



Journal of Consumer Marketing

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Marylyn Carrigan, Ahmad Attalla, (2001) "The myth of the ethical consumer – do ethics matter in purchase behaviour?", Journal of Consumer Marketing, Vol. 18 Issue: 7, pp.560-578, <https://doi.org/10.1108/07363760110410263>

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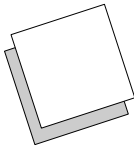
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The myth of the ethical consumer – do ethics matter in purchase behaviour?

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Keywords *Marketing, Ethics, Consumer behaviour, Social responsibility*

Abstract *Marketing ethics and social responsibility are inherently controversial, and years of research continue to present conflicts and challenges for marketers on the value of a socially responsible approach to marketing activities. This article examines whether or not consumers care about ethical behaviour, and investigates the effect of good and bad ethical conduct on consumer purchase behaviour. Through focus group discussions it becomes clear that although we are more sophisticated as consumers today, this does not necessarily translate into behaviour which favours ethical companies and punishes unethical firms. The article concludes by some thoughts on how marketers might encourage consumers to engage in positive purchase behaviour in favour of ethical marketing.*

Controversial issues

Issues surrounding marketing ethics and social responsibility are inherently controversial, and years of research continue to present scholars and practitioners with conflicting and challenging views on the value of a socially responsible approach to marketing activities (Laczniak and Murphy, 1993; Smith and Quelch, 1996). An area that causes particular dispute is the question of the effect of ethical/unethical marketing activity on the purchase behaviour of consumers. One would like to think that being a “good company” would attract consumers to your products, while unethical behaviour would see customers boycotting the products of the offender. Unfortunately, it is neither as simple nor as straightforward. Indeed there are reasons to believe that there may be very little commercial reward in terms of consumer purchasing to be gained by behaving as an ethical marketer. This paper will examine whether consumers do care about marketing ethics, first, by considering the research to date in societal marketing, and in relation to consumer attitudes and ethical purchase behaviour. This will be followed by evidence from focus group discussions conducted with a group of consumers to elicit their thoughts and opinions on the subject of ethical and unethical marketing behaviour. Finally, the authors offer some thoughts on how marketers might engage consumers in favouring ethical behaviour, while encouraging them to translate this into positive purchase behaviour.

Social responsibility in marketing

The study of marketing ethics evolved in response to what some would term the “smugness” of marketers who believed that their actions were inevitably in the best interest of the consumer. Theoretically, in the exchange process

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Social responsibility in marketing

marketers made a reasonable profit, consumers got the product they desired and everyone was happy. This simplistic notion has been challenged since the 1960s, with initially what were lone uncoordinated voices such as Vance Packard and Ralph Nader criticising the power imbalance that existed between marketers and consumers. Sheth *et al.* (1988) point out that until the 1960s marketers either displayed disinterest in issues related to their social responsibilities or deliberately ignored them. But the higher profile of consumer activists during this decade served to encourage a more aggressive stance by some consumers against the shortcomings of marketing tactics. Today there is a more concerted attack from well-organised activists/lobbyists in the form of protest groups such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth or the UK Consumers Association. The Internet has opened up a route for international groups of consumers and interested bodies to co-ordinate their activity globally, and this can be seen in Web sites such as www.saigon.com/nike, the homepage of the Boycott Nike campaign, or www.mcspotlight.org the homepage of the McDonalds boycott. In response, large organisations that had previously believed themselves immune from such activity find themselves now having to defend themselves against their global critics on their own company Web sites.

Social responsibility in marketing covers a diverse range of issues such as consumerism, environmentalism, regulation, political and social marketing. Given the tremendous responsibility marketing has in gathering and transforming resources into products, it is inevitable that there is disagreement over how that is achieved (Sheth *et al.*, 1988). According to Fineman (1999), marketers such as Beardshaw and Palfreman (1990) present marketing as an “ethically neutral system or management tool serving an unequivocal market good”. Apart from the occasional lapse into guns and pornography, marketing serves society’s needs with few ethical strings attached. However, others Fineman (1999) argues, suggest that marketing is more profoundly value laden (Smith, 1995; Lacznia, 1993), and manipulate the consumer in anything but an innocent way. Fineman (1999) states that the act of purchase and exchange is what interests marketers; it is an end in itself, remote from its “relationship to others’ interests or concerns – like privacy, pollution or resource scarcity”. Thus marketing becomes unhinged from “its imperial position in contributing to the apparent good life” and becomes guilty of contributing to the destructive and wasteful side of consumerist society (Fineman, 1999). This conflict within marketing has given rise to scholarly debate surrounding societal marketing and marketing ethics, and the rise of the activist school of marketing, representing empirical research and conceptual thinking related to societal marketing issues, in particular consumer welfare and consumer satisfaction.

Important issue

Kotler (1972) was a key founder of the societal marketing movement, who recognised that what consumers’ desire may not necessarily be good for them (e.g. tobacco), and although marketers may create a happy customer in the short term, in the long run both consumer and society may suffer as a direct result of the marketer’s actions in “satisfying” the consumer. In later years a range of scholars have examined various aspects of social responsibility and societal marketing (e.g. Hunt and Chonko, 1984; Robin and Reidenbach, 1987; Garrett, 1987; Lacznia and Murphy, 1993; Murphy, 1998; Hunt and Vitell, 1992; Smith 1995). Evidently many marketers consider social responsibility and societal marketing to be an important issue within the marketing field, but how does the actual consumer view these matters?

