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Gerard Costa

*Escuela Superior de Administración y Dirección de Empresas Barcelona*, [gerard.costa@esade.edu](mailto:gerard.costa@esade.edu)

Mar Vila

*Escuela Superior de Administración y Dirección de Empresas Barcelona*, [mar.vila@esade.edu](mailto:mar.vila@esade.edu)

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# SUSTAINABLE MARKETING

## AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF MARKETING MANAGERS IN INTERNATIONAL SPANISH HOTELS

GERARD COSTA

*(corresponding author)*

*Escuela Superior de Administración y Dirección de Empresas  
Barcelona, Spain*

*gerard.costa@esade.edu*

MAR VILA

*Escuela Superior de Administración y Dirección de Empresas  
Barcelona, Spain*

*mar.vila@esade.edu*

**Abstract.** Sustainable marketing is one of the main challenges facing firms over the next few years because of its potential impact on both the growth of firms and the image of business people, hence the need for executives to manage its implementation. This article explores how hotel marketing managers in Spain perceive and manage the role of marketing in improving sustainable business management and the changes needed to make sustainable marketing work. The study contributes twenty-four empirical cases to discover what corporate changes managers consider necessary in order to make the hotel industry sustainable. The main research contribution is an initial framework of four fields in which executives set company management priorities with a view towards implementing sustainable marketing.

**Keywords:** marketing managers; Spanish hotels; sustainable marketing

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development and the role of marketing within sustainability are perhaps the most significant and worrisome problems facing marketing in the years ahead (Schaefer, 2005). As Varey (2010) wittily remarked, this issue is the “elephant in the marketing living room.” This article explores how managers see and grapple with this beast. It touches on a series of complex sources such as pressure from stakeholders, managers’ values, and hopes that sustainability may give a firm a competitive advantage.

This is a relatively unexplored field where further empirical research is considered an imperative (Kotler, 2011); here there is a need to explore the views of managers in both the private and public sectors (Kang & James, 2007). We used the hotel industry as our universe because it is a field in which the environment and social settings play vital roles. The industry’s extreme dependence on environmental attractions and on low-paid workers means that the loss of either (or both) may threaten a hotel chain’s very survival (Kasim, 2006).

The research question of this article is how hotel marketing managers in Spain perceive and manage the role of marketing in improving sustainable business management. The research furthers knowledge on what hotel marketing managers think needs to be done in order to make the industry sustainable. We use managers’ perceptions rather than objective measures because the former are a fairer and more meaningful measure (Weick, 1979). Put another way, when managers see an issue as a real one, it has real-life consequences (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Thus, the aim is to grasp the vision that managers have of sustainable marketing and its scope and limitations.

Our findings on the hotel industry enable us to understand and explain how sustainable marketing strategies are being implemented by managers and why. We conclude that implementation reveals major contradictions between firms’ objectives, stakeholders’ expectations, and management behavior. The study findings reveal the scope for future research and should help both scholars and practitioners ensure that sustainable marketing is effectively implemented.

## SUSTAINABILITY

The concept of sustainability has existed since the thirteenth century. It was in the 1950s, however, when researchers began investi-

gating its implications for business. The first studies appeared in the 1970s and focused on whether companies should only concentrate on rewarding shareholders.

The definition of sustainability is complex; one of the most accepted versions is: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment, 1987). Sustainability leads to the concept of sustainable development, a three-dimensional concept capturing economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The present lack of sustainable development causes grave imbalances, environmental deterioration, a soaring world population, ever-scarcer natural resources, and growing social problems (Brown, 2008; Friedman, 2008). Sustainability is thus a multidimensional concept encompassing complementary meanings, with economic sustainability getting the most attention because it bears on the financial incentives needed to make corporate implementation of sustainability policies feasible (Bansal & Roth, 2000; Székely & Knirsch, 2005).

Business management research in relation to sustainability has produced a new model of development. This model is based on making profits while achieving social and environmental aims, thus implying a change in standards worldwide (Engardio, 2007). The importance of this new model is reflected in the numerous corporate reputation rankings that measure social and environmental performance.

