

Chapter 42

Sustainability and the UK's Major Food Retailers: Consumer Concentric Cause Marketing Writ Large

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews how the UK's leading food retailers are incorporating sustainability into their corporate identities and marketing strategies. The chapter begins with an outline of the characteristics of sustainability, a discussion of the relationships between marketing and sustainability, and a brief description of the structure of food retailing within the UK. The chapter draws its empirical information from the sustainability material on the top ten UK's food retailers' corporate websites and an observational survey conducted in these retailers' stores in the town of Cheltenham in the UK. The findings reveal that while the top ten UK food retailers claimed strong corporate commitments to sustainability, such commitments are poorly reflected at the point of sale within stores where the dominant marketing messages were designed to entice customers to consume rather than to encourage them to develop more sustainable patterns of shopping behaviour. This leads the authors to offer some critical reflections on the sustainability agendas being pursued by the UK's leading food retailers. More critically, the authors argue that the UK's leading food retailers have constructed sustainability agendas which are driven largely, though not necessarily exclusively, by their own commercial interests rather than by commitments to sustainability. As such, these retailers can be seen to be looking to accommodate both strategic long-term commitments to sustainability as well short-term operational decisions to offer customers competitive prices within what they see as genuinely consumer concentric marketing strategies.

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Consumers are increasingly concerned about their own environmental impacts, those of the products they buy and those of the companies at which they shop. These concerns focus on physical impacts such as global warming and on broader social issues such as how their purchasing actions and choices affect the livelihoods of people in other countries (Global Coca Cola Retail Research Council Forum, 2009, p. 5).

INTRODUCTION

In identifying “caring consumption” (p. 1) as “one of the top ten consumer trends for 2010” (p. 1), Euromonitor International (2009) suggested that consumers are “keen on cause consumption” and they “want to buy from brands who care about society and who are striving to reduce the negative impacts of their products and services on the environment” (p. 1). Cause marketing has been defined in a number of ways but it typically “entails firms communicating through their advertising, packaging, promotions, and so on, their corporate social responsibility, namely their affiliation or work with non-profit organisations or support for causes. The point is to attract customers wanting to make a difference in society through their purchasing” (Bronn & Vrioni, 2001, pp. 207-208). Smith and Alcorn (1991) argued that “cause marketing may be the most creative and cost-effective product marketing strategy to evolve in years” (p. 20), and Sundar (2007) has predicted that cause marketing “will emerge as the single most effective long term strategy to establish emotional relationships with target consumers” (p. 213).

As increasing number of consumers are looking to reduce the impact their purchases have on the environment and society so sustainability has become an increasingly important “collective cause” and a seemingly ever more important element in many large retailers’ corporate identities and marketing strategies. It is collective in the sense that a number of major retailers are pursu-

ing similar strategies and in that sustainability is, in theory if not always in practice, seen to be an important issue for all consumers. Marc Bolland the Chief Executive Officer of Marks and Spencer, one of the UK’s best-known retailers, for example has argued that “sustainability is central to how we do business” (Marks & Spencer, 2011, p. 1). While Mike Duke, the President and Chief Executive of Wal-Mart Stores, the world’s largest retailer, has claimed “we do not view our sustainability work as a philanthropic add on but as a core part of who we are” (Wal-Mart, 2011, p. 1). Corporate identity and marketing strategy are becoming increasingly intertwined with a growing awareness that customers’ buying behaviour can be influenced by their perceptions of the ways in which retailers manage environmental, social, and economic impacts throughout their supply chains. The UK has the most concentrated, and arguably the most sophisticated food retail sector in the world, and this chapter reviews how the UK’s top ten food retailers are incorporating sustainability into their corporate identities and marketing strategies. More specifically the aims of the chapter are three fold namely to examine the corporate commitments the UK’s top ten food retailers are making to sustainability; to explore how these commitments are being reflected at the point of sale within the retailers’ stores; and to offer some critical reflections on the ways in which these retailers are addressing and pursuing sustainability agendas.

SUSTAINABILITY

The concept of sustainability can be traced back as far as the thirteenth century but in more recent times it appeared in the environmental literature in the 1970s (Kamara, Coff, & Wynne, 2006) and since then it has attracted increasingly widespread attention. Jamieson (1998) suggests that “most people’s thoughts about the meaning of sustainability are probably simple and grand: sustain-

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