No definitive answer

The “ethics era”

Despite the work in the field over the last 30 to 40 years, there is still no definitive answer to the question of what exactly is the social responsibility of marketing. One of the reasons for this may lie in the difficulty of deciding which stakeholder interests should take priority, and who should make the final decision if conflict exists between those stakeholder interests. The current debate over pharmaceutical drug pricing has engaged national government and drug marketers in litigation in the South African courts (Haddow, 2001; BBC, 2001). Arguments are being made by governments, and organisations such as Oxfam and Médecin Sans Frontières on ethical grounds to allow cheaper access for consumers of drugs such as AZT; pharmaceutical firms defend their pricing policies based on the consideration of other stakeholders such as shareholders, employees and the wider community who can only benefit from new product developments if high economic returns are made from existing drugs. How do we decide who is the “most important” stakeholder in a situation such as this? The stakeholder aspect of societal marketing is a complicating factor for those trying to achieve clear ethical judgements. Often it is difficult to make a consistent ethical judgement that achieves equal “good” or avoids harming all stakeholder interests. In his recent paper Gaski (1999) questions the validity of marketing ethics, and analyses its contribution to the marketing field. Yet, even after a cynical debate on what marketing ethics has to offer, Gaski (1999) contends that there remains an imperative for marketers to continue to seek to act with social responsibility, for “without doubt, the ethics of one day may be the law of the next”.

Establishment of guidelines

Rather than be defeated by the continued lack of answers to the many questions which continue to be posed by the challenges of social responsibility, there are many marketers who seek to establish acceptable ethical guidelines and practice, and disseminate that within the industry (Smith, 1995; Laczniak, 1993; Hunt and Vitell, 1992). Legislation has played a part in raising consumer expectations of marketing behaviour, and regulation has also helped move us from the “*caveat emptor*” position of the 1960s to a more socially responsible era in marketing (Smith, 1995). There are signs that ethics are no longer languishing on the fringes of marketing activity. In the UK advertisers and print media have had to face responsibility for their role in promoting “glamorous” anorexic body images (e.g. the Accurist “put some weight on” campaign; UK government anti-drug advertisements); food manufacturers and marketers have had to defend and amend the nutritional content of their products (e.g. McDonald’s, Sunny Delight); cigarette firms have had to admit the carcinogenic qualities of their products (e.g. Phillip Morris). Scholarly journals such as the *Journal of Business Ethics and Marketing and Public Policy* are dedicated to disseminating research on the subject of social responsibility in marketing; universities are developing courses in societal marketing and ethics (e.g. London Business School; Colorado State’s Online Business Ethics Certificate Program, www.e-business.com). Most major multinational firms have published codes of conduct to demonstrate their commitment to better business behaviour (e.g. Levi Strauss, The Body Shop), as have professional marketing organisations such as the Market Research Society or the American Marketing Association. Globally, there have been hundreds of organisations and institutes established to research and promote ethical business behaviour (e.g. European Business Ethics Network, Hong Kong Ethics Development Centre), and marketing ethics/societal marketing are key tracks at marketing conferences, as well as being priority topics for

Buyer side under-researched

research. For the marketing profession it is clear that social responsibility in marketing has moved to centre stage as marketing moves into the new millennium. Laczniak (1993) has argued that as the field of marketing develops a stronger ethical profile, academically and professionally, marketers are finding it harder to ignore the “ethics gap” between what society expects and what marketing professionals are delivering. However, does society expect such behaviour, or at least if it does, will it actually reward marketers for their ethical behaviour by buying their products, and boycotting those of unethical firms? Given that this flurry of ethical concern is driven in some way by the belief that consumers will be attracted to socially responsible firms, do we have enough evidence to support that belief?

Consumer response to the ethics era

Despite the amount of attention given to marketing ethics in recent years, the buyer side of the exchange process remains under-researched (Hunt and Vitell, 1992). Although consumers are key stakeholders in the marketing exchange process, there has been little research attention focused on understanding the ethics of consumers, and the buyer behaviour attached to them (Hunt and Vitell, 1992; Folkes and Kamins, 1999). Smith (1995) argues that we are now living in the “ethics era”, whereby society’s expectations of marketers have changed and we face challenges to basic marketing assumptions.

Consumer sophistication

According to some marketing scholars, this is in part driven by the fact that consumers are better informed, more educated and awareness is greater of consumer rights and product requirements at least in Western society (Hirschman, 1980; Barnes and McTavish, 1983). However, possessing “consumer sophistication” is no guarantee that consumers actually participate in wise or ethical buying practices (Titus and Bradford, 1996). There is a difference between sophisticated consumer characteristics and sophisticated consumer behaviour (Titus and Bradford, 1996), a distinction not always recognised in the marketing ethics literature. It is not enough to possess the prerequisite knowledge and ability to make efficient consumer decisions, one must also act according to that knowledge. Sproles *et al.* (1978) argued that efficient decision making requires consumers to be fully informed; are today’s consumers fully informed about the ethical behaviour of marketers, and does it translate into efficient ethical purchasing? There are those committed ethical consumers who do seek out environmentally-friendly products, and boycott those firms perceived as being unethical. For them, information guides ethical purchasing behaviour. Other consumers possess the same amount of information in terms of ethical and unethical marketing conduct, but this does not lead them to boycott offenders, nor reward ethical firms.

