

Philip J. Kitchen

1. Introduction

One of the most appreciated and yet at times - most vilified - topics in the 21st century and especially as we enter the third decade, are ongoing marketing activity by organisations of all types, and that of sustainability in terms of businesses and national and global environments².

These can be seen from multitudinous perspectives and all cannot be discussed fully here except in summary form.

We will commence by considering marketing in the broadest sense. What is known about the topic? It is a vibrant active force in all markets and nations. It is widely embraced by businesses and other organisations and apparently deeply rooted, in fact, integral at all business levels. It is contemporaneous and deeply relevant. It is an artefact of the 20th century and despite kudos and criticisms, legitimized everywhere by widespread adoption, usage and publicity. This said, there is no generally extant acceptable theory of marketing available at this time. If such a theory existed, it would likely rest or rely on three foundation principles:

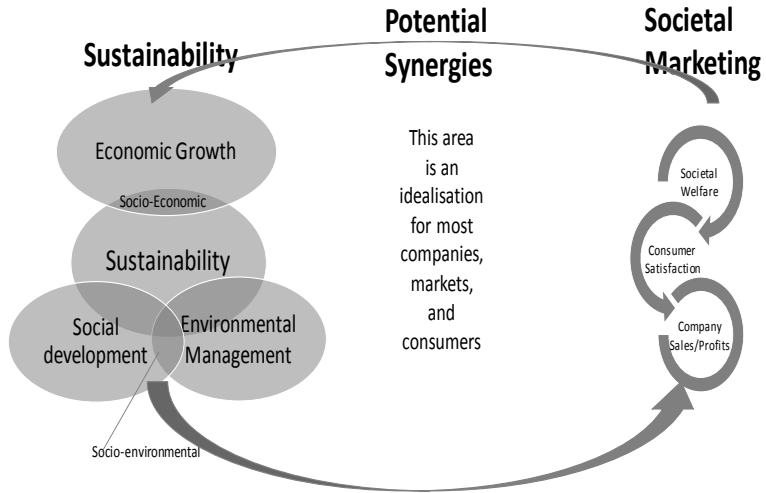
- A sound understanding of the dynamics of served markets
- Critical examination of opportunities for competitive advantage and implementation of marketing strategies
- Inside a marketplace/space that is global in form, structure and ubiquity

And the outcomes are market transactions for goods and services which *appear* to offer to satisfy some need. In an equally general sense, we see more and more announcements of business 'sustainability' which are frequently proclaimed via online and offline media spaces. A regularly quoted definition of sustainability is that it is: 'a way of utilising resources, which meets present generation needs *without compromising* the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment & Development, 1987). This raises a host of interesting questions such as: are businesses really the drivers of a sustainable society? And, should they be the drivers? Figure 1 below notes that synergies apparently accrue when societally oriented marketing and sustainability work together.

¹ This article is founded upon a keynote address presented at the Sinergie-SIMA Management Conference, Sapienza University of Rome, June 2019.

² At the time this paper was written, little did we know that in a matter of months the global economy, and each national economy would severely disrupted by the Coronavirus pandemic. It is still too soon to ascertain what the consequences are.

Fig. 1: Marketing, Sustainability, Synergy



Source: Author, adapted from multiple sources

Undoubtedly, sustainability is big news for the media industry. Just a brief look at recent financial news, illustrates the desire for, readability and relevance of sustainable issues. For example, speakers were confirmed recently for an Edie climate emergency seminar which brought together on 27th June 2019, leading experts from across the world to discuss the climate emergency and 2050 net-zero target at a webinar. At the same time, the UK government rashly rejected environmental targets for big-name brands where recommendations for mandatory carbon, waste and water targets to be applied to all large UK fashion businesses were rejected despite many requests for action by MP's. This is the same government that has dilly-dallied and shilly-shallied for three years over Brexit, but on something much more important and of far greater societal significance, acted with speed, decisiveness and alacrity *in the wrong direction*. Meanwhile, the G20 group of nations have spearheaded a new framework for combating marine plastic pollution (17 June 2019, Edie Newsroom) where environment ministers agreed to a new framework tackling increasing ocean waste (note, agreement to a new framework means the old one has/is not working and agreement doesn't necessarily match implementation or operationalisation). At the same time, large scale institutional investors grilled business multinationals such as BP, Amazon and Exxon Mobil as to their non-disclosure on environmental impacts. There are other trends of concern.

