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Reducing plastic bag consumption: A community approach to social marketing

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REDUCING PLASTIC BAG CONSUMPTION: A COMMUNITY APPROACH TO SOCIAL MARKETING

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Short Abstract

Traditionally, CSR discourse has focused on multinational corporations. However, the present work's starting point was the following question: can consumer-leaders and responsible SMEs help foster societal change toward sustainable consumption? By drawing on the literature about ethical consumption and community-based social marketing, we suggest community leaders and small organizations can play a major role in this process. Through the use of news articles, broadcasts, websites, and documentaries, we compiled the Modbury case. Modbury, an iconic 'plastic bag-free' English town, is used as an exemplar of how a consumer activist alongside small firms can change communities, and encourage environmentally-friendly consumer behavior.

Extended Abstract

Can consumer-leaders and responsible SMEs help foster societal change toward sustainable consumption? We address this question by drawing on the ethical consumption and community-based social marketing literature. This makes the present work innovative in that, to date, CSR discourse has focused primarily on multinational corporations.

The first stream of literature encompasses behavioral change, as well as the incentives and barriers affecting ethical and environment-friendly behavior. The literature suggests a bias toward research examining the rational aspects of individual behavior (Caruana 2007; Chatzidakis et al. 2007; Shaw and Shiu 2003; Sparks and Shepherd 1992), and fails to explain attitude-behavior gaps (Boulstridge and Carrigan 2000). Interpretive studies (Boulstridge and Carrigan 2000; McEachern et al. 2007) have problematized attitude-behavior gaps, but suggest that inconsistencies can be seen as coherent if we look at people's consumption as part of their overall life projects (Newholm 2005). However, such gaps still pose challenges to policy makers. To address this matter, Jackson (2005) looked at 'lock-in' issues, and suggested that attitude-behavior gaps emanate from factors such as restricted choice, inequality in access, institutional barriers, incentive structures, habits, social norms, as well as expectations based on prevailing cultural values. The author suggests that for change to occur we must unfreeze habits, and make common practices visible and discursively available. Jackson (2005) also proposes that behavioral lock-ins must be released through the creation of appropriate institutional structures and incentives, with appropriate access to pro-environmental choice, grass-root community initiatives, and exemplar practices and policies. Additionally, Verplanken and Wood (2006) suggest that inconsistency-reduction interventions entail 'downstream plus' approaches, in which information is provided at points in which habits are susceptible to change, and 'upstream'

approaches, in which critical features of the behavior performance environment are disrupted and re-created prior to the occurrence of the habitual behavior.

The second relevant stream of literature suggests that a social marketing approach can help SMEs and community leaders enable change toward environment-friendly behavior. Prochaska and DiClemente's (1983) Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change, which is widely used in social marketing, is a way to integrate stages of readiness to perform a behavior, processes of behavior change, self-efficacy, and decisional balances (the pros and cons of changing the behavior). The model's five stages of behavioral readiness are: pre-contemplation (consumers are still not thinking about changing behavior); contemplation (consumers are seriously considering change); preparation (consumers have tried to alter behavior, and are considering trying again); action (change has occurred); and maintenance (change has been maintained). Viewing behavioral change as a process allows us to see certain types of attitude-behavior discrepancies as tentative change by consumers. This also means that different stages of the process will require different interventions. Thus, successful interventions will require effective segmentation and targeting based on stages of readiness, and upstream and downstream interventions that are customized to each segment. Indeed, the stages of readiness can help reduce resistance and non-commitment, and increase participation and progress toward change (Prochaska, Prochaska and Levesque 2001) at a localized level. Additionally, McKenzie-Mohr's (1999) community-based social marketing provides practical guidelines for communities interested in advancing sustainable consumption. McKenzie-Mohr's (1999) framework tackles issues related to routines, habits, norms, barriers, and incentives, and comprises four key steps: identifying barriers to change (research); outlining a strategy that uses change tools (creation of commitment amongst members, implementation of behavioral prompts, development of new norms, communication of effective messages, creation of incentives, and making it convenient to act); piloting the strategy; and evaluating the outcomes. All these steps can be used to reduce behavioral inconsistencies, and to foster sustainable consumption.

The Modbury case was compiled using news articles, media broadcasts, websites, and the community's own documentaries, and illustrates the discussion above. Modbury, an English town in Devon, is the home town of BBC filmmaker Rebecca Hosking who, while filming in the Pacific Ocean, witnessed the marine pollution and wildlife devastation caused by plastic waste. This experience motivated her to try and ban plastic bags. In the initial stages of the campaign, the retailers of Modbury exhibited characteristics of the pre-contemplation stage in the Transtheoretical Model. At this point they believed that providing plastic bags was an essential part of customer service. Recognizing that information alone was unlikely to have the desired effect (Hastings 2007), Hosking organized an event to show the BBC film that she had made about the effect of plastic bags, and invited every trader in town to attend. Using downstream interventions (environmental education and information) to increase the self-efficacy of the traders (Verplanken and Wood 2006; McKenzie-Mohr 1999), Hosking enabled the organizations to enter the contemplation stage (Prochaska and DiClemente 1983). Achieving the commitment from traders to attend the film night was the first step. Commitment techniques have proven successful in galvanizing support from the retail sector towards sustainable behavior (Shipee and Gregory 1982), so Hosking capitalized on local relationships within the community, and used a direct appeal for behavioral change (McKenzie-Mohr 1999). A tipping point was reached when

nearly all traders were on board, and those who were less persuaded became reluctant to be left out as the only traders not willing to engage in the community's environmental campaign. This reflects Jackson's (2005) view that social norms reprimand or encourage certain behavioral choices among groups. If behavioral change was to take place, providing functional alternatives was essential, so Hosking gave traders the names of wholesalers who could supply sustainable bags and wrappers (Barkham 2007). Additionally, two thousand recycled cotton bags were commissioned by the local traders to sell at a non-profit price to customers (www.plasticbagfree.com). Transition was further helped by the upstream intervention provided by Plymouth and South West Co-operative (the local supermarket), who donated a Fairtrade reusable and environmentally-friendly bag to every household in Modbury, and this acted as a prompt to release behavioral 'lock-ins' (Jackson 2005). Modbury became the first European plastic bag-free town in April 2007 (Vidal 2007), and what began as a six-month trial became a permanent project; one that has reached maintenance stage (Prochaska and DiClemente 1983). Hosking and Modbury traders have been credited with starting this "small green revolution" in the UK (Vidal 2009, 9), which now includes major retailers such as Wal-Mart Asda. This highlights the relevance of consumer-leaders and small businesses in the sustainable consumption and CSR debate (Jamali et. al. 2009; Niehm et al. 2008). We suggest community leaders and small organizations can play a major role in enabling sustainable consumption, and that primary research in this area is warranted.

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