

Marketing Communications for Sustainable Consumption: A Conceptual Framework

Shilpa Bagdare*

ABSTRACT

Sustainability has become a global buzz word. Global business leaders are showing deep concerns about sustainable business practices in the light of growing emphasis on sustainable development. Consumers across the world are becoming gradually aware of the environmental impact of industrialization and realizing their role in contributing to the environment through responsible consumption of products. The companies adopting sustainability measures enjoy better credibility and image among all stakeholders including the consumers. Many business organizations are making efforts to create wider consumer awareness about consumption for sustainable development and sustainability marketing practices adopted by their organizations. Marketing communications techniques play a critical role in communicating with the consumers to influence their behaviour towards sustainable consumption. The present paper deals with analyzing marketing communication techniques adopted for promoting environment friendly or sustainable products and suggests a conceptual framework for communicating sustainability marketing practices adopted by business organizations.

Keywords: Sustainability, Marketing Communications, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

There is a rising global concern about sustainability among nations of the world as a result of the initiatives and efforts of United Nations in popularising Sustainable Development Goals – 2030. Efforts are being made by all the stakeholders to save the planet for future generations by adopting all possible measures. Businesses are also integrating sustainability dimensions into their strategic plans and operations which are reflected in their marketing practices. There is a growing popularity of environment friendly products and sustainability marketing practices adopted by business organizations. Measures are being taken to popularize through different types of public campaigns. Communication programmes play a great role in creating widespread awareness about sustainable development across the world among all stakeholders. They build public opinions and influence the life and behaviours of all concerned. Sustainability communication campaigns are being run by every country and their impact are being shared among other countries.

Over a period of time, particularly in the last decade, the Consumers are increasingly becoming aware about the sustainable development movement. They are also realizing their role and contribution by way of becoming a responsible citizen and consumers. Globally, there is a growing demand for green or environment friendly or eco-friendly products and services among consumers. They pay greater attention to environment related information about the products they buy. Companies adopting green marketing practices enjoy better image and credibility among all stakeholders.

Communication is the most powerful force for promoting any idea, product or service, particularly in the context of sustainability. It should be informative, credible and persuasive in order to sensitize and influence the consumption patterns in favour of saving the planet earth. In view of the growing importance of consumers in terms responsible or sustainable consumption for Sustainable Development, the need to adopt an effective communication strategy is increasingly felt by the marketers. Trivedi, Trivedi, and Goswami (2018)

* Faculty, Marketing Area, International Institute of Professional Studies Devi Ahilya University, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India. Email: shilpa_bagdare@rediffmail.com

suggests that the organizations should constantly keep their customers engaged and involved through proper communication, They further opined that the customers must be regularly updated about their efforts towards social responsibility and environmental mitigation. Marketers often face a large number of challenges in educating, sensitizing, and motivating people to engage themselves in sustainable development. One of the critical tasks is to design an appropriate and effective communication strategy with the right mix of message, media and marketing communication elements.

Sustainability is a well developed concept in both theory and practice. It has emphasis on fulfilling the needs of the present generation in such a manner that we preserve enough for the future generations. It addresses the issues of integrating triple bottom line – people, planet and profits. A need for involving masses is increasingly being felt. Communication for sustainability is the key for creating a mass movement. Review of literature reveals that although a lot of work has been done in the area of sustainable development, but very few studies, related to sustainable marketing communication, are reported. Marketing professionals should also be provided insights for developing effective communication strategies to contribute for the cause of sustainability. It is revealed that there exists a gap in the existing body of knowledge for proposing the guiding principles for sustainable marketing communication. The present paper makes an attempt to significantly contribute to the academics and marketing practices by reviewing and integrating the marketing communications techniques with sustainability and proposes a conceptual framework for sustainability marketing communications for effectively communicating with consumers. It also tries to create value for researchers as well as practitioners by bringing out important implications.

METHODOLOGY

The present paper is conceptual in nature and is based on the review of selected works on sustainability marketing communications and sustainability practices adopted by business organizations. The author also draws insights from the concepts and techniques related to marketing communications adopted for consumer goods and services. In view of the need for widespread adoption

of sustainable development initiatives, a framework for communicating sustainability marketing practices is developed for business organizations. The four elements of the framework explain different communication stages and are appropriately supported by the marketing communication mix elements for designing effective communication strategies for sustainable consumption.