For example, sustainability could be transmogrifying into materiality. A recent report cited from Ford whose aim is 'go further' was cited in Etzion and Ferrero (2010):

‘... for the purpose of this ... sustainability ... report we consider material information to be that which is of greatest interest to, and which has the potential to affect the ‘perception of those stakeholders’ who wish to make informed decisions and judgements about the company’s commitment to environmental, social and economic progress’

An initial study by Nishant, Goh and Kitchen (2016) found the following:

‘The difficulty with materiality is that it may not take all stakeholders into consideration, but merely those likely to have the greatest organisational impact.’

Their study provided an initial understanding of the complexities and applicability of sustainability and materiality. From a theoretical standpoint, the study demonstrated the presence of materiality in the sustainability practices of Indian firms yet found sustainability practices adoption were focused mainly on resource efficiency. Water was the most critical resource for Indian firms. The literature is currently focussed upon energy and emissions i.e. not upon water and other resources. Further, product stewardship practices such as recycling, reuse, and remanufacturing were not very important for sampled firms, though these practices may well be elsewhere. Thus, as sustainability practices may have a strong local orientation, this article suggests that specific resource constraints and other contextual characteristics are salient in the embracing of sustainability by firms. Future research can provide more insights on how firms can benefit from focusing on practices they deem material.

In a report by Motorola, Greg Brown, Chairman and CEO, places emphasis on sustainability:

“We are proud to operate with integrity while delivering strong business results,” “As we look ahead, we will continue to focus on innovation, sustainability and service as we strive to deliver on our purpose: helping people be their best in the moments that matter”. (Motorola, Corporate Responsibility Report, 2018)

It is apparent there are very few, almost no, businesses and industries who have not declared themselves firm advocates of sustainability and some aspects of materiality. Just as, in another domain (of m^{arketing}), corporate social responsibility was proclaimed (and is proclaimed) as the friend of the consumer, environment and planet generally. But, we have yet to see a real change toward social responsibility across the board.

The above said, the stark reality for both marketing and sustainability is that brickbats, not bouquets, are needed. For example, the world is facing several major environmental disasters. The burning of the Amazon Rain Forest (August 2019), the rising presence of plastic waste in our oceans and now in tap water (UK, 2019), rising global temperatures, Greenland’s glacier death... come to mind with immediacy. For years, China - at a price of course - has conveniently disposed of half the world’s plastic

waste. By 2030, 111 million tonnes of plastic waste will have nowhere to go due to a Chinese import ban. Yet millions of products i.e. future waste are made from plastic - all of it non-biodegradable (Carrig, 2018). Can we continue with good old-fashioned marketing of plastic products and planet-warming consumption?

Amid the swirl of conjecture, the world is changing rapidly, perhaps too rapidly. It is just over a century and a half since the completion of the world's first industrial revolution in the old 'Great Britain'. Other countries have since industrialised - in fact most of the world is industrialised. The full costs of this to the environment have never been stated or analysed to any significant degree. Yet, the consequences of industrialisation could mean the end of civilisation as we know it. Further, Marketing has become the main connection between businesses and organisations of all types and sizes and customers and consumers where the latter are reminded *ad nauseum* that marketing is *in their interest*, seeks to *fulfil their needs*, and changes are invariably presented in a way that are *supposedly beneficial to target audiences*. *But, it may not be seen in these ways by everyone*. (Kitchen, 2003a, 2003b; 2013; 2019 italics added). Speaking as a marketer, there are misgivings about marketing. It is evident that many organisations (business or other) do not adopt a customer, consumer or even an environmental orientation. This is manifest in many ways. One example is the growing demise of customer service where there are:

