

FDIN Sustainability Tune-In
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Point of view - Role of the Consumer
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1. We can't rely on overt consumer pressure to be a driver for change

Most consumers in countries like UK and USA are preoccupied with issues other than the most pressing 'big' sustainability issues. When they are making purchasing decisions they are concerned far more about value and convenience than they are about the environmental or social profile of what they are buying.

They are not unconcerned, but sustainability issues aren't key purchase drivers. Consumers continue to express interest and concern in sustainability issues, but consistently fail to follow through in any meaningful way in terms of significant changes in behaviour, with the possible exception of recycling and waste reduction.

Consumers often focus on issues that are not the most important – but are things that are close to home and that they can do something about – like packaging. It's important for companies to address these symbolic issues, but consumers aren't reliable agenda setters for companies seeking to shape their business strategy.

Should we therefore simply ignore consumers as agents of change and let companies go on with making decisions on their behalf?

2. Companies are increasingly considering the long term, major sustainability issues as inputs that help shape their opportunities, challenges and business strategy

Many companies are simply getting on with addressing the major issues 'behind the scenes', choice editing on consumers' behalf, without involving them or even informing them. Consumers are, on the whole, very happy for this to happen. They expect companies to address important issues like the sustainability of raw materials, the efficiency of the supply chain, water use, soil fertility etc on their behalf. Most of the biggest issues on the agenda at the moment are ones where choice editing is likely to be the realistic approach.

But not everything can be done in a way that is invisible to consumers. In some areas there will be a need for innovation that will be visible to consumers, and that therefore needs to be 'framed' and explained, and the benefits made clear to consumers. For example, the latest wave of refill packs have been presented as improvements in value or convenience – or even in aesthetics – and this has helped consumer acceptance.

There will also be an increasing need to engage consumers in changing their behaviours – as we've seen in areas like low temperature washing.

In these cases, sustainability gets on to the marketing and brand agenda, as brands will need to connect with consumers and normalise new behaviours. It will be essential to think about how to engage consumers emotionally, rather than simply inform them rationally. While communication around sustainability has often been worthy but dull, brand – led communication and activity has to be inspiring and engaging.

3. What is the role of marketing and brand people in helping advance corporate sustainability?

Integration into brands can help to anchor sustainability within the organisation by linking the reputation and value of major assets to the contribution they can make to delivering sustainability objectives. For this to work effectively, brand and marketing people will have to take on board what sustainability is really about – at the ‘big issues’ level. This is made easier of course if the company sets clear strategic and policy directions. This can help identify positive opportunities for the brand to influence change.

Any migration of influence over the corporate sustainability agenda towards marketing can of course be threatening to the sustainability specialists, who see many dangers in ill-informed, irresponsible marketing people focusing on all the wrong things! And, as yet, many brand marketers don’t yet grasp the significance of sustainability issues for their relationships with their customers. But there is an inexorable trend that pulls these areas closer together.

As the brand agenda is generally moving more and more towards building in values, purpose and meaning, and towards more participative, collaborative relationships with consumers, the conditions are conducive to ‘proper’ integration of sustainability objectives rather than simply seeing ‘green marketing’ opportunities as an appealing short term promotional theme. Stories about the provenance and impact of products will become woven into brand narratives and will support brands’ rational and emotional benefits, helping consumers make informed choices.

The gradual shift in focus from ‘doing less bad’ to ‘doing more good’ will perhaps open up easier opportunities to involve and inspire consumers.

4. Engaging with consumers around sustainability means connecting with their agenda, rather than relying on ‘educating’ them about a sustainability agenda they currently perceive as quite remote

We know very well that consumers look for the ‘what’s in it for me’ aspect of offers that relate to sustainability – whether that’s in emotional feel good benefits or in more concrete benefits related to lower cost, convenience etc.

But rather than attempt to persuade people to deal with issues and perspectives they don’t currently see as immediately relevant to them, there are many fundamental consumer needs that offer bridges into sustainability territories.

Health and wellness plays a central role in sustainability and is a powerful need and aspiration for many people. The myriad links between health objectives and sustainability requirements will become increasingly apparent, with personal health usually being a strong driver. For example, persuading people to reduce some meat consumption because of its environmental impact may be hard, but inspiring them to eat more legumes because they are healthier and cheaper (and also lower impact) may be easier.

Consumer priorities of saving money and increasing thriftiness lead naturally into reducing waste, promoting the appreciation of sufficiency rather than excess, and enhancing the value of simplicity. Avoiding waste is a powerful motivator for a growing proportion of people.

Consumers' retreat to comfort and security in the face of economic and other adversity and uncertainty leads into the importance of resilience and a desire to secure the longer term.

The desire to connect socially and join with like-minded people can lead to inspiring community action.

When we consider how we are going to tackle some of the big, long term sustainability issues which will undoubtedly require some consumer engagement and changes in behaviour, we need to look more at their underlying needs, priorities and values, rather than rely too much on at their apparent current 'green' attitudes and behaviours.

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