustainable consumption, is yet more consumption. In contrast, sustainable marketing also has to address non-purchase behaviour such as product use, sharing, maintenance, disposal, and take-back.

Another view of the story of green marketing is that we are witnessing the early stage of an epic tale of great length. For such stories, readers need to exhibit patience and commitment to achieve the full rewards. So, it is likely to be with green marketing. However, at the moment such patience and commitment is often lacking. The tendency of commentators to over-simplify and oversell the “win-win” opportunities linked to green markets is not surprising since support would hardly be drummed up by stressing that it will be complex, difficult and involve compromises. However, the downside to this is that it has created unrealistic expectations leading to disillusionment and impatience on all sides. Moreover, the “win-win” philosophy has in turn created an expectation that green products would be environmentally superior to conventional products, while also being competitive in terms of price and technical performance. In practice, green marketing is characterised by a sloping playing field due to the socio-environmental subsidy that many conventional products effectively enjoy (by externalising social environmental costs) and the performance effects of removing harmful (but effective) product ingredients. Green products are therefore often thrust into an extremely difficult competitive position.

Green marketers can therefore find themselves faced with several dilemmas. They can pursue radical change and try to be more genuinely sustainable, by internalising the environmental costs involved in production. This may be more than consumers are ready for. Unilever’s recent strategy of moving consumers away from consumption of endangered cod and haddock and towards more sustainable pollock and hoki, has progressed more slowly than hoped due to consumer conservatism. If green producers try to focus on the most environmentally concerned customers as a niche market, what good are they really doing? If they aim to move the mass market towards sustainability, how likely are they to succeed given the proven lack of understanding about sustainability among consumers, and their distrust of companies?

In the face of these difficulties, it is perhaps unsurprising that much of what has happened under the banner of “green marketing” has had relatively little to do with either marketing or the environment. Green marketing should therefore not be written off as a prophecy unfulfilled, but recognised as one whose time has not yet come. Perhaps the answer to making more substantive progress towards sustainability does not lie with marketers at all, since the market’s current flaws make it incapable of delivering sustainability alone. The market needs to operate within a society in which sustainability is more than adopted as a public policy goal, but is actively pursued through policy implementation in terms of taxation, education, industrial policy, and

public spending and investments. Whilst the early predictions for growth in the green market may now look a little overstated, the predictions for growing environmental problems have not. The longer we take to address the issue, and to make progress towards more sustainable marketing, the greater the disruption and effort will be. The sooner substantive progress is made, the more likely the story will be to have a happy ending.

#### Note

1. The terminology varies. We use green marketing here to keep to the language that was prevalent when the idea took-off, but authors have also used greener marketing, environmental marketing and sustainable marketing. The debate about the semantics involved can be side-stepped by considering them all as labels which describe a form of marketing which represents progress towards sustainability.

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