'... difficulties in consumers being able to contact organisations save by labyrinthine methods; a [perceived] disinterest and disinclination by businesses to treat consumers with respect; products that do not deliver proclaimed benefits and perhaps are incapable of so doing; services that do not match expectations; and products that while they satisfy needs also damage consumers and the environment. And, despite the advent of customer services in many organisations, these - at times - seem purposely designed to keep customers away from influencing businesses and/or their marketing processes in any way as evidenced by the rising popularity of consumer watchdog programs' (cited in Kitchen and Sheth, 2016; also cited in Kitchen and Taylor, 2020).

Two case vignettes:

EpiPen

- In the USA, Mylan, amid a basketful purchase of medicines from Merck KgaA, acquired EpiPen - an auto-injector for food allergy and bee-sting emergencies. Marketing was used to boost sales to concerned parents of children with allergies. *Since acquisition (2007), EpiPen has been transformed from an ageing device to a brand blockbuster*. In the process, somehow wholesale prices have risen 700%. In the USA, a package of two EpiPens costs approximately \$600, compared to France where the same product sold by another company is a mere \$85.
- Naturally, the *marketing process* was accompanied by extensive government and departmental lobbying resulting in legislation favourable to Mylan, marketing public relations, sponsorship and arrangements with schools and theme parks such as Disney to stock the products.

- Prices accelerated in line with advertising expenditure which mushroomed from \$4.8 in 2011 to \$35.2m in 2014. In 2007, when Mylan bought the product, it had around \$200m in annual sales. In 2016 exceeded \$1billion, in 2018 \$3.6billion (Koons and Langreth, in Bloomberg (2016). Notably, there are mutterings and murmurings of discontent around *high prices and profiteering. Media attention remains high.* (Business Insider, 2019).

Meanwhile, Mylan depicts itself as a product champion of health care and corporate social responsibility via its corporate communications:

- At Mylan, we are committed to setting new standards in healthcare. Working together around the world to provide 7 billion people access to high quality medicine, we innovate to satisfy unmet needs; make reliability and service excellence a habit; do what's right, not what's easy; and impact the future through passionate global leadership.
- Mylan's vision for global social responsibility intrinsically woven within Mylan's commitment to achieve our mission and deliver better health for a better world. It is what drives our enduring passion to improve access and serve unmet needs across all geographies, while respecting the environment and positively impacting our stakeholders (Head of Global Sustainability, December 2018). (Source: Mylan. Com report, 2018). Many more examples are writ large in every major news media: internet, press, radio, television etc.

A UK example of marketing gone wrong and corporate communications unsullied character are presented by UK company BT's You View/Internet.

'In the UK BT (British Telecom) UK went to significant lengths to promote YouView which delivers television on demand to homes. BT introduced a new set top box which, according to the marketing, was one of the easiest ways to watch [loved] programs. BT's initial marketing outlay was in the order of £70million (Bulkley, 2012). Every on- and off-line media was deployed to persuade consumers to subscribe. But, having subscribed, there were significant technological problems. Often, the system simply did not work, or worked badly, leaving consumers to access online help facilities (often useless) or to communicate directly with BT or its affiliates via telecom personnel who seemed poorly qualified or simply not trained to deal with specific technical issues or associated complaints. (Kitchen, 2015, 127). BT problems escalate in terms of poor internet connectivity.

- Put simply, BT spent more time and money on corporate and marketing communications (i.e. £738m in terms of premier league football TV rights), and far less time and money in having sufficient engineers and qualified after sales personnel to support their customers and consumers in their legitimate requests for help, explanation, assistance or for problems to be put right expeditiously.

