

Socially Responsible Marketing

Ellis Jones

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Holy Cross College, 1 College Street, Worcester MA 01610

Abstract. Socially responsible marketing is practiced by companies engaged in corporate social responsibility as a way to clearly communicate their positive social and environmental behaviors to ethical consumers. The opposite practice, greenwashing, is commonly used by companies attempting to gain undue credit for a lackluster commitment to responsible social and environmental behaviors. While the former is preferable, the latter has become increasingly sophisticated and dominant in the marketplace.

Keywords: greenwashing; corporate social responsibility; ethical consumer; socially irresponsible marketing; green business

Socially Responsible Marketing (SRM)

Socially responsible marketing (SRM), sometimes referred to as ethical corporate marketing or green marketing, are practices that some companies adopt to acknowledge the larger social and environmental impacts of their products and services. SRM signals to consumers that the company takes responsibility for and aims to reduce the negative consequences of its operation. These practices fall under the larger rubric of corporate social responsibility (CSR) but are easily conflated with opposing practices: socially irresponsible marketing (SIM), more commonly referred to as greenwashing, the corporate practice of masking poor social/environmental records with deceptive ad campaigns that boast of their socially/environmentally responsible behavior/commitment.

Early calls for SRM included restrictions in marketing aimed toward children, particularly vis-à-vis products like tobacco, alcohol, and gambling. Consumer advocates recently added “junk food” to this list of products, in part due to increasing rates of childhood obesity. More recently, some consumers have expressed a desire for SRM that conveys specific, transparent, accurate, and easily understandable information about corporations’ social and environmental responsibility. In other words, some consumers view SRM as a venue for educating the public about the consequences of the consumptive practices.

Authentic SRM involves claims that are easily verified using publically available information. Such claims clearly demonstrate that particular corporate practices, products or services are more socially or environmentally responsible than the market competition. The most trusted sources for verifying SRM claims tend to be labels or certifications created and verified by third-party organizations such as USDA Organic, Fair Trade

Association, Green Seal, Green-e, Energy Star, Forest Stewardship Council, Marine Stewardship Council, B Corporation, or Green America. Unfortunately, as the number of third-party certifications has increased, SIM (or greenwashing) has even begun to muddy data from these previously reliable sources.

As with other aspects of CSR, companies that wish to legitimately engage in SRM simultaneously face two struggles: 1. How to convey their responsible practices to consumers in ways that distinguish them from irresponsible companies engaged in greenwashing, and 2. How to accurately gauge their own social and environmental responsibility so that they, themselves, don't inadvertently engage in greenwashing.

Greenwashing (a.k.a. Socially Irresponsible Marketing)

Greenwashing occurs when companies assert, through advertising and/or public relations, that they are environmentally virtuous despite a clear record indicating the opposite. The term "greenwash" combines "whitewash" (to cover up crimes/scandals) with "green" (environmentally sustainable). Although some consumer advocates employ terms such as "bluewashing" (human rights, poverty, and labor issues) and "pinkwashing" (LGBT and/or breast cancer research issues), greenwashing is more common and has evolved to encompass a broad span of issues beyond environmental responsibility.

As greenwashing has become increasingly common, it has also become more sophisticated, consisting of a wide range of techniques that companies use to obscure problematic records and/or "oversell" ostensibly responsible practices. Companies engage in greenwashing in order to increase their market share of the lucrative ethical consumer sector. Some of the most common greenwashing techniques include:

- *Misdirection* (e.g. highlighting philanthropic donations to popular social and/or environmental causes as a way to distract from a troubled environmental/social record)
- *Self-aggrandizement* (e.g. implying that a particular practice makes them exceptionally responsible when that practice is, in fact, standard within an industry)
- *Ambiguity* (e.g. using vague language to describe a long-term commitment to broad social and environmental values)
- *Magnification* (e.g. focusing attention on a positive practice that is not, in fact, particularly significant in terms of making change)
- *Proclamations* (e.g. making social/environmental claims that cannot be verified or corroborated without access to confidential data)

- *Implied Association* (e.g. using language or imagery similar to those which carry official or significant positive meaning for ethical consumers such as “fairly traded” to imply official fair trade certification.)

SRM is an important component of ethical marketplace as it allows for clear communication between producers and consumers. SIM hinders the ability of ethical consumers in particular to effectively influence companies through their purchasing behavior, often construed as casting “economic votes” for responsible companies.

Cross-References

SEE ALSO: Corporate Social Responsibility; Ethical Consumption; Marketing/Marketing Science

Further Reading

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