

As the world wakes up to the perils of excess consumption, is the Marketing discipline condemned to be principal villain?

A CERTAIN SHADE OF GREEN by Achim Schauerte

What exactly are the perils of excess consumption? The concept of excess or over-consumption basically puts population density in relation to per capita consumption. The so called ecological footprint of societies and nations does not so much depend on the number of people but rather on their lifestyle and in which way this lifestyle leaves it's mark on this planet.

And these marks are alarming indeed. Over-consumption is the main cause for global warming as consumption goes along with the combustion of energy (in form of fossil fuels). By including unecological production methods, the transport of materials and post-consumer waste we end up with a really terrifying balance sheet. At least since Al Gore telling us the ‚Inconvenient Truth‘ we should be aware of the perils of global warming and therefore excess-consumption.

The causes, and there is no way around it, are highly rooted in our western, consumeristic lifestyle of always more. This is personified by a super sized, almost caricature like figure of the fat American, which we are aware of at the latest since Morgan Spurlock's Supersize selftest.¹

Well Spurlock is himself an American and may be able to blame his own people. But before pointing the finger at other people I thought of doing a little selftest as well. I wanted to know how much of the Earth's resources my own lifestyle does require.² The result was surprisingly shocking. Although I did not thought of myself living a very ecology-minded

¹ According to different sources, the United States with a population of around 300 million people (or around 5% of the world's population, consume around 25% of the worlds resources and produce around 25% of the world's CO₂

² According to the website www.myfootprint.org the ecological footprint is defines as: The Ecological Footprint is a complex sustainability indicator that answers a simple question: How much of the Earth's resources does your lifestyle require? Using existing, official statistics that quantify the resources people consume and the waste they generate, Redefining Progress translates this consumption and waste flow data into a measurement of the biologically productive area required to sustain that flow.

lifestyle, I wasn't aware of already being one of the villains. According to the website my own footprint is 7.5 global hectares, meaning that if all people on earth lived this way, we would need 4.2 planets to provide the needed resources.

The perils of excess-consumption are undeniable. But is Marketing really to blame for all this? (Which would make most of us guilty not only as consumers but as professionals as well.) The supporters of the above question base their argumentation on the following chain of causation: Marketing (often personified and specified by the Advertising industry) is responsible for making people always desiring and buying more stuff of what they don't really need, which leads to more consumption, which leads to more pollution (as seen above), which leads to more natural disasters and finally to the end of the world.

Of course the perils of consumerism are highly fueled by the Marketing discipline whose main imperative is to make people buy more stuff. But as a Marketing practitioner who would like to sleep well without waking up drenched in sweat every night from now on, I feel the urge of defending our discipline here. The supporters of the above question disregard two demanding forces that the Marketing discipline constantly has to handle.

On the one side, we have the force of the financial market: the Principal villain, I mean like the really bad guy in the movies, if you want to use this picture, is rather capitalism and the whole financial shareholder value system (with value being solely defined as financial value). You could also easily blame the Finance department for all this, but as Marketing is the most visible discipline, it is the one at the front. And in secret Marketing, being the villain's right hand, always aspired to be the principal. So it is no wonder that Marketing is in the dock here. The financial system however is always demanding to get more for less. More profit for less investments as the ROI becomes the key metric for almost all corporate decisions. This often leads to unethical practices.

On the other side, the force of the consumer also demands more for less. Although most consumers like to think of themselves being immune against Marketing, they nevertheless like to blame Marketing to manipulate them into buying. I personally believe in the maturity of the consumer, especially today with so much information at hand. The website www.climatecounts.org for example evaluates corporations' 'greenness' by measuring their climate footprint, their impact on global warming, their policy stance and report

mentality. People nowadays have the means to inform themselves and to act accordingly but are not necessarily willing or able to pay more for sustainable products.³

Marketing has to meet both, shareholder and consumer demands. And now as the world wakes up to the perils of excess consumption, the Marketing discipline is faced with another challenge - the ecological footprint on the environment.

But how exactly can the Marketing discipline's function be defined? In a Marketing lecture I once heard a really tight definition of the discipline's function: „Marketing is to create the optimum environment in which profitable sales can take place.“ I mean, think about it, it's true. That is basically what Marketing is all about. We can't deny the fact that every business is about selling products and to do so with a profit. The question we need to ask is how. How do we define the optimum environment? Is it just about optimized distribution levels? Or pricing strategies? The optimum environment first of all should be a healthy one. The optimum environment that Marketing can create, needs to be an environment that „meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future generations to meet their own needs.“⁴

It is the challenge of successful Marketing to create a business environment that goes beyond the pure black and red figures on a balance sheet. The Marketing colour of the future has this certain shade of green, that combines economical as well as ecological success.

There are already brands that have shown that this balancing act is possible. method is just one example, but a very good one as the brand was built from the core on the idea of sustainability. I know that method is not confronted with shareholder interests yet. But it demonstrates that profit and environmental sustainability can coexist. While method products are completely made from eco-friendly and biodegradable⁵ ingredients they also

³ According to a recent Ernst&Young survey about LOHAS, 36.8% of the respondents were willing to pay a >20% price increase for ecological products.

⁴ This is the definition of ‚sustainability‘ first published in 1987 by a landmark UN report

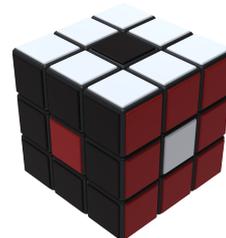
⁵ some of them are 100% PCR (post-consumer recycled), meaning that the plastic in the bottle has come from bottles which have been recycled before

managed to become the seventh fastest growing brand in America (by Inc Magazine) in 2006, predicting net revenues of well above \$100m in 2007.⁶

It is possible to come up with Marketing ideas that are good for business and good for the environment.⁷ What method managed by creating it's business environment was to exactly meet this certain shade of green, being green to the mainstream without people having to sacrifice too much. In this role, Marketing can not only be not the principal villain, it can be the hero discipline driving the whole business forward towards a better world.

But to put the whole responsibility into Marketing hands contradicts with most peoples notion of personally being immune against Marketing activities. The issue is too big to be originated nor to be solved by one discipline. It is our interest as consumers to consume more consciously. It is our duty as marketing practitioners to find creative solutions to this challenging task to provide offerings that meet consumer demand, economical and environmental standards. We should not procrastinate. We should act now. It is this certain shade of green that makes life liveable.

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⁶ See method case study in Contagious magazine thirteen, Q4/07, pages 48-57

⁷ See also The Green Marketing Manifesto by John Grant