

ARTICLE REVIEW

The Elusive Green Consumer

Authors: Katherine White, David J. Hardisty, and Rishad Habib
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OVERVIEW

Going green and sustainable has been a frustrating paradox to companies for decades. Consumers are often considered as the biggest hurdle to companies when going green and sustainable. Most consumers claim to be eco-friendly, but in actual fact their green consumption patterns are constrained by other priorities in life, reflecting an intention-action gap.

This article, “The Elusive Green Consumer” by White, K., Hardisty, D. J., & Habib, R. (2019) inspires readers of the Harvard Business Review with a comprehensive insight into green consumption and sustainable behavior throughout its 17 pages. The authors present insights gained from experiments and research reviews in marketing, economics, and psychology over several years. The three authors of this article are Katherine White, David J. Hardisty, Rishad

Habib. Katherine White is a professor and academic director of the Dhillon Centre for Business Ethics at the University of British Columbia’s Sauder School of Business, Canada. She is a keen researcher, having conducted over 20 major funded research projects in 15 years, and a distinguished expert in the areas of consumer insight, prosocial consumption, and sustainability. David J. Hardisty is an assistant professor, division chair of the Marketing and Behavioral Science Division, and a founding member of the center for decision insights for Business and Society at the University of British Columbia’s Sauder School of Business, Canada. His research interests include consumer behavior, sustainability, and decision making. Rishad Habib is a Ph.D. candidate in the Marketing and Behavioral Science Division at the University of British Columbia’s Sauder School of Business, Canada. Her research

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interests focus on prosocial behavior. As suggested by the title and subheadings, green consumers are difficult to find despite most consumers claiming to be sustainably minded individuals who want to purchase sustainable products. Two key purposes of the article are (a) to say that the elusiveness of the green consumer can be reduced or eliminated, and (b) to offer companies five routes to eliminate the phenomenon of the elusive green consumer. These routes are identified as (1) using social influence, (2) shaping good habits, (3) leveraging the domino effect, (4) deciding whether to talk to the heart or the brain, and (5) favoring experiences over ownership.

REVIEW

The five routes to real green consumption are clearly and effectively presented focusing on each route individually.

The first route – “use social influence”. The authors underline the vital role of social norms in shaping the acceptable standard of the behavior of social groups. To suggest the use of social influence, the authors cite real examples and concrete behavior, for example, grasscycling in a town, which is combined with evidence from their own experiment, “Your neighbors are grasscycling. You can too”. The authors also suggest other ways to increase the impact of social influence, one is to display it publicly, making people’s commitments to eco-friendly

behavior public, e.g. wearing a pin, or displaying a car window sticker, e.g. “I Turn My Engine Off...” (p.128).

The second route – “shape good habits”. The authors wisely state that to shape good habits simply begins with breaking bad habits and encouraging good ones (p.129). The most effective approach suggested by the authors is to make sustainable behavior the default option. This includes taking green options, using prompts and feedback to create positive habits among consumers, using incentives appropriately, and introducing sustainable behaviors during major consumer life changes.

The third route – “leverage the domino effect”. Another convincing point the authors bring to readers is how to create positive spillover and avoid negative spillover. People like to be consistent, if consumers adopt one sustainable behavior, they are likely to make other positive changes in the future as well. Therefore, companies should make the first sustainable action particularly effortful in the perspective of consumers, encourage meaningful commitments to behavior change, and encourage consumers to signal that they are “good people” with an initial token act.

The fourth route – “decide whether to talk to the heart or the brain”. To grab the reader’s attention, the authors suggest companies to tap into both emotional and rational appeals - feelings of hope and the pride of consumers, to slightly activate their emotional resonance; loss-framed messages should be

created instead of gain-framed messages, providing concrete evidence and referencing local impacts.

The fifth route – “favor experiences over ownership”. The authors suggest companies to consider business models that offer experiences as an alternative to material goods, or in other words **“give stories, not stuff”**. Moreover, companies should contemplate the various repurpose options available for disposing of their products.

To this end, what is remarkable about this article is the insights offered, particularly regarding the authors’ professionalism and expertise, which make the article unique and able to keep readers interested in such a theoretical article until the end. Moreover, the information is thought-provoking and worth a review.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the authors of this article recommend that companies should understand the insights of their consumers, along with the drawbacks and benefits to realizing sustainable consumer behavior changes, finding a way to maximize their sustainability and strategic goals accordingly.

Further research is highly recommended by the authors in the article. This thought-provoking article is not only suitable for business companies targeting the nurture of sustainable consumption in their customers, but also environmental policy makers,

business leaders, researchers, and members of the general public who are interested in gaining a better understanding of green consumption and sustainable consumer behavior.