Yet, the corporate communication confidently proclaims in BT's Digital and Sustainability Report:

- Building better digital lives: our new strategy of digital impact and sustainability
- We are preparing our customers for the challenges and opportunities of tomorrow
- We're investing in digital skills to create the workforce of tomorrow

- Whilst protecting people's privacy...
- At the same time, we're reducing our emissions and helping our customers do the same.
- And, making sure we all play our part. (Source: BT Sustainability Report 2018)

Yet Mylan and BT are by no means unique or strange outliers in the domain of business and marketing. One could multiply examples exponentially. Instead, let us draw the strands together.

Admittedly Marketing is chequered by change and adaptation. As environmental conditions changed, so marketing underwent a series of orientations - or managerial ways of looking at and responding to market circumstances where earlier orientations were - apparently - replaced by newer more 'user friendly versions (see Table 1 below).

Tab. 1: Managerial/Marketing Orientations

1900s: discovery or elucidation of basic concepts and their exploration
1910s: conceptualisation, classification and definition of terms
1920s: integration on the basis of principles
1930s: development of specialisation and variation in theory
1940s: reappraisal in the light of new demands and a more scientific approach
1950s: reconceptualisation in the light of managerialism, social development and quantitative approaches
1960s: differentiation on bases such as managerialism, holism, environmentalism, systems, and internationalism
1970s: socialisation; the adaptation of marketing to social change
1980's: globalisation of markets, not apropos Levitt (1983)
1990's: IMC gains academic status, CRM and IMC (in various guises and names) gain dominance in promotions and marketing planning, relationship orientation. ICC gains momentum
1995-2001: the Dot-com bubble temporarily re-defined the future of marketing
1996: identification of viral marketing
2000s: Integrated marketing gains acceptance
2010>: B2B, B2C, C2C, social mobile marketing orientation
2015>: Organisationalism?
2019/2020>: Rising nationalism, protectionism, internet purchases nationalized
Placed in more standard chronology (see Bartels, 1974; Dawson, 1969; Keith, 1960; Kotler and Keller, 2006; Kitchen and Sheth, 2016; Kitchen, 2019) marketing history can be characterized as follows:
- Production orientation era
- Product orientation era
- Sales orientation era
- Market orientation era
- Customer orientation
- Relationship orientation
- Social/mobile marketing
orientation
- Organisationalism
- Discombobulation?

Sources: Kitchen, P.J. 2013; 2016, 2019.

Some businesses stayed with the older versions. Irrespective of these changes, they do not result in sustainability, satisfied customers or safe environments. It has moved from what American women did when shopping for food and other household goods to an essential philosophy and management practice for businesses to succeed in the medium to long term. It seems to be essential in underpinning and creating market exchanges and Kotler and Keller (2015) agree it has progressed through various stages or orientations (Kotler and Keller, 2015), and has now been proclaimed both a science and an art ... i.e. 'Marketing is the science and art of exploring, creating, and delivering value to satisfy the needs of a target market at a profit'. But does satisfying a target market's needs also protect and enhance the environment? For example, how does eating McDonalds' hamburgers or fries, or gulping Coca-Cola or Pepsi Cola satisfy real needs? How do these companies and their marketing contribute to environmental pollution? Please note this not about marketing or corporate communications rhetoric perse.

Marketing is now firmly entrenched in many countries and societies. It is contemporaneous and roughly in line with economic and social (but not) environmental development. It seems to be relevant to literally millions of businesses and 7.4 billion potential customers and is, in fact, a global phenomenon affecting global, multinational, international, and national firms, media, agencies and market research agencies that serve their needs. It is a powerful and dynamic force. It has some weaknesses and problems that are increasingly visible from an organisational and consumer perspective. It can even be seen as a nuisance, and in the communication domain as a form of leviathan. And, indeed there are many examples of failure. That said, there is no substitute for marketing at this time. Alternatives have been tried, tested, and failed. If we accept the need for democracy and its presumed value (even here there are misgivings), then to some degree, we accept the notion of markets. Marketers must have some degrees of freedom in which to market goods and services. But, the notion of a marketing orientation to seek to satisfy customers and their needs profitably is a very weak definition of marketing. Most marketing is today organisationally and competitively focused. That marketing is being done for 'us', for and in behalf of customers and consumers is more a form of rhetoric than some deep underlying business concept. The warts of marketing are plainly visible. Perhaps over time, these can be eradicated, removed, or ameliorated? Yet, for a short while now, marketing would appear to be the best approach underpinning transactions. However, there are some ridiculously poor examples. In the field of political marketing (a contradiction in terms), Barack Obama and Mitt Romney squandered almost 2 billion dollars to support their respective candidacies. Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton, the two most disliked front-runners of the democrats and republicans spent approximately the same. 4 billion dollars to re-elect or elect the president of one country, in itself a major polluter of the global environment Was it worth this expense? Could the dollars have been better spent elsewhere?

