Consuming Sustainability Narratives

Paul Haynes, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

Many well known brands use ethical and environmental narratives effectively to differentiate themselves from similar products; however, narratives conflicting with existing cultural values are unlikely to influence consumers. Using insights from cultural branding, this paper will challenge the view that to promote sustainable goods requires changing consumer’s values.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019038/volumes/v43/NA-43

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Consuming Sustainability Narratives
Paul Haynes, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

ABSTRACT

Many well known brands use ethical and environmental narratives effectively to differentiate themselves from similar products; however, narratives conflicting with existing cultural values are unlikely to influence consumers. Using insights from cultural branding, this paper will challenge the view that to promote sustainable goods requires changing consumer’s values.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability discourse and the narratives that derive their influence from this discourse continue to pose a challenge for entrepreneurs and academics engaged in the study of entrepreneurship. Consumers are generally aware of the need to conserve resources and ensure that present consumption behaviour does not compromise that of future generations (Morais et al. 2012). Entrepreneurs are aware of the potential for competitive advantage and new markets in goods that can demonstrate environmental credentials (Porter & van der Linde, 1995; Polonsky & Ottman, 1998). The problem is that the message to consume sustainably is having a very limited impact (Crane & Desmond, 2002; Holt, 2014). There is certainly confusion concerning the environmental claims made on behalf of companies and products, which is not helped by a lack of transparent environmental indicators to compare the environmental impact of one product with another (Ristino, 2008). This is not, though the main barrier to achieving sustainable consumption patterns. Research indicates that well informed consumers, able to identify the environmental consequences of their consumption and who express ethical concerns about these environment issues, demonstrate consumption patterns only marginally different from those who express little or no concern (Leonidou & Leonidou, 2011; Polonsky et al., 2012). The main problem discussed in this article is the type of strategy used to address this tension. The message to reduce consumption, to switch to more environmental alternatives and make sacrifices to save the environment, framed in a variety of ways, does not have a significant impact beyond a core of environmental radicals. The consensus view, found in a variety of disciplines, is that new ways have to be found to present this message in order to change existing consumers into ethical and/or environmental consumers. This article will challenge this view and suggest instead an alternative strategy, one designed to change consumer behaviour based on their existing cultural values, which oppose the message and values of environmental radicalism. Marketers have a number of powerful tools with which to achieve this, in particular those that link effectively to concepts from across the social sciences. This article will combine insights derived from these marketing and consumption concepts, with strategies from social campaigns to explain the potential impact of narrative mechanisms on practices of sustainably.

The argument will be exemplified with reference to the mobilisation of consumers through sustainability-related narratives. Defining and categorising such narratives presents an additional challenge. They are linguistic structures, but also stories, plots and the details that populate these stories. They are phrases, colloquialism-r ritualised language that encompass myths. They link individuals to communities, create social ties and are public and social even when used by solitary individuals. They fill out brands and they persuade us by appealing to our sense of identity, a sense they continually help to shape. This is why narratives are so key to understanding the engagement they make possible in building social campaigns, movements and the power of brands in identifying “who we are” and expressing this identity to others through products and services. Building on Merrill’s (2007) work, this paper will focus on the functions of narrative, identifying credible assumptions about how narratives help to make sense of, and navigate, patterns of social interaction, in particular to leverage ethical and environmental consumption.

NARRATIVES IN BRANDING AND ACTIVISM

Assessing the challenges of sustainability narratives for marketing and consumption research enables the source of these challenges to be re-examined. Key amongst these challenges is the convergence on a small number of strategies to promote sustainable consumption, based on emphasising the benefits of being conscientious consumers and the need to change consumerist values (see Holt 2012; Humphreys 2014). Understanding why this is unlikely to be a fruitful approach is at the very core of evaluating the role of marketing in promoting ethical and environmental business and consumption practices.