Ethical manner

Marketers are encouraged to behave in an ethical manner because information about a firm’s ethical behaviours is thought to influence product sales and consumers’ image of the company (Mascarenhas, 1995). Although it seems obvious that consumers hold more positive attitudes towards companies that behave than companies which behave unethically, this information may be combined in complex ways (Folkes and Kamins, 1999). According to research, information about ethical and unethical actions has an asymmetrical influence on attitudes, such that vices detract from attitudes more than virtues enhance them (Reeder and Brewer, 1979; Skowronski and

Conflicting research

Carlston, 1987). Thus, one might expect consumers to punish unethical behaviour, but not necessarily reward ethical behaviour. It has been suggested that many people believe there is a responsibility not to do harm (e.g. not to use child labour), but do not automatically believe that others have a right to be helped (e.g. provide education for under-age workers) (Folkes and Kamins, 1999; Spranca *et al.*, 1991). Ethically minded consumers, therefore, need not consistently buy ethically.

Evidence of ethical consumption

Past research suggests that negative information influences consumer attitudes more than does positive information (Herr *et al.*, 1991; Amine, 1996). If this is so, one might expect that consumers' aware of information on a firm's unethical behaviour should boycott their products, while knowing about a firm's ethical behaviour would not necessarily persuade a consumer to buy their products. There is conflicting research to date on the proclivities of consumers to support or reject the ethical and unethical conduct of marketing firms. A recent MORI poll commissioned by the Co-operative Bank in the UK suggests that one-third of consumers are "seriously concerned" with ethical issues (Mason, 2000). Within the past year, over half had bought a product or recommended a company on the basis of its ethical reputation. This corresponds with earlier research by Forte and Lamont (1998) who feel that consumers are increasingly making purchases on the basis of a firm's role in society, and the Cone and Roper study (Simon, 1995) that found that 85 per cent of respondents had a more positive image of a company that supported something they cared about. A total of 15 per cent of respondents in the same study stated they would be more likely to pay more for a product or service associated with a cause important to them. Creyer and Ross (1997) also found that a company's level of ethical behaviour is an important consideration during the purchase decision; in the USA consumers expect ethical behaviour from companies and they were willing to pay higher prices and reward ethical behaviour. Creyer and Ross (1997) did discover that consumers would still buy products from unethical firms, but only at a lower price – the cost of poor ethics.

Attitude-behaviour gap

An attitude-behaviour gap has been identified by Roberts (1996) and Cone and Roper (Simon, 1995) which tallies with the complex consumer purchase behaviour identified by Folkes and Kamins (1999). Although consumers had socially responsible attitudes, only 20 per cent had actually purchased something in the last year because the product was associated with a good cause. What seems to be emerging is that although consumers express willingness to make ethical purchases linked to good reputation, the reality is that social responsibility is not the most dominant criteria in their purchase decision (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000). A recent survey by brand marketer Corporate Edge (Rogers, 1998) found that 57 per cent of their sample said they would stop buying a brand if they knew child labour had been employed, and 21 per cent supported action against companies they perceived as unethical. However, there was a notable difference recorded between supporting an action and actually carrying it out oneself.

An earlier study by Dragon International (1991), and the Cone and Roper study (Simon, 1995) have highlighted some important issues in the ethical purchase behaviour of consumers. These studies suggest that consumers are interested in ethical behaviour beyond those issues that directly impact on them, and would be more discriminating in their purchases if they were given more information about ethically and socially responsible activities. Although consumers had not been actively linking their purchases with

Consumers are relatively uninformed

social responsibility, there was interest in the link. It was also found that consumers were more likely to support positive actions than punish unethical actions; boycotting was unlikely if the product was one they relied on. This contradicts the findings discussed earlier (Folkes and Kamins, 1999; Spranca *et al.*, 1991; Reeder and Brewer, 1979; Skowronski and Carlston, 1987) suggesting that consumers will not reward ethical behaviour, although they are likely to punish unethical behaviour.

In the Dragon International study (1991) only 26 per cent of respondents could actually name any socially responsible firms, and only 18 per cent could name a “least socially responsible” firm. This conflicting evidence does at least tell us something: many consumers remain relatively uninformed about corporate social responsibility. The argument of the increasingly sophisticated consumer making ethically discriminating purchases seems to be erroneous. Despite Caminiti’s (1992) view that recent decades have created “the sharpest, most educated consumers marketers have ever faced”, it would appear this knowledge has not always guided them towards ethically sophisticated purchasing.