## **SUSTAINABLE MARKETING**

The relationship between marketing and sustainability has been described as irreconcilable given that one concept involves selling more and the other means buying less (Jones, Clarke-Hill, Comfort, & Hillier, 2008). Marketing includes the ideas of constant growth and constantly expanding potential demand. Marketing, therefore, is seen as a suitable model for businesses in consumerist Western societies (Connolly & Prothero, 2003; Durning, 1992).

The cumulative effect has been a decline in the image of marketing (Johansson, 2006) and the activities of marketing professionals (Sheth & Sisodia, 2005), as well as negative consumer attitudes towards marketing (Palmer & Stull, 2000; Pereira Heath & Chatzidakis, 2012; Sheth & Sisodia, 2006). Marketing is criticized for encouraging excessive consumption and hedonism, and for promoting a culture of consumption where products and services are the basis of social identity over traditional values. In

short, research has produced a critical review of marketing and its role in society (Alvesson, 1994; Tadajewski & Brownlie, 2008), hence the urgency in developing marketing within the framework of sustainability.

Research in the marketing field has been dominated by the functionalist theoretical approach. The impact of marketing as a significant social institution has received much less attention (Gordon, Carrigan, & Hastings, 2011). Indeed, interest in sustainable development often arises only after companies have been named and shamed for pursuing socially harmful marketing activities (Desmond & Crane, 2004; Peattie & Peattie, 2009). Some researchers have begun exploring a sustainable marketing paradigm (Cooper, 2005; Peattie & Peattie, 2009) that breaks with the dominant positivist managerialist epistemology (Gordon et al., 2011).

## **IMPACT ON MARKETING MANAGERS**

Marketing professionals have responded to allegations that marketing is unsustainable by claiming that marketing activities are a response to the preferences of a free and sovereign consumer (Shankar, Whittaker, & Fitchett, 2006; O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2002). In other words, it is the consumer who can and must decide what is best.

The current response of marketing professionals is to adapt the process to new social realities and apply marketing mechanisms to address environmental and social problems (Peattie, 2001). The managers involved perceive this adaptation strategy as a key factor for organizational success; they monitor the immediate environment and formulate issue-based strategies. However, we also know that this approach is an uncertain one. It lacks a defined objective and is linked to whatever marketing professionals themselves create. As Varey remarked (2010: 112), "Marketing surely has a future—what will we have it be?"

Sustainable marketing is one of the possible answers. This concept first arose in the 1990s and it gives priority to sustainability over economic efficiency (Kilbourne & Beckmann, 1998; Peattie, 1999; Peattie & Charter, 2003), and analyzes an environment that includes producers, consumers, legislators, and other stakeholders.

The concept of sustainable marketing states that an organization must satisfy the needs of today's consumers without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). The concept incorporates the holistic concept of the triple bottom

line which integrates environmental, social, and economic concerns, placing equal emphasis on each. Social responsibility thus becomes intertwined in the process of marketing (Lazer, 1969) and the co-creation of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Sustainable marketing presupposes managing the tension between appropriate and inappropriate behavior, giving customers what they want while (for the first time) making value judgments about their desires (Achrol & Kotler, 2012). This tension is reflected in the new definition of marketing issued by the American Marketing Association in 2007, which enshrines for the very first time the idea of creating value for society (Wilkie & Moore, 2012).

Marketing professionals have been invited to venture outside their traditional framework and lead change by developing more sustainable products and services. Because they are the interface between organizations and customers, marketing managers (Sodhi, 2011) have been invited to: 1) build relationships with customers in order to glean insights on product processing, packaging, and distribution, 2) communicate these insights to the rest of the firm, and 3) tell stakeholders about the firm's sustainability practices.

Faced with changing expectations, it is important to grasp what is expected of marketing managers and what they can achieve. Business leaders are willing to incorporate societal expectations in their strategies but face major challenges in doing so (Bielak, Bonini, & Oppenheim, 2007). The barriers to developing these initiatives are often linked to their perception of reality (Little, 2005) and include: a lack of understanding of sustainability trends, considerable skepticism and high perceived risk, uncertainty about how to manage these activities, and the tendency to repeat familiar patterns of management rather than take the risk that comes with innovation.