It is *sine qua non* that the environment, the global population of all living things including sentient homo sapiens, and the only habitable planet

we know of are too important to be managed by business and politicians. There are simply too many examples of business pollution, marketing inappropriateness and political failures and ineptitude. These unsafe hands are insufficient for the sustainability of our planet, the only known source of sentient life, and for managing processes that may indeed satisfy some needs, yet simultaneously damage our people and our world.

Just a few months ago, several major branded companies, all tub-thumping socially responsible businesses and supporters of a sustainable society came under the harsh spotlight of their own poor performance. Businesses such as General Motors, Huawei, Facebook, Air-France KLM, RWE, Deutsche Bank, NatWest, GlaxoSmithKline, TATA, Jaguar/Landrover, Ford, Debenhams, EDF, Goldman Sachs, Bayer, Sears, BT, Tesco, and Sainsbury were all performing poorly. Business 'leaders' seem less and less equipped for the business world of 2020 and beyond. Politicians almost everywhere are mistrusted, disliked and their clutching at the grasping hands of business do them no favours. It is at best, a fearful and unappreciated alliance. In all of this, the voice of customers, consumers, and citizens are scarcely heard, so long as the ringing of electronic cash registers continues. Does this matter? Is it important? What can be done?

Conclusion

This paper hopefully acts as a clarion call for more research and critical comment from others. Business folks and marketers cannot continually applaud a discipline that stands in need of necessary correction and significant amendments to entire productive processes, from conception to disposal of waste.

Marketing needs to be rethought, remolded, and renewed so its outputs do not further damage the environment. Current marketing orientation could easily be recast as organisationalism, that is an orientation that works more in favour of satisfying organisation rather than consumer needs. There is too much talk of corporate 'good news' of CSR, sustainability, and materialism, but these surely cannot be operationalized myopically in the current fragile environment. Given that marketing itself is a synthetic discipline which adopts, begs, steals, borrows from elsewhere. Can it not borrow and apply tools from environmental science? Certainly, marketing can be seen as schizophrenic or Janus-faced. But, it cannot face both ways simultaneously. And finally, are marketing or business or politics the 'sustainable hands' to protect the future of our planet, people, and environment? Table 2 is an unusual way to end a short article, but hopefully summarises the points made.

So much of marketers thoughts and attention are focussed upon marketing itself, branding, and business/organisations/corporations, the latter often standing hand-in-hand with politics and governments. I am not arguing that these be left aside. But surely, it is high time to consider the consequences of decisions made at these lower levels, upon the planet and its people. In Greenland, scientists have warned that extreme ice melt this summer threatens coastal communities across the world (CNBC, August 2019).

Fig. 2: Marketing and Sustainability

Philip J. Kitchen
Marketing and Sustainability
in the 21st Century



Source: Author

In some of China's smog-ridden industrialised cities, the major item for sale these days is fresh air (Daily Mail August 2019). And amid one of the hottest days in UK records, scores of people struggled for breath on an Essex beach (Independent Minds, August 2019). No cause had been identified at the time of writing. Global sustainability, human sustainability, life sustainability, these all need to be taken into consideration by marketers of today and tomorrow. It's not enough to prate of 'responsibility' or 'sustainability', but for all parties to work together and take determined urgent action.