Consumer boycotts and consumer values

There are those who argue that consumer activism is on the increase, particularly in view of the recent consumer boycotts against petrol retailers in the UK, as well as boycotts of French imports during the BSE crisis, and the ongoing global Nestlé boycott over infant formula marketing practices. There is evidence that companies do suffer commercially from boycotts; Shell were estimated to have lost between 20 per cent and 50 per cent of their sales during the Brent Spar boycott (Klein, 2000), and the Nestlé boycott is said to have cost the firm \$40 million (Nelson-Horchler, 1984). Gelb (1995) argues the power of consumer boycotts is increasing, with more buyers refusing to buy a branded product or a class of products to achieve some socially responsible outcome. The access available to global consumer populations via the Internet has caused a proliferation of protests against brand-name products perpetuated by consumer advocacy groups, with companies such as Gap Inc., Nike and Shell being targeted (Reed, 1999). Research by GGT Advertising found that two-thirds of the population are more likely to take some form of action against a company than they were five years ago, and over half said they would stop doing business with a firm they believed had behaved unethically. It has also been found that 44 per cent of the British public have boycotted a product for ethical reasons in the last 12 months (Mason, 2000).

Response of consumers

However, a study by Boulstridge and Carrigan (2000) investigated the response of consumer’s to ethical and unethical marketing behaviour. What emerged was that most consumers lacked information to distinguish whether a company had or had not behaved ethically; Nestlé and Exxon were known offenders, but there was little awareness of any other socially responsible behaviour by companies, good or bad. Most respondents agreed that social responsibility was not an important consideration in their purchasing behaviour; even with knowledge about unethical activity, some consumers still bought products from the offending company. Others argued that lack of information did mean that social responsibility was not high on their purchasing agenda. If they liked and regularly bought a product they would find it hard to boycott over unethical behaviour. The most important purchasing criteria were price, value, quality and brand familiarity; consumers bought for personal reasons rather than societal ones.

Purchase behaviour

When queried if more information would help, some respondents said it would make little difference, while others stated it would add to the confusion and make buying difficult. This suggests a problem for the so-called sophisticated consumer. Having so much knowledge today on consumer products can actually detract from, rather than enhance choice. The additional burden of having to trade off ethical information, alongside price, quality and other factors seems almost too much for them to deal with. Respondents in this study were not averse to the publication of information concerning ethical behaviour by firms, they simply felt it would do little to change their purchase behaviour. Perhaps it is not that consumers do not care, but rather they care more about price, quality and value than corporate ethics (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; Ulrich and Sarasin, 1995).

There is also doubt cast over the value of consumer research towards ethical issues:

One thing is clear, don't do any research. Don't ask the public any questions on this subject. The answers are never reliable. In instances where the head says one thing and the heart another, studies are useless if not misleading (Ulrich and Sarasin, 1995).

Lack of demand

This does call into question past research which has found that ethical issues affect purchase behaviour, and there are commercial examples of products launched on the premise of consumer requests for ethical purchase choices which have struggled in the marketplace through lack of demand (e.g. Volkswagen Golf Ecomatic diesel engine car). Ulrich and Sarasin (1995) strongly believe that the demand for change towards more ethical marketing behaviour is not here, "because nothing changes and nothing moves". Their cynicism stems from their own research that was found to be misleading due to consumers reporting wants and needs that did not translate into purchase behaviour. There is gap evident between attitude and behaviour in ethical purchasing which is illustrated by UK consumer attitudes to financial ethics. In 1994 Mintel research reported a rise in consumer ethical awareness, with 47 per cent of respondents stating they would not use a financial organisation they felt to be ethically unsound. Given that 80 per cent of UK consumers bank with the "Big Four" high street banks, and Natwest bank have actually stated that they are financially involved with animal testing centres, there is a conflict. This might be explained as follows; either consumers' say one thing and behave another way with regard to ethics, or they lack knowledge and awareness with which to make "ethical" judgements. It may be that for UK consumers, as long as the banks operate within the law they are perceived as being socially responsible. This is significant, as this suggests that for many consumers "ethical" is synonymous with "legal", indicating that acting within the law is sufficient to be perceived by the public as socially responsible.

Perhaps a key factor which emerged from the Boulstridge and Carrigan (2000) study was the importance of ethical/unethical behaviour which directly impacted on the consumer themselves. The level of interest that the participants showed in corporate activity was characterised by what would directly impact on them. Thus, if unethical behaviour negatively affected the consumer, then they would be interested and take action. It may be that ethics only matter to consumers if they have a vested personal interest in them, and they would be personally positively or negatively affected by the behaviour. It was also clear that consumers have little specific knowledge about individual firms, but rather view ethics on a macro basis in terms of "general" business misdemeanours. Without any clear ethical differentiation

Ethical consumer behaviour

perceived between and among firms, consumers have little on which to make their judgements.

Because of the lack of consensus over consumer attitudes and behaviour towards social responsibility, the authors undertook further research in an attempt to develop more definitive answers to the questions surrounding ethical consumer behaviour. As sophisticated consumers do we behave with ethical sophistication in our purchase decisions? If not, why do we ignore ethical behaviour and condone unethical activity through our purchase choices?

The study

A decade ago, Dragon International (1991) concluded that although at that time the link between social responsibility and purchase behaviour was still in its early stages, this was likely to develop in the future. The following study was carried out to ascertain whether or not that development has occurred, given that the existing evidence remains inconclusive and conflicting. The authors decided to conduct focus group interviews in order to elicit consumer opinions and attitudes towards social responsibility and purchase behaviour. As a qualitative research method, focus groups allow for preliminary exploration, and are particularly useful in under-researched areas (Tynan and Drayton, 1988; Goldman and McDonald, 1987; Greenbaum, 1993). They allow for ideas to be screened and sorted as the discussion progresses, to explore complex behaviour and to experience the consumer's "eye view" of the world (Tynan and Drayton, 1988; Krueger, 1994). Their advantage of speed, flexibility, economy and the rich data generated made them suitable for the topic under examination. Small group discussions also allow peer interaction to be observed, while still allowing for individual contributions to be explored (O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998).