The cognitive approach (Fineman & Clarke, 1996) as applied in numerous theoretical and empirical investigations (González-Benito & González-Benito, 2006; Marshall, Cordano, & Silverman, 2005; Vazquez Brust & Liston-Heyes, 2010) analyzes management decisions based on their perceptions of developments that affect companies. In this approach, it is important to understand how values, beliefs, attitudes, and subjective perceptions influence decisions (Bansal, 2003; Cordano & Frieze, 2000). There are examples of sustainable marketing applications which confirm that the more marketing managers see sustainability as an opportunity, the more likely a company is to voluntarily develop sustainability strategies (Sharma, Pablo, & Vredenburg, 1999).

## SUSTAINABLE MARKETING IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY

Sustainable marketing should have a special resonance in the hotel industry as it is a sector with significant impact on the environment and a strong international presence in poorer nations (Kirk, 1996; Webster, 2000). The hotel industry depends heavily not only on the physical environment but also on the social one (the local workforce, relations between international management and local staff, and contact between tourists and local citizens). The dependence is so great that the loss of these resources may jeopardize a firm's survival and security (González & León, 2001; Kasim, 2006).

Previous research in the hotel industry suggests that marketing professionals (mainly those in leading international brands) value sustainable marketing in terms of positioning, and as an approach that helps create competitive differentiation and builds trusting relationships with stakeholders (Kasim, 2006). Managers perceive that environmental and social responsibility can influence corporate reputation and competitive success (Banerjee, 1999; Menon & Menon, 1997; Miles & Covin, 2000). However, these professionals also see a high risk in using sustainability as a focus for differentiation because the concept has been distorted by inappropriate advertising (Clarke, 2002). Companies have tended to put their "sustainable" practices (e.g., water saving, hiring local workers) in their corporate communications but have failed to scrap some of their non-sustainable practices.

The limited research on hotel management has revealed an enormous amount of information about the environment (Costa, 1995) and a tendency to selectively ignore certain aspects of sustainability while focusing on others (O'Neill, Beauvais, & Scholl, 2004). Issues perceived as priorities are related to employees (O'Neill et al., 2004), such as recruitment, training, and motivation.

We found several proposals explaining the degree of adoption of pro-active strategies on sustainability. There is literature on the pressure exerted by stakeholders (Álvarez Gil, Burgos Jimenez, & Céspedes Lorente, 2001; Henriques & Sadosky, 1999; Sharma & Henriques, 2005), pro-activity in developing strategies (Aragón-Correa, 1998; Porter & Van der Linde, 1995; Rivera, 2002), institutional dynamics (Hoffman, 1999), managerial ethics (Prakash, 2001), and the organizational context (Moon, 2007). Each provides a partial picture and there is no exploratory study based on managerial perceptions. This lack of consistency requires research that draws on multiple theories and bodies of literature.

The research question of this article is how hotel marketing managers in Spain perceive and manage the role of marketing in improving sustainable business management. This question was drawn up in response to the lack of studies on managers' perceptions of sustainable marketing. We used managers' perceptions rather than objective measures of sustainability implementation because we are interested in what managers see as practical barriers to adopting sustainable marketing—something that involves rethinking the ends and means of marketing. We contribute to empirical knowledge by considering how far marketing managers in Spanish hotels have incorporated sustainable marketing strategies. In doing so, we also assess the main factors underlying their various approaches.

The research was carried out on Spanish hotel companies given that Spain is a world leader in the tourism industry, both in terms of the number of foreign tourists the country attracts and its long track record of providing quality tourism services abroad. The context is particularly interesting in the light of various public administration initiatives to improve performance in this key sector of the Spanish economy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach was used within the framework of an interpretive phenomenological paradigm (Patton, 2005). The case study is used for descriptive purposes (Yin, 2009) in which the cases are individual ones. The research problem was defined after conducting a bibliographic review. The research design was based on flexibility and triangulation criteria (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). The population was composed of the marketing managers and commercial directors of international Spanish hotel chains. The sample was selected using purposive sampling with snowball criteria (Patton, 2005) until the saturation criterion was met (Gummesson, 2000). We selected a sample of 24 managers from 20 international groups, with the units of analysis being the managers themselves. The sources of evidence were focused, in-depth, and semi-open interviews, with a pilot test and two rounds of interviews. The interviews were conducted and analyzed by various researchers and were recorded with the interviewees' consent. The data gathered was analyzed using ATLAS-ti software.