To address these challenges will require synthesising key concepts from marketing and consumption research with concepts from other disciplines, in particular those shown to be productive in representing the role of narratives in the process of engagement. These include insights from cultural branding (Barthes, 1973; Barthes, 1984; Holt, 2004), social movements (Buechler 2000), social campaigns (Bob 2005) and network mechanisms, such as assemblages (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987) and boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989).

Cultural branding provides an important component in evaluating sustainability narratives because it provides insight into these narratives and myths fostering cultural expression and how these are experienced by consumers through contact with brands. However, instead of examining sustainability brands, this paper will examine sustainability as a narrative, or series of narratives, circulated by brands, particularly through the logics of ambivalence (symbolic value) and difference (sign value) afforded by the most celebrated marques. Cultural branding also provides important elements for shaping an appropriate framework for sustainability as barriers/enablers and resistance/acquiescence to sustainable production and consumption can, in this way, be identified and analysed from the point of view of management and marketing concepts. The article will therefore evaluate some of the key elements associated will the cultural branding paradigm, in particular the concept of the iconic brand.

Among the huge variety of trademarks and product identifiers that exist on the brandscape are those of particular value as cultural icons. Such Iconic brands are among the most effective form of mythmaking and narrative sharing entities within consumer culture. This is because, as Douglas Holt evidences (Holt, 2004), iconic brands are among the artefacts most able to mediate the types of identity myth that consumers perform to express their cultural values and identify their position within (or against) specific communities. While Holt’s explanation for the emergence of iconic brands is less developed, a point that will be addressed shortly, the role he identifies as key to their status as iconic brands is extremely powerful; iconic brands enable new cultural content and meaning to emerge through collective experience and the performance of ritual. In this way, iconic brands afford activism, provide cultural hegemony and elicit collective action by mediating and translating identity narra-
tives into artefacts that in turn express symbolic value and sign value (see also Baudrillard, 1994).

Holt argues that an iconic brand becomes iconic by virtue of being able to tackle acute contradictions in society by performing identity myths that address the desires and anxieties such contradictions entail. This does not explain the mechanism through which it resolves variations of desire and anxiety collectively, nor the iconic status of the same brand (such as Coca Cola; Rolex etc.) in locations that face entirely different circumstances and anxieties. It is this heterogeneity that poses a challenge to Holt, but provides an opportunity for rethinking the role of narratives in building alliances.

Research indicates that sustainability narratives play a key role in building alliances (Crane, 1998); however, these relationships go beyond merely connecting individuals or organisations together. Compelling narratives, whether political, ideological, critical, or brand narratives draw together and influence a variety of heterogeneous elements, which collectively shape events, decisions, outcomes, beliefs and behaviour. Narratives help to assemble the different entities from different social worlds, as specific brands unite different social groups, technologies, organisations and other elements into a distinct community. The mechanism drawing the entities together is the narrative’s character as a boundary object, a concept explained by Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer in their seminal study of institutional ecologies of engagement (see Star & Griesemer, 1989). According to Star and Griesemer’s evaluation of the engagement process, a boundary object is an entity that inhabits multiple and overlapping social worlds. Such an entity has enough common structure to be shared across worlds but is also adaptable enough to co-ordinate activity among varied individuals in a specific world. In this way, a boundary object acts as a site on which recruitment to a specific network takes place. A boundary object is, in this regard, a medium for communication and co-operation. It is able to serve such a function by being both adaptable and able to maintain an identity, in the way that, for example, an architectural blueprint enables engineers, builders, planners, architects, estate agents, interior designers and house buyers to engage with each other as a reference point for mediation or translation across intersecting, but distinct, agendas.

