

Eco-apparel marketing strategy: An innovative approach to overcome marketing barriers

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify the marketing barriers facing eco-apparel products and to devise a marketing strategy framework that could be employed to overcome these barriers in an effort to eventually make eco-apparel the preferred choice for the majority of apparel customers. The production of eco-apparel has a minimal negative effect on the natural environment in comparison to the production of conventional apparel. Eco-apparel can be designed, produced and distributed using green and/or organic methods (Klonsky & Tourte, 1998; Vardas, 2010). Despite the fact that the process of producing conventional clothing has a negative effect on health and the environment, eco-apparel products have not really made significant progress. The development and marketing of eco-products faces a number of barriers. There are however, very few research reports on these barriers (Berchicci & Bodewes, 2005; Ottman, Stafford & Hartman, 2006). Some researchers have attempted to describe general factors such as lack of design, limited information, restricted availability of products (Connell, 2010) and lack of trust as possible reasons for consumers not purchasing eco-apparel (Ottman, Stafford & Hartman, 2006) and other researchers have highlighted the environmental superiority of the products (Meffert & Kirchgeorg, 1998; Sonnenberg, Jacobs, & Momberg, 2014). Despite these efforts, eco-apparel has not become the mainstream apparel for the mass market; the market remains a niche market (Beard, 2008). This maybe an indication that there are still significant marketing barriers facing eco-apparel. The barriers have not been comprehensively identified and adequately studied. To identify and sufficiently address the marketing barriers, it is important to understand the key factors in apparel marketing and the performance of eco-apparel across those key factors. This can be achieved by understanding how people respond to eco-apparel and why? Research on the study of people's perceptions of eco-apparel products remains a fairly new area of enquiry. The qualitative research method such as interviews can help a researcher to get a deeper insight into the eco-apparel market and its consumers as it allows the researcher to ask questions such as "what", "how" and "why" rather than "how many", "how much" or frequency and times (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Neuman, 1997; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Thus the qualitative research method was applied to this study. The research used both primary and secondary data, and employed in-depth interviews. In line with guidelines on the scope of the research project in question, 12 apparel managers and 12 apparel consumers were interviewed. In addition, the research utilized 12 reports relevant to both eco-apparel and conventional apparel. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was employed along with the manual process to organize and analyze the data. The information from apparel managers and apparel consumers was triangulated. This triangulation of data helped in generating a better summarization of the data (Creswell, 2007) and making comparisons of findings. The overall research is underpinned by theory derived from strategic marketing. It involves market analysis and use of the Strategy Canvas and Four Actions Framework (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005) in formulating the appropriate marketing strategy framework. The theoretical contribution of this research is the development of a theoretical marketing model adapted from the Strategy Canvas and Four Actions Framework, and that will act as a marketing strategy framework ready for use as a guide in the development of appropriate marketing programs by eco-apparel marketing practitioners. The novelty of this marketing strategy framework is based specifically on the Four-Actions Framework's capacity to integrate elements of marketing strategy that have conventionally not been employed in the eco-apparel

industry. Additionally, as a practical contribution, this research is expected to help in boosting market demand for eco-apparel and in reducing the negative impact on the natural environment. To reduce the negative impact of conventional clothing on our environment, there is a dire need to increase the demand and consumption of eco-apparel. Apparel industry activities add considerably to the problem of global warming because the industry extensively uses fossil fuels to create energy for water heating and laundering (Allwood, Laursen, Rodríguez, & Bocken, 2006; de Z Gunathilaka & Gunewardena, 2014). Along with cotton; in the apparel industry, leather, fibers, fur, wool and dyes are a percentage of the crude materials utilized while processing style items. Animals are killed for fur, leather, bones, shell, and ivory (Stork & Obsever, 2012). Thus, the outcomes of this research will benefit society and our natural environment.

Keywords: marketing strategy; eco-apparel; sustainable development; strategy canvas; four-actions framework; qualitative study

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