As the objective was to analyze the perceptions of managers, we used a qualitative methodology that enabled us to access the experiences of these subjects through their narratives. Qualitative methodologies are



suitable for exploring substantive issues which we know little about (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Although limitations must be accepted when attempting to generalize any findings, we assumed that the purpose was to create understanding from patterns, and so we sacrificed the quantitative approach used in testing theory-based hypotheses (Patton, 2005).

Various researchers in the field of tourism have made calls for a greater use of qualitative research (Riley & Love, 2000; Walle, 1997). Its use is gaining ground from traditional quantitative approaches (Slevitch, 2011). Qualitative research seeks deeper insight into managers' perceptions of professionals regarding specific problems, prioritizing the understanding of a particular phenomenon over the establishment of causal relationships.

The design of the research starts from a broad question as an initial proposition and so avoids hypotheses (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). The aim is to find a description of the processes, consequences, and strategies of how something develops (Flick, 2009) while taking into account the criteria of flexibility and triangulation (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). This requires measuring managers' perceptions because situations perceived as real by managers have consequences (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). The measurement of perceptions has been compared by researchers with objective measurements: Weick (1979) suggested that the analysis of perceptions can be as fair and meaningful as, or even more so than, objective measurements.

Evidence was gathered from focused and in-depth semi-open interviews (Patton, 2005) suggested by Yin (2009) in those management areas where respondents cannot easily explain the underlying reasons for their behavior. The questions sought to elicit managers' perceptions of the key areas in the implementation of sustainable marketing. Two interviews were conducted to verify the process, tabulation, and analysis of two researchers. Subsequent interviews—15 in January of 2013 and 9 in the second phase in March of 2013—were also conducted. All interviews were audio recorded with permission. Triangulation criteria were applied through interviews with hotel industry expert consultants and scholars. Transcription and analysis were performed in parallel to meet the flexibility criterion. Interviews were conducted at the headquarters of the hotel groups, or at the offices of ESADE in Barcelona and Madrid, and lasted between 50 and 80 minutes (refer to Table 1).

Data analysis using ATLAS.ti 7 software was performed using the steps suggested for qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, we validated the research design for external and security validity using the criteria of Yin (2009).

Interviewed	Position	Number of hotels in group	Years of experience in industry	CSR dept?
Manager 1	MARKETING	+100	12	YES
Manager 2	OPERATIONS	50-100	10	YES
Manager 3	OPERATIONS	+100	7	YES
Manager 4	OPERATIONS	+100	14	YES
Manager 5	MARKETING	0-25	11	NO, FROM HR
Manager 6	MARKETING	0-25	3	YES
Manager 7	OPERATIONS	0-25	6	No
Manager 8	MARKETING	+100	4	YES
Manager 9	OPERATIONS	+100	4	YES
Manager 10	MARKETING	+100	5	YES
Manager 11	MARKETING	0-25	11	YES
Manager 12	MARKETING	50-100	10	YES
Manager 13	OPERATIONS	+100	3	YES
Manager 14	OPERATIONS	0-25	0	NO
Manager 15	MARKETING	25-50	8	NO
Manager 16	OPERATIONS	0-25	5	NO
Manager 17	MARKETING	50-100	15	YES
Manager 18	MARKETING	+100	4	YES
Manager 19	MARKETING	50-100	14	YES
Manager 20	MARKETING	50-100	9	YES
Manager 21	OPERATIONS	+100	4	YES
Manager 22	OPERATIONS	25-50	5	NO
Manager 23	MARKETING	50-100	5	YES
Manager 24	OPERATIONS	50-100	9	YES
Consultant 1			21	
Consultant 2			18	
Consultant 3			32	
Academic 1			12	
Academic 2			22	
Academic 3			13	

TABLE 1: Respondents

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The main findings of this study come from the respondents' opinions on the perception of managers regarding the implementation of sustainable marketing, and are grouped into themes (refer to Table 2). The process of transcribing and coding the interviews revealed four large concerns as relevant to managers: individual managerial training, the definition of key stakeholders who determine implementation, reactive or pro-active attitudes towards implementation, and the department implementing sustainable marketing.