In this way, an iconic brand derives its iconicity through its ability to function as a boundary object, i.e. by assigning need and utility to mere appendices to the communicative and mediatory role of the brand. This is also an important step in the argument in that it indicates that mediation and translation have hegemonic properties as they enrol (and exclude other) narratives that become agents of change or resistance, and spill over into other movements and cultural practices. This does not mean that a boundary object is neutral or is unable to shape engagement in a coercive way (see Huvila, 2011), but merely that it brings together different meanings from different social worlds for collaborative purposes in ways that retain multiplicity. It is this sense of an assemblage (see Deleuze & Parnet, 1987), one that is not premised on entities being reduced to a common unit (individual consumers, psychographic cohorts, etc.) or compelled to express value homogeneity (environmental activism, anti-consumerism, utilitarianism etc) that is both intuitive and makes wholesale collaboration viable. It is by explicitly retaining this diversity while building relevant alliances that makes treating brands that mobilise sustainability narratives as boundary objects a compelling alternative to the consensus view of sustainability promotion as an attempt to substitute one set of consumption values for another.

The way in which sustainability narratives become influential over consumption is through the mediation of social and cultural practices. Through these practices sustainability narratives contribute to collective perceptions of worth, meaning, relevance and importance. Sustainability narratives can be used successfully, then, if entrepreneurs and marketers can align branding strategies through these narratives in such a way as to provide cultural momentum, embodying sustainability discourse through influential and compelling narratives serving boundary objects. This is extended beyond identity projects relevant to commercial branding narratives (Holt 2002), turning the process inside out: the artefact no longer embodies the brand narrative but the brand narrative embodies and assembles the artefact. Coupled with this, the product artefact, with which to embody and mobilise the boundary object, must project a depth and coherence of meaning that resonates with cultural myths and values that present the desired consumption patterns. Sustainability narratives, unlike narratives that focus on identity differentiation, are only meaningful if they encompass a broad category of consumption values or one that can leverage broader change in production and resource use. A sustainability narrative can have little meaning as an isolated invitation to consume or desist from consuming. In the commercial world, for a promotional campaign to operate these powerful narratives it will generally need to forge a coalition sufficiently broad to give credibility to the product used to embody the narratives, for example with the ‘health food’ frame or the Fairtrade food sector. Applying specific sustainability narratives to foster an advantage to a product or service will thus require social campaigning as part of individual marketing campaigning with which to operationalise sufficiently influential narratives capable of translating and transforming cultural values into new (and improved) practices of consumption. In this way, products that cohere with sustainability narratives will benefit from spillovers when such narratives are invoked elsewhere and in related spheres (for example Fairtrade is both a brand and, at the same time, not a brand).

To promote sustainability through (social) entrepreneurship and marketing strategies requires social campaigning but of a type very different from campaigns as typically conceived (see Polonsky et al., 2012). Indeed, research suggests that many of the most ‘worthy’ and prominent campaigns to promote a cause are almost invariably unsuccessful in meeting even their most basic objectives such as raising awareness and encouraging participation (Bob, 2005). The campaigns that have been successful at raising awareness are likely to exhibit specific structural factors such as good standing, leadership, contacts, knowledge, material and organisational resources, or other characteristics such as targeting effective partnerships or framing their opposition very negatively (Bob, 2005: 20-51). Raising awareness is perhaps a necessary but not a sufficient condition of success. More importantly, irrespective of awareness-raising, most campaigns are entirely unable to produce the desired change beyond their hard-core support (Holt 2012) or influence policy decisions (Oegema & Klanderman, 1994). The reasons are of course complex and often dependent upon individual detail and conflicting interests, but an important factor is that such campaigns set out to substitute one set of behaviours and values with another set as though there were no cultural meaning derived from, and contributing to, these values and practices. Holt argues that to challenge materialism and consumerism by expecting consumers to transform their values to those outside modern capitalism (ethical values paradigm) would contradict the basis of modern consumption, and thus would not work (Holt, 2012: 238). Holt’s solutions are market based social movements (Holt, 2012) and a focus on improvements in ‘main street’ (Holt, 2014), both of which are pragmatic and coherent responses, but explain little about the mechanisms to be employed to foster sustainability narratives.
CONCLUSION

Boundary objects are neither more nor less complex than the narratives of which they are comprised. Nor are they more or less resonant than the brands that they are able to shape. This is because in contemporary consumer society, narratives, boundary objects and brands are so interdependent that it often impossible to draw them apart. Indeed, the argument presented in this article is that sometimes they may be functionally indistinguishable – a brand becomes a boundary object because it is able to encompass a specific narrative. Fairtrade, Oxfam and the G7 (or G8 or G20) are salient examples here, as they are all and none of these things at the same time, but each in a very different way. Drawing out the implications of this insight for marketing and consumption practice in developing and promoting ethical, environmental and sustainable consumer behaviour will form the basis of this conclusion.