References

- AMAZON RAINFOREST, August 2019, <https://www.cnet.com/how-to/the-amazon-rainforest-fires-are-still-burning-whats-happening-and-how-you-can-help/>, accessed August 26th 2019.
- BT PLC.com Report 2018, https://www.btplc.com/Digitalimpactandsustainability/Ourreport/Downloads/2019/BT_Digital_Impact_Sustainability_Report_2018_19.pdf, accessed/downloaded June 2019
- BUSINESS INSIDER (2016), <https://www.businessinsider.com/epipen-price-increases-about-500-percent-2016-8?r=US&IR=T>; accessed June 11 2019.
- CARRIG D. USA Today (22 June 2018), 'The US used to ship 4,000 recyclable containers a day to China. Where will the banned trash go now?', <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/06/21/china-ban-plastic-waste-recycling/721879002/> accessed 26/08/2019
- CNBC, August 2019, CNBC, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/01/extreme-ice-melt-in-greenland-threatens-coastal-communities-scientists-warn.html>, accessed August 26th 2019.
- DAILY MAIL August 2019.. 'Fresh Air for Sale', <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2592762/Chinas-latest-fad-breath-fresh-air-Oxygen-stations-set-country-city-dwellers-escape-smog.html>, accessed August 26th 2019.

- ETZION P., FERRARO J. (2010), "The Role of Analogy in the Institutionalization of Sustainability Reporting", *Organization Science*, vol. 21, n. 5, pp. 1092-1107.
- INDEPENDENT MINDS, August 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/frinton-esssex-beach-breathe-coghing-ambulance-police-a9078701.html>, accessed August 2019.
- KITCHEN P.J. (2003), "Managing Reputation on a Global Basis", *Competition Forum*, vol. 1, n. 1, pp. 573-587.
- KITCHEN P.J., SHETH J.G. (2016), "Brickbats or Bouquets for Marketing?", *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 50, n. 11, pp. 1906-1923.
- KITCHEN P.J. (2019), *From keynote addresses given at the Italian Institute of Management*, Sapienza University, Rome and University of Salford, July.
- KITCHEN P.J., TAYLOR R. (2020), "The Janus Face of Customer Service", *European Journal of Marketing*, forthcoming.
- KOTLER, P., KELLER, K.L. (2015), *Marketing Management*, 15th edition. London: Pearson.
- MOTOROLA, Corporate Responsibility Report, 2018; <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20190718005586/en/Innovation-Sustainability-Commitment-Service-Highlight-Motorola-Solutions>, accessed June 10th 2020.
- MYLAN.COM report (2018), <https://www.mylan.com/-/media/mylancom/files/gsr-pdfs/social-responsibility-pdf/2018-global-social-responsibility-report.pdf?la=en>, accessed 18th June 2019.
- NISHANT R., GOH M., KITCHEN P.J. (2016), "Sustainability and Differentiation: Understanding Materiality from the Context of Indian Firms", *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 69, n. 15, pp. 1892-1897.
- WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT & DEVELOPMENT (1987) Agenda for Sustainable Development, <https://www.are.admin.ch/are/en/home/sustainable-development/international-cooperation/2030agenda.html> accessed August 26th 2019. Note: this report is often quoted and usually alone, it is, however, 30+ years old.
- EDIE NEWSROOM, <https://www.edie.net/> accessed August 26th 2019.
- EDIE CLIMATE EMERGENCY WEBINAR, <https://www.edie.net/news/11/AVAILABLE-ON-DEMAND-edies-climate-emergency-QA-webinar/38602/> accessed June 2019.



Academic or professional position and contacts

sinergie
italian journal of management

ISSN 0393-5108
DOI 10.7433/s111.2020.03
pp. 21-30



Italian Society of
MANAGEMENT

Philip J. Kitchen
Professor of Marketing
ICN School of Business, Nancy - France
e-mail: philip.kitchen@icn-artem.com