Group discussions

Two group discussions involving five participants were conducted. The group discussions were taped with the participants' permission, and a discussion guide was used to encourage topics to be explored. Although the most widely recommended size for group discussions is between eight and 12 (MacFarlane Smith, 1972; Bellenger *et al.*, 1976; Tynan and Drayton, 1988; Morgan, 1992), if the subject matter is sensitive using fewer respondents has been advised by several authors (Falconer, 1976; Mendes de Almeida, 1980). There is the danger that there may be a loss of useful data, but this must be traded against the requirements for the subject matter. The respondents were divided by gender, and were aged between 18 and 25 years, and university educated. The respondents were segregated into male and female groups to avoid any discomfort that may arise from discussing ethical issues (Morgan, 1993). Whether the sexes interact differently in mixed groups is a longstanding research question (Thorne and Henley, 1975), and so the authors decided to eliminate any potential bias by gender segregation. The advantages of homogeneity among the focus groups in terms of "community of interests" and ease of discussion have been discussed previously (Peterson, 1995; Tynan and Drayton, 1988; Levy, 1979; Morgan, 1993), although it does create a limitation in that their views may not be representative of the rest of the population, and thus replication may not be possible. However, qualitative research of this type does reveal a richer vein of information not always possible through quantitative routes, and the interplay between respondents can develop discussions beyond that of independent contributions.

The study aimed to investigate several questions raised by the conflicts in past research. An attitude-behaviour gap has been suggested between intention and actual ethical purchasing behaviour, and we wished to see if this could be explored further. It was also considered important to investigate the awareness consumers had about past or present corporate behaviour in relation to ethics, and whether or not they considered unethical behaviour reason to boycott a firm and its products. Finally, the study questions whether consumers really do care about social responsibility, and how influential ethical issues are in terms of their purchase decisions compared with other factors such as price and quality.

No identifiable differences

Findings

First, there were no identifiable differences in the responses given by either focus group. This suggests that gender does not play a part in ethical attitudes. When asked if they had ever boycotted a product, not one respondent stated that they had. The moderator specifically mentioned Nike, and all but one of the respondents were aware of publicity surrounding Nike's employment practices in the developing world. However, despite accepting that Nike had a poor ethical record, all respondents stated that they would still buy Nike products. This suggests that a poor ethical record has no affect on purchase intention.

One female respondent stated:

It is exploitation, but without companies such as Nike, they wouldn't have a job at all.

Another said:

If someone is clever enough to set up a company in this way, earning huge profits, then fair enough.

The perspective seems to be that companies such as Nike, are not considered unethical because economically they provide jobs and profits; providing this commercial "good" would appear to be enough to be seen as socially responsible behaviour.

The moderator introduced the issue of chocolate production to the groups, mentioning the low wages of producers. Although respondents stated they were unhappy at low wages being paid to people producing chocolate for them, they said they still would not be willing to boycott products over this issue. They also stated that they would not pay a price premium of around 10-15 per cent for the same chocolate if it were produced in a more socially responsible way.

Socially responsible firms

When asked to identify socially responsible firms, all respondents singled out the Body Shop, but were quick to point out that they shopped there not to be socially responsible, but because they liked the products. JCB, Nissan and the Co-operative Bank came in for recognition for ethical behaviour, but while trying to think of "good corporate citizens", one respondent noted:

There really aren't that many . . . I am sure they are all unethical to some degree . . .

This indicates not only a low awareness of ethical and responsible behaviour by companies, but also an inherent cynicism among consumers in relation to such behaviour. Unprompted, the companies who did register as having poor social responsibility were L'Oreal because of their animal testing, Natwest due to their financial investment with animal research centres, and Shell and BP due to their poor environmental pollution and poor employee relations behaviour in Nigeria.

Attitude to “misdeeds”

The respondents’ attitude to these “misdeeds” was unequivocally ambivalent:

Most people think, there is not much I can do about it, so why bother?

Other comments included:

When you buy petrol, you do not think of those companies that are or are not ethical . . . it doesn’t even cross your mind . . . I would only fill up elsewhere if it caused no inconvenience to me.

One issue that did engage sympathy from the respondents was animal rights, particularly the idea that animals suffered due to corporate behaviour. In fact, exploitation of animals seemed to engender more indignation than human exploitation. This topic did create a lot of debate, and it became clear that the respondents only cared about certain kinds of social issues. For example, the rainforest and working conditions were low on their list of ethical priorities, while the idea of animals, and in particular dolphins, being killed or maimed did matter to them enough to affect their purchase behaviour. So much so that it emerged they valued this issue enough to pay a premium and actively seek out a product that had been produced in an ethical manner:

I’d be a lot less inclined to buy if I knew for a fact that companies were harming animals.