THEME	SUB-THEME	APPEARANCES/ INTERVIEWS
Individual training	Lack of specific training	92
	Uncertainty as to method of measuring results	77
	Distrust of externalities generated by marketing	59
	Confusion with own social and ethical thinking	68
Definition of stakeholders	Sustainable marketing seen as alternative following stakeholder pressure	118
	Consumers sensitized but do not see themselves causing harm	61
	Short-term results with internal collaborators	67
	Other less relevant and specific collaborators: marketing and society channels	41
Pro-active or reactive	Need for company leadership before the legal framework	75
	Reactive attitudes are safer	62
	Strategy attempting to expand sensitized market is risky	51
Function responsible for sustainable marketing	Viewed as part of corporate marketing	55

	Viewed as local development strategy within international marketing	51
	Doubts about location in product marketing	78

TABLE 2: Summary of findings

## INDIVIDUAL TRAINING

The insecurity of the manager is generally apparent, starting with the conceptual base of the *triple bottom line* as a tool for decision making. The underlying reasons are generally two-fold: managers perceive a lack of training during their general university studies or specific studies in marketing, and so feel professionally insecure tackling issues related to sustainability; they also perceive that although their function has a negative effect on the environment, such effects are either unquantifiable (with social effects being even less so) or not fairly compared with the positive effects.

The relationship managers have with sustainability is mediated by financial results, and these are based on current and past metrics; the other two indicators, which are soft, complementary, and attitudinal, are not employed for reporting results to a manager. Managers worry about how these three indicators can be incorporated into the operating accounts without contradictory and awkward effects. They believe it would be difficult to track the positive and negative externalities generated for society as well as the effects on the overall image of the company (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006).

All of this is a surprise ... I have been thinking about taking a course for a while now ... but what can I do as Director of Marketing? (D9)

We have organized a number of seminars, complete with consultants and advisors ... everyone talks about the triple bottom line like they were members of the family. But nobody can give a single example of what a hotel manager can do. Everyone says go ahead—but nobody knows where to go .... (D21)

Marketing managers focus on the development and launch of products and services, managing their communication, promotion, and prices, and finally (at the strategic level) identifying competitive advantages. Goals related to sustainability generally receive little attention and priority during these processes.

Insecurity frequently arises because these managers perceive that their own sensitivities may be mixed with issues related to sustainability, and their own personal behavior may be linked with their work goals. Some managers even feel guilty for defending sustainability to their colleagues. They fear that they may have to defend their own socially ethical thinking while implementing sustainable practices.

I said one day to the Managing Director that we already have a battery of indicators on sustainability ... since that day the MD calls me "the ecologist" ... in any event all of this is only for the report and accounts. (D3)

Some managers think about whether sustainability should be a positive force in their current organizations. Their concern for sustainability is projected to other activities that can be developed outside their jobs, such as working with a charity or developing social entrepreneurial projects. They only feel comfortable when working within professional collaborative projects with local organizations, such as through corporate volunteering.

I enjoy working and learning on these projects. I can see the usefulness and meet people who understand the issues. However, I cannot and will not do this sort of activity at work. (D17)

The conclusion is that managers are comfortable with sustainability issues that flow from the values of the organization, but are fearful that their own personal values will become involved.

## **THE DEFINITION OF STAKEHOLDERS**

The common perception is that companies are engaged in sustainability because of the demands of stakeholders (shareholders, domestic partners, mass media, or simply clients). Pressure from stakeholders is perceived as positive and generates a call for a market orientation strategy. The ability or willingness of companies to respond to this pressure is related to their strategic leadership style (pro-active or conservative), capacity for continuous innovation, and the size of the company.