SUSTAINABILITY MARKETING COMMUNICATION

Genc (2017) argued that communication plays a key role in promoting sustainability and engaging different internal and external stakeholders in sustainable development activities. Marketing communications tools are the most effective ways of influencing and shaping consumer's minds, decisions and actions. They are used for creating awareness, imparting education and knowledge, shaping perceptions and forming attitudes, creating interest and engagement, building preferences and motivating the consumer to take purchase decisions. Organizations of all types and sizes make effective use of marketing communication techniques for their business objectives related to building brand image and positioning, launching products, increasing sales, customer retention etc. The integrated marketing communication mix elements such as advertising, sales promotion, public relations, personal selling, event marketing, digital marketing, direct marketing, customer relationship management etc., which are extensively used in marketing of consumer goods and services, can be adopted for sustainability marketing communication. Martin and Schouten (2015) defined sustainable marketing communication – “messages and media directed to any of any of an organization's stakeholders for the purpose of achieving the organization's marketing and sustainability objectives”. They further highlighted that sustainable marketing communications should be integrated with triple bottom line dimensions of sustainability; involve all stakeholders; reflect transparency, integrity and accountability of organization; establish credibility and build communities of purpose.

In addition to the marketing communication mix elements, product labels are becoming important means of sustainability communication as they contain vital information about the product. The product labels are

the first contact point between the consumer and the product. Hsiao (2013) explained that Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs) using eco-labels play a very important role in providing environmental information to consumers about the products. It was further described that such information in the eco labels may include energy consumption/emission, carbon footprints etc in the form of statements, symbols, or graphics which can be used by consumers for purchase decision making purposes. Organizations can carefully provide relevant environment related information on their product labels to attract, educate and motivate consumers.

CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE MARKETING COMMUNICATION

Organizations face a number of challenges while designing their sustainability marketing communication strategies. One of the major dilemma before them relates to “which dimensions of sustainability be emphasized” and to “what extent the sustainability benefits be emphasized”. Many a time organizations emphasize on one dimension while ignoring the other important ones. Tugrul and Gocer (2017) in a comparative study of global and Turkish brands, analyzed the sustainability related messages on social media by leading brands and found that global brands emphasize on economic dimensions such as efficiency or cost benefits, whereas, Turkish brands focus on social dimension such as welfare programmes, as compared to environmental dimension of sustainability in their marketing communications on Corporate Facebook accounts. The authors proposed that considering triple bottom line, all dimensions of sustainability should be considered while designing sustainability communication messages by the corporate.

Another important marketing communication challenge relates to Greenwashing. Delmas and Burbano (2011) observed that with the growing popularity and demand for green products, a large number of companies are engaging themselves in making false claims or exaggerating about environmental benefits of the product, and misleading the consumers. It poses very high risk for the corporate of losing their credibility in the market place on account of false reporting of environmental information or claims. De Jong, Harkink, and Barth (2018) also argued that Greenwashing leads to only limited benefits in terms of

consumers’ perception about environmental performance with a much greater threat to integrity of the organization. Consumers also develop a negative perception about integrity of the communication about environmental claims made by the companies.

Considering the large number of communications options, ranging from traditional media to digital media, the formulation of integrated communication strategies for sustainability is a difficult task. The organizations need to be very careful while focusing their communication efforts on sustainability benefits, designing content, selecting media options and choosing the combination of marketing communication toolkit.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABILITY MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

Sustainability rests on three pillars – commonly known as triple bottom line – people, planet, and profits or in other words social, environmental and economic sustainability. Business organizations often integrate one or many dimensions of sustainability in their communication programmes. There is a need for structured and organized efforts for communicating sustainable marketing practices among consumers. Lee (2017) studied the use of marketing communications for sustainability and proposed a framework by integrating (a) sustainability issues; (b) stimulation of sustainable mindsets; and (c) encouragement of sustainable consumption. Designing sustainability marketing communications requires defining a clear focus on sustainability dimensions and thereby, integrating them with marketing communication mix elements.

In view of the relevant literature and the practices adopted by business organizations, a fourfold conceptual framework for sustainability marketing communication is proposed. Its dimensions include - *Sensitize*; *Familiarize*; *Incentivize*; *Recognize*. The framework also suggests appropriate marketing communication tools for each of the dimensions.

1. *Sensitize*: The communication has the first and foremost objective of creating large scale awareness about sustainability and educating the consumers about their role and responsibilities.

Consumers need to be sensitized about environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainable development. They must realize that they are a major stakeholder in creating a sustainable planet. There is a need to develop confidence in adopting sustainability practices for better life and better planet, and sense of pride in performing their role by respecting sustainability driven organizations, favouring eco-friendly products and services and consuming responsibly. A sensitized and responsible consumer is an important contributor to the sustainable development.