However, again there is the need for convincing of the ethics of the behaviour in order affect purchase behaviour. It emerged from the discussions that no respondent had actively sought out or inquired about the production of any product, and they simply relied on labelling information as a guide. This suggests that consumers are passive ethical shoppers rather than active consumer ethicists.

Factors influencing buying decisions

When asked what factors most strongly influenced their buying decisions, they concluded that price, value, brand image and fashion trends were the four most important factors. However, as the discussion progressed, they did state that if they were made aware of any unethical or irresponsible corporate behaviour through media exposure, this would affect their purchase decision:

If it gets a lot of media coverage, then it makes me think twice about what I am buying.

However, one respondent did say:

We all know about McDonald’s cutting down trees and promoting unhealthy food, but all of us here eat McDonald’s.

In response to the Nike issues, one also said:

The people who they are exploiting get paid a pittance, but in their country it is a reasonable wage.

Given the conflict between these statements, we do have to question the level of commitment being shown towards ethical purchasing. Does poor ethics make them uncomfortable, but not enough actually to change their purchase behaviour? Respondents seem to justify and rationalise their own behaviour through helplessness, and that of corporations by accepting that poor ethics has to be viewed in the context of the host nation norms.

When asked outright did a company’s record on the environment or social responsibility influence their purchase decision, almost all respondents said that it had no influence on their decision, and that they did not care how well companies behave. One did say that it might affect about “5 per cent” of their purchase decisions. Respondents did seem to consider the media a

Awareness of unethical conduct

powerful information source on ethical issues, and believed that if a great deal of publicity were given to a company behaving badly then this would affect their purchase intentions. However, when it was pointed out that Nike, the Gap and McDonald's had all been very publicly exposed for poor ethics, the respondents acknowledged that in terms of these products it had made no difference to their purchase behaviour:

I like Gap clothing, McDonald's tastes good, and Nike looks and feels right.

Finally, most participants were keen to point out that if they could financially afford to discriminate against those unethical companies, then they would pay the premium for any good quality products that were produced through a more responsible approach.

From the participant responses we can see that, although there was a high awareness of unethical conduct on the part of companies such as Nike, awareness was low in relation to ethical conduct. The public may register the negative behaviour, but positive ethical behaviour is still not recognised to any great degree. None of our respondents had boycotted any product for ethical reasons, and their purchases were driven by personal rather than societal reasons; a company's social responsibility had no influence on their purchase behaviour. It did appear that if they felt they could really make a difference our respondents would make ethical choices, but this seems to depend on them having enough information to do so. Consumers are unwilling to undergo any extra inconvenience in order to purchase ethically, and price, value, trends and brand image remain the dominant influences over purchase choice. There does appear to be an attitude-behaviour gap between ethical purchase intention and actual purchase behaviour at least among these consumers, and they were willing to justify and accept the existence of inadequate and unethical employment practices by firms, although animal rights were an issue that induced more concern.

Important anomalies

Discussion

The findings from this research raise important anomalies in relation to past research studies. Those studies which have suggested that we live in the ethics era (Smith, 1995), and that consumer purchasing has become more socially responsible (Mason, 2000; Simon, 1995; Creyer and Ross, 1997) would seem to be at odds with this research. There are reasons why this may be so, and we shall now explore them. First, we have to acknowledge the age of the respondents in this study. Perhaps younger consumers have a different ethical perspective than other age groups. Ethical purchase behaviour may be influenced by various demographical characteristics, age being one of them. We report no gender differences, but it was evident from these discussions that the importance of image, fashion and price was a strong influencer on purchase behaviour. It is no secret that young people feel strongly about wearing the "right" clothes and brands. Perhaps the current importance of brands such as Nike and Gap as youth icons outweighs the ethical message for this group of consumers. It may be that older or younger consumers would be more ethically discriminating, and this is a question that future research should address.

There were contradictions within the responses from the participants when they stated that a greater awareness of unethical activity would affect their purchase behaviour. It would seem that in reality it would only affect behaviour among certain product categories. Rather than behaving ethically across the board, consumers seem only willing to be selectively ethical. This may be for several reasons. First, the importance of brand image with

Unhealthy scepticism

products such as clothing takes precedence over ethical criteria. Unless they can buy ethically and still retain fashion status, consumers will not boycott unethical brand leaders. With food products this is less of an issue, and so given enough information with which to purchase discriminatingly there is the chance that consumers will opt for ethical choices. However, there appears to be a hierarchy of ethical issues that will prompt that discrimination among this group of consumers; not all unethical activity affects purchase behaviour. So we have seen that unethical work practices elicit little sympathetic purchase behaviour, while animal abuse induces positive discrimination in favour of ethical producers. What emerges from this study is that the assertion that negative information influences consumer attitudes more than does positive information (Herr *et al.*, 1991) is not supported. These participants had negative information on companies such as Gap and Nike but continued to do business with them.

It would also appear that consumers do not wish to be inconvenienced, and ethical purchasing will only take place if there are no costs to the consumer in terms of added price, loss of quality or having to “shop around”. Consumers do seem to be aware of unethical behaviour, but appear to be confused about who is guilty and who is not, and retain an unhealthy scepticism that there is little to choose from between companies. This may be influential in maintaining a reluctance to go the ethical purchasing route; if consumers believe that not only do all companies behave irresponsibly in some way, but also that consumer purchase behaviour can have little impact in changing the situation then it is not surprising that they feel ambivalent.