Everyone talks about the same thing: change is happening to us, we are simply reacting to what happens .... I have not met a single visionary manager. (C2)

Our international nature enables us to detect what is important. Sustainability is reflected in some hotels. (D9)

The most frequently mentioned stakeholders are direct clients: there is a growing, but highly fragmented, segment of clients who are sensitive to sustainability issues. Managers recognize that they provide only limited sustainability information to clients (regarding recycling processes, behavior modification tips, corporate volunteering, and local social initiatives). This is because they have identified a contradiction in consumers: a growing awareness of sustainability but a refusal to identify their own actions as unsustainable. When managers are pro-active in delivering this type of information, they worry about it being seen as sufficient or credible, or whether clients will see the firm as acting in a cynical manner.

... the Germans, Dutch, and Norwegians ... are different .... They are the ones who pull you ... and ignore you if you don't follow them. (D8)

A second group of stakeholders are employees (differentiating employees from the country of origin and local employees from those nations where the hotels are located). Strong pressure is identified in the first group, which pushes for corporate social involvement programs in the countries where they operate. These programs, however, like most internal marketing policies, are difficult to use in terms of marketing and company positioning.

I see that companies are reluctant to show their human side—except with employees .... I'm only devoting time to volunteering schemes and workshops—all of which are aimed at the staff .... Somebody told me that the aim was achieved when you bring your children to these events. (C1)

Other stakeholders are mentioned much less frequently and given less relevance. Large travel agencies apply pressure for sustainable policies but the effect is diluted because the same agencies also turn the screws in every other area of performance (prices, flexibility, and new services), and so managers perceive sustainability as an indiscriminate, low-priority demand. Pressure from society is generally recognized as pressure from stakeholders such as the media, ranking companies, and regulatory agencies. Preventing any possible complaints or negative impacts arising from international activities by communicating various secondary attributes related to sustainability is therefore seen as the priority.

Talk to them about society and nobody listens. Talk about what they buy, and what they spend and they listen. (D16)

The conclusion in this section is a confirmation that pressure from stakeholders is a critical factor for corporate response to issues of sustainability (Hoffman & Ventresca, 2002). However, there are various hypotheses on relevance and trends.

## REACTIVE OR PRO-ACTIVE ATTITUDE

Managers perceive that it is the company that determines a pro-active or reactive stance, as well as the likelihood of adopting practices that comply with legislation and industry standards. When voluntary sustainable behavior takes place, it is usually due to some action anticipating the market that has been implemented by a director in the head office—or in the department of sustainability or corporate marketing.

Marketing professionals are more comfortable with reactive activities that respond to pressures or stakeholder interests. In such circumstances, the potential impact of their personal values is limited, and it is corporate values that shape action. Pro-active actions, such as communicating the harm of energy consumption, or favoring the hiring of local staff, are seen as risky. Managers also reject the possibility of expanding the market of conscientious consumers; they aim to offer only what each segment wants, or what each stakeholder is aware that it wants.

We are two different breeds, you see it in their eyes ... you are either on the CSR team ... yes, they sell, of course they sell ... but at another level ... or the accounts team ... the financial bottom line. (D22)

During the interview, the possibility of “demarketing” (dissuasion from using a product or service) as a competitive strategic option was raised. This was the most frequently rejected option. Proactivity was seen as an option for strengthening a well branded product in competitive terms; however, pro-active *demarketing* that proposed the reduced use of a product for environmental or social reasons was seen as frivolous, as well as damaging to turnover and profitability.

It simply seems crazy to me ... unthinkable ... but who knows? (D8)

De-what? How are we going to tell the client what he needs? (D5)

## THE ROLE RESPONSIBLE FOR SUSTAINABLE MARKETING

Several of the issues discussed in the categories above ended up generating reflections on what should be the role of marketing in the management of sustainable marketing. There were three broad positions.

Research now focuses not on whether marketing should be sustainable, but on who takes the bull by the horns in the organization ... who takes the lead. (A3)

The most common approach is to identify sustainable marketing with corporate marketing. This is because corporate marketing is under the control of the senior management team (who should be aware of the strategic priorities). In this way, sustainable marketing is identified as a process that is allied with the image of corporate brands rather than with day-to-day marketing activities, and as an activity that requires major efforts with corporate stakeholders such as investors, the media, and society in general.