Marketing Communication Mix: Organizations can very effectively use Advertising (all media including print, broadcast, digital, out of home etc); Personal Selling or presentations; Events of all types; Direct Marketing and Social Media.

2. *Familiarization:* The second important dimensions of the framework deals with familiarizing the consumer about the company, its functioning, and products and services. There is a need to build credibility about the company by disclosing its functioning and the efforts taken for promoting sustainability. Organizations must function in a transparent, ethical and responsible manner. The product/services should be promoted/displayed/demonstrated by highlighting their environment friendly features, green technology and ingredients used, eco-friendly packaging and safe disposal. Energy efficient electronics, fuel efficient automobiles, organic food products, recyclable packages etc. are some of the examples of sustainable products. Efforts should be made to make consumers familiarize and understand about all the sustainability related benefits offered by the products/services so that they are motivated to take purchase decision.

Marketing Communication Mix: Some of the effective tools are Corporate Communications, Corporate Sustainability Disclosure, Public Relations, Corporate Social Responsibility, Product Advertising, Product display and demonstration, Eco - Labelling, and Packaging.

3. *Incentivizing Consumers:* A motivated consumer needs some stimuli for purchase decision and action. Once the consumer is aware and familiar with the product and its sustainability related benefits, an incentive in any form will act as a catalyst to

convert the demand into an actual sale of the product. In order to attract a consumer to buy a sustainable product, an incentive in the form of an introductory offer or monetary benefit or some reward may be provided in the beginning, particularly to the new consumers or first time users. Once the consumer start consuming the products and derive value from their consumption, they may repurchase those products. Such sales promotion offers act as stimulant for actual purchase.

Marketing Communication Mix: Sales Promotion such as introductory offer, discounts, gifts, coupons, contests, reusable containers etc. may be used.

4. *Recognize:* The fourth dimension of the framework deals with recognizing the efforts of a sensitive and responsible consumer towards sustainable consumption. For regular customers, organizations may think about recognizing their patronage by loyalty awards programs or customer relationship management efforts. Organizations may also create consumer engagement by way of promoting consumer communities, whereby, they interact with fellow consumers about their knowledge, experiences, consumption, and other sustainability related issues. The companies can also appreciate or reward the consumers by organizing social or special events or publishing their experiences/stories/profiles on digital media. The customers may also be encouraged to recommend the products/services to their friends/relatives.

Marketing Communication Mix: Consumer Communities; Events; Sharing Experiences; Story Telling; Social Media; Word of Mouth Communication; Loyalty Programs; Customer Relationship Management etc.

The above fourfold framework of Marketing Communications for Sustainable Consumption involving sensitizing, familiarizing, incentivizing, and recognizing consumers can be adopted with the help of suggested marketing communication mix elements and integrated in the marketing programmes of business organizations. Each dimension of the framework represents a unique phase and communication action points in the evolution of a sustainable consumer.

IMPLICATIONS

Sustainability communications is a relatively new area for research as well as practice. The proposed conceptual framework of marketing communications for sustainable consumption presents important implications for researchers as well as practitioners. It can serve as the starting point for employing the proposed fourfold dimensions into practice and empirically assessing the impact and effectiveness of various marketing communication tools. The influence of other moderating variables such as culture, demographics, psychographics, and geography can also be studied in future researches.

The business organizations can ascertain their sustainability focus and efforts, and accordingly design and launch sustainable marketing communication strategy. Many advertising or marketing communications agencies have created a special division for social or green marketing. Engaging professionals with a sustainability oriented mindset may help in giving such efforts the right direction. Business organizations may partner with other non profit organizations or communities for effective implementation of their sustainability communication plans. While doing so, business organizations must design their marketing communications strategies with great care by avoiding false or misleading claims about environmental benefits.

CONCLUSION

Consumer is the basic and integral unit in the global movement towards sustainable development. The actions of consumer by way of accepting or rejecting commercial initiatives of business organizations may play a decisive role in keeping the planet green and safe for the future generations. Consumers' awareness, perceptions, attitudes, decisions, and actions towards sustainability will help in wider acceptance of environment friendly practices and products/services. Marketing communications can be very effective in influencing and shaping consumer behaviour towards responsible consumption by giving

them the right orientation. The present study contributes by proposing a fourfold conceptual framework of marketing communication which describes four initiatives – sensitize, familiarize, incentivize, and recognize – for evolution of a responsible consumer. This framework may serve as guidelines for designing communication campaigns. Organizations can be greatly benefitted by realizing their role in sustainable development and contributing by adopting marketing communications strategies sustainable consumption.

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