Our investigations seem to suggest albeit that we are dealing with increasingly sophisticated consumers, this does not necessarily translate into wise or ethical buying practice. Sproles *et al.* (1978) argued that efficient decision making requires consumers to be fully informed. Perhaps the problem is that, although they are informed to some extent on ethical matters, they are not fully informed. There was low awareness of good ethical conduct by corporations, and confusion and cynicism about the level of unethical conduct. If consumers had clearer information on who is behaving unethically, and who is not, this may induce them to discriminate more in their purchasing. The media were cited as the conduit most consumers received their ethical information from, and it may be that companies need to disseminate information on their socially responsible behaviour more widely. At the same time, there is a need for differentiation among and between companies on ethical grounds if companies are to avoid being “tarred with the same unethical brush” as fellow corporate offenders. Alternatively, there is a vested interest for everyone to raise corporate ethical standards to develop a better image all round for business, and encourage consumers to view corporate social responsibility more benevolently.

Ethical abuses can still continue

Realistically though, we must accept that some consumers will simply not be engaged by issues that do not directly affect them, or with which they feel no sympathy. The depressing reality is that many ethical abuses can still continue to be carried out by companies without any negative impact on consumer buyer behaviour. Thus if you as a firm wish to position yourself on an ethical platform that encourages positive consumer behaviour towards your products, you must do so over issues that engage your target market. We are not arguing that altruism and philanthropy be discarded, simply that they may offer little payback in consumer purchase terms. Young consumers seem to find animals more sympathetic than people, while other consumer groups may champion different issues. This is something else that future

A minority

research should investigate as it has important implications for the ethical profile of any company and its products. Consumers may hold ethical companies in high regard, but they do not necessarily buy their products because of it (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000), nor do they boycott irresponsible firms because of their social irresponsibility. It would seem that unless it is an issue that directly impacts on the buyer him/herself then it may be irrelevant to their purchase decisions.

Our respondents' comments suggest that firms should be cautious about acting on the findings of studies that suggest being ethical will attract consumers to your company and products. Boulstridge and Carrigan (2000) suggest that the social inappropriateness of stating that you do purchase unethically may have led consumers in the past to respond with inaccurate statements in ethical consumer surveys, and this may be the case. Ulrich and Sarasin (1995) have a point in questioning the validity of consumer research; price, value, brand image and convenience feature higher up the scale of consumer priorities than ethics, despite what many surveys have suggested. These difficulties have led us to develop the matrix shown in Figure 1 as a categorisation of consumer attitudes to ethical purchasing.

Consumers who act on ethical intentions and seek out information on corporate social responsibility do exist, but they are likely to remain a minority for the foreseeable future. "Caring and ethical" consumers make it their business to discriminate for and against ethical and unethical companies, and they are likely to respond positively to genuine ethical behaviour. This has to be tempered with the knowledge that they may be selectively ethical – companies have to identify which ethical issues are important to these consumers and ensure that they are satisfied with the company's stance in these matters. For example, young people may choose to purchase brands that protect the environment, but be less discriminating on employment abuses. The "confused and uncertain" would like to shop ethically but remain bewildered by the lack of guidance and contradictory messages about corporate ethical behaviour. Such consumers would benefit from increased information to raise their awareness of ethical conduct by companies to allow them to make discriminating purchase decisions. The "cynical and disinterested" suffer not from a lack of information, but a lack of conviction that companies truly are ethical. Even if they were convinced, it is debatable whether or not this would make them change their buyer behaviour. Such consumers will only buy ethically if it does not detract from their value and brand choice, and involves no inconvenience. It is therefore up to companies to make it easy for such consumers to buy ethically; they

		Ethical Awareness	
		High	Low
Ethical Purchase Intention	High	Caring and Ethical	Confused and Uncertain
	Low	Cynical and Disinterested	Oblivious

Figure 1. Consumer attitudes to ethical purchasing

Little interest in ethical behaviour

may have to give them reasons beyond social responsibility, and concentrate on quality, price and brand image as well as ethical marketing. This can be a tough choice for firms, as ethical marketing policy can often involve added costs; unless firms absorb those they are unlikely to endear themselves to the cynical consumer. Finally, the “oblivious” consumer is an unknown quantity; they may or may not be willing to shop ethically, but lack of knowledge on the issue means that it has not yet entered into their purchase equation. Raising the awareness of such shoppers to ethical and unethical behaviour may provoke them into a more ethical purchase intention. Again, information is the key, as well as targeting the ethical issue to the consumer. For example, new mothers may have been previously unaware of Nestlé’s activities in relation to baby food; raising their awareness could lead them to boycott Nestlé products, or seek out more ethical food companies and brands.

Depressing though it may be for us to accept that many consumers in the new millennium still have little interest in ethical behaviour, as marketers we should not be disheartened. One of the problems may be that in this age of more abundant and accessible information the sophisticated consumer is overwhelmed rather than disinterested in ethical product knowledge (Titus and Bradford, 1996). Perhaps there is too much of the wrong information and not enough of the right information coming through to persuade and convince consumers that ethical purchase decisions make a difference. Dickson and Wilkie (1985) and Dickson and Sawyer (1990) found that consumers make little use of important sources of product-related information such as consumer reports and guides. It may be ethical information needs to be communicated in a form that breaks through the clutter, and reaches the consumer without creating any inconvenience or discomfort for them.