Looking at what is senior management ... who wants to develop it ... I do not say it is bad, it's just the bank with "the most" or the hotel with "the best" ... but it won't help a client decide where to spend the summer. (D20)

The second option is to manage sustainable marketing from an international perspective. This suggestion arose from the experience of managing hotels overseas where certain minimums of sustainable marketing are standardized. It was stressed that international marketing departments tend to be very open and willing to standardize marketing management in each nation, and to adopt main international trends (with respect to consumers, competition, and shareholders).

Sustainability for marketing has a name: segmentation ... which means that with more than 100 hotels we need to differentiate by country, destination, and origin. (D4)

The option which generates most doubt is that of managing sustainable marketing from product marketing. Sustainable marketing is seen as risky, unjustified, and irrelevant for large markets, and as expensive and undemanded in the hotel sector. The connotations of leisure, hospitality, and personalized service make brand positioning based on sustainability difficult. Hospitality is perceived as something emotional and unconnected with the rational world of sustainability. Again, it is



argued that the detection of clients interested in sustainability should be made from corporate marketing and that new brands should be created for this niche.

Despite my many years of experience with three chains in five countries, I have yet to see a sustainable brand, a sustainable product line, or even a sustainable center .... We have to develop the way people are treated, the details, analyzing customers ... but I don't see the brand ... at least in the big players ... in these monsters. (D17)

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has answered the research question of the article—how hotel marketing managers in Spain perceive and manage the role of marketing in improving sustainable business management. This research contributes to the literature on the concept of sustainable marketing by boosting our knowledge of what managers understand by sustainable marketing and the changes they think are needed to implement it.

The contribution made by this research should be analyzed using the two-edged approach proposed by Kotler (2011). He considers it vital to research the changes needed to implement sustainable marketing. First, we find that managers' understanding of "sustainable marketing" focuses on company growth through sustainable products rather than on scrapping unsustainable ones. Second, we argue that our knowledge of marketing managers needs deepening if we are to help them make the necessary changes.

The qualitative research undertaken shows obvious contradictions in the reference framework. The first contradiction is the difficulty of implementing sustainable marketing against the background of present (unsustainable) consumption patterns (Connolly & Prothero, 2003; Fuller, 1999; Kilbourne & Beckmann, 1998). The second contradiction lies in the differing perceptions of the relative importance of adapting to 1) growing environmental awareness (which is seen as directly affecting the hotel industry) and 2) social awareness. The latter kind of awareness is a "triple bottom line" dimension which is much less apparent to managers in the hotel industry.

The analysis provides a hypothesis regarding the perception of four major and interdependent areas. The first covers the level of training needed to facilitate this adaptation and is a clear call for trainers and educational institutions. Marketing schools must ask themselves why their alumni have such a restricted vision of the environment in which

they operate, and how classical concepts such as the product life cycle can be updated to include much broader and subsequent phases such as recycling or management of local social impacts.

The second key area is the definition of stakeholders. Managers recognize the diversity of stakeholders, and it is the pressure from stakeholders that has generated a sustainable marketing strategic option. The most influential stakeholders in this respect have been clients and staff, with issues of social equity being raised because these international companies operate in poor nations that are attractive to tourists.

The third area reveals that managers believe that they are expected to react to events rather than show marketing leadership, or take any action to expand demand for sustainable products and services.

The fourth area shows that most managers do not see sustainability as a marketing priority, and that there are many doubts about basing a product strategy on sustainability.

In order to enhance a corporate culture focused on sustainability, recommendations for professionals center on the need to update their knowledge about how to lead the process through instrumental training and creating projects. Research suggests that sustainability, when practiced as an organizational culture, creates new opportunities for managers. The results depend on the ability to communicate corporate sustainability values to consumers as well as to stakeholders (Menon & Menon, 1997).

Finally, it is recognized that a major limitation of this study is its exploratory and qualitative nature—inasmuch as this creates a trade-off regarding the generalizability of the results. Our recommendations for further research are thus based on 1) applying this approach to other sectors and 2) deeper study of whether certain features (such as hotel size, age, manager gender) furnish new hypotheses. Although we now better understand how managers frame reality, quantitative research is needed to discover the underlying causal relationships.

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