The first implication is that marketing has a demonstrably powerful role in tackling ethical and environmental problems, not just in its social guise, but in its commercial settings too. Commercial consumption-based solutions to sustainability problems are plausible on condition that the sustainable options that firms supply are highly valued in themselves, able to express impressions and ideas in a meaningful way to a mass of consumers. Social entrepreneurs and social marketers have, though, in addition, the benefit of a potentially compelling narrative as part of their founding vision. Generic appeals to emotion, the application of an inappropriate commercial character and a narrow cultural appeal, unable to resonate with the values of those outside the very core constituency are barriers not always given sufficient attention by practitioners.

To address this task, a narrative’s flexibility can enable a heterogeneous group of ideologies, as manifested in the diverse perspectives of individual consumers, to each take ownership and perform the narrative in a way that expresses existing – but very different, indeed potentially opposing – cultural values, but builds connections with other perspectives. Some successful brands have been able to appeal across the value spectrum: the mini, Levis, Apple etc., but this should not be reduced to a sense of universal appeal, but rather considered due to their ability to appeal to very specific values, simultaneously and amenably.

In addition, irrespective of how unrelated different narratives might seem, people find ingenious ways to integrate narratives that help to build the relationships they desire. A careful evaluation of the narratives used in our everyday lives as consumers reveal that the package of narratives used are collectively contradictory. In the context of ethical and environmental narratives, we consume “carbon friendly” bio-fuel crops or soya bean products, even when aware that they contribute to rainforest destruction; or, purchase water-intensive Fairtrade organic fruit and vegetables that are imported huge distances by air transport from countries prone to drought; or, indeed, purchase prompt by licensing effects, effects observed when small ethical or environmental consumption compromises are rewarded with extravagant and unsustainable treats (Khan and Dhar 2006: 265).

Perhaps this is a challenge when narratives are performed to share values and are deemed relevant if they provide cultural expression while performing this function. As a narrative’s relevance resides in the collective nature of perception that it affords, the narratives themselves can be thought of as activists rather than their performers. This is especially the case when we ‘delegate’ ethical responsibility to the brands we consume, as with the purchase of diet foods. The consequence of this projection of agency to brands is that by (collectively) creating a wide variety of narratives to identify and address a collective and communicative problem, a boundary object is able to emerge. Through such a composite boundary object, the various narratives become interconnected and modified by encountering each other and by the work they are required to do as expressions of existing cultural values. Perhaps then the contradictions we exhibit collectively as unethical and environmentally damaging materialist consumers, is no more contradictory than the different uses made of a single narrative by the same individual over time that mixes sustainable and unsustainable consumer behaviour as a matter of course. Collectively realigning our consumption practices to eliminate the less ethical and environmentally damaging behaviour, on the basis of appropriate (and shared) narratives derived from existing values, is the real challenge to be tackled by both marketers and consumer researchers.

REFERENCES


Crane, Andrew and John Desmond (2002), Societal marketing and morality. European Journal of Marketing, 36(5-6), 548-569


Holt, Douglas B. (2012), Constructing Sustainable Consumption from Ethical Values to the Cultural Transformation of Unsustainable Markets. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 644(1), 236-255

Holt, Douglas B. (2014), Why the Sustainable Economy Movement Hasn’t Scaled: Toward a Strategy That Empowers Main Street. In J. Schor, & C. Thompson, (Eds.), Sustainable Lifestyles and the Quest for Plenitude: Yale University Press


Khan, Uzma and Ravi Dhar (2006), Licensing Effect in Consumer Choice Journal of Marketing Research 43(2) 259–266