Time pressures

Time pressures in their life increasingly lead to consumers being more harassed and stressed (Robinson, 1991; Cutler, 1990). This leads to consumers curtailing their informational gathering activities; time pressures drastically reduce the consumer search activity (Newman, 1977). Although access to information has increased, time pressures seem to limit its use (Titus and Bradford, 1996). Consumers simply do not have time to take into account the ethical aspects of their purchases as they are rushing around a supermarket or shopping centre. This places the onus on marketers to make it easier in the future to shop ethically; currently extended cognitive effort is needed to do so. Time pressures and information overload may actually diminish the consumer’s ability to make accurate judgements of product quality (Titus and Bradford, 1996). Marketing efforts have become so complex and refined that it is extremely difficult to compare product value accurately, let alone ethical integrity. How do you trade off the exploitation of child labour versus environmental pollution when purchasing a pair of jeans? A growing number of competing products dramatically increases the possible brand and attribute comparisons a consumer has to make (Titus and Bradford, 1996); some simply give up and focus on a few important attributes such as price or service, ignoring ethical aspects. Rather than increasing our sophistication as consumers, these pressures may well lead us to make less discriminating choices. The corporate dilemma is that today’s sophisticated consumer is rewarding unethical behaviour and penalising ethical business behaviour (Titus and Bradford, 1996). While firms may wish to behave according to moral and ethical principles, the lack of knowledge and appropriate consumer purchase behaviour can produce strong incentives for firms to abandon these principles. Can a company afford to pursue such

Misplaced and misguided emphasis

Consumers need for information

principles in the face of competition from the undesirable effects of unethical business practices that continue to be rewarded? Even when ethical abuses are uncovered and reported, there is no guarantee that consumers will respond by punishing the offender. Even the most principled and ethical companies find it difficult to adhere to their standards of ethical business conduct in the face of consumer disaffection.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate whether or not consumers care enough about marketing ethics to influence their purchase behaviour. What has emerged from the research is that most consumers pay little heed to ethical considerations in their purchase decision-making behaviour. One might conclude from this evidence that the current emphasis on social responsibility and marketing ethics by academics and practitioners is both misplaced and misguided. Certainly the link between corporate social responsibility and consumer purchase behaviour remains unproven. Yet one should not conclude from this that the development of ethical marketing policy and corporate social responsibility is a pointless activity for firms. There are more stakeholders than the consumer to be influenced, and shareholders, governments, employees and the wider community are actively concerned with good ethical behaviour. It is probably true that at present good corporate ethics will not be particularly influential in consumer purchases, but there are ways to improve this situation. It makes sense to have clear objectives in mind when developing ethical marketing policy; if consumers are the target, firms should temper expectations with reality. It may make sense to conduct research into which ethical issues really matter to consumers, particularly those likely to impact on them. This seems to engage their sympathy and hard cash more than ethics built around what they perceive to be irrelevant, hopeless or distant causes. Companies should also accept that their ethical behaviour may not necessarily win them much more than good reputation, but this in itself has merit. As time goes by, the dynamics of business ethics may change this situation, and it may not be too long before ethical behaviour becomes an imperative rather than a gesture.

It is difficult to draw definite conclusions about the merit of ethical behaviour, nor the demerits of unethical behaviour given the contradictory research evidence. Consumers do seem to need more information to allow them to make better ethical judgements, and there is a role for firms to communicate this more effectively through the media. Equally, consumers need to more easily be able to compare and contrast the ethical behaviour of different companies and their products if ethical values are to enter into their purchase decisions. There also seems to be an issue concerning ethical integrity, and consumer scepticism surrounding corporate ethics will also require attention. We would never condone unethical behaviour, for there are legal and economic implications, but whether or not consumers care that much is another matter. Morally and ethically it is desirable that as marketers we strive to be more ethical in our business activities; it is just that it may not always be commercially beneficial. A company with integrity will pursue an ethical marketing policy despite that limitation, and indeed many have done so for many years (e.g. Levi Strauss, Johnson and Johnson). Perhaps in time new generations of consumers will not only think more ethically, but also act more ethically, and while product value, price and quality will always be key consumer issues, future consumers may also consider good ethics to be equally crucial.

Managerial implications

- Although consumers may express a desire to support ethical companies, and punish unethical companies, their actual purchase behaviour often remains unaffected by ethical concerns.
- Possessing knowledge about unethical behaviour does not necessarily lead a consumer to boycott the unethical firm or its products.
- Most consumers remain uninformed about ethical behaviour by firms, and have limited knowledge about unethical behaviour. However, to be effective, future ethical marketing information has to be conveyed in a manner that does not further confuse or alienate consumers.
- Consumers express willingness to purchase ethically but do not wish to be inconvenienced in order to do so.
- Many consumers are cynical about differentiation between companies on ethical grounds. Companies need to find ways to convince consumers about their ethical integrity.
- Price, quality and value outweigh ethical criteria in consumer purchase behaviour.
- Consumers need to be convinced that their purchase behaviour can make a difference in ethical terms in order to be persuaded to buy.

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