

## ECOMARKETING, THE RESPONSE OF MARKETING TO CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY’S ETHICAL REQUIREMENTS

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### **Abstract**

*The paper describes the concept of sustainable development and the manner in which ecomarketing has responded to the multiple challenges raised by the new social and environmental paradigm. The trends and evolutions of ecomarketing are addressed. An analysis is made of the Reșița consumers and the way they react to the ecological problems. The increase of ecomarketing role of communication as a way of informing and educating the consumer in applying the ecological principles is highlighted.*

**Keywords:** *sustainable development, green marketing, ecomarketing, Green consumers*

**JEL:** *M31, Q56*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The sense and purpose of our entire activity is "to make our world better than we found it when we were born. By better we mean safer, healthier, more beautiful, fairer, more loving, more cognizable, all in all a sustainable world." (Ionescu, 2006)

Obviously, in order to accomplish the above we need to adopt ethical attitudes and honest practices of human resources development, as well as an efficient environmental management. Today's society oscillates between feeling and reason, trying to impose its pragmatic decisions in a context that ensures its well-being and prosperity. However, it is increasingly evident that responsibility and sustainability are the only viable arguments for a secure future.

The pursuit of profit, overpopulation, excessive pollution, the extraction of mineral resources and energy sources in inefficient conditions trigger serious consequences, which endanger life on the planet in se. In this context very rarely do we hear there any voices stating that the responsibility is specific to "crypto-public, deeply socialist enterprises" (Manne H G, 2006).

Actually, economists admit that any economic endeavour must include "a simultaneous analysis of economic growth, environmental protection and social equity in business planning and decision making" (Rondinelli & Berry, 2000), sustainable development being achieved by ensuring the balance between these three pillars. It is a difficult task because ecological development depends on the capacity of the environment to regenerate; thus, the quality of life cannot have an upward trend if environmental protection programs are absent. Sustainable development has thus become a key element in environmental management (Mebratu, 1998), with the Brundtland Report marking global interest in this issue.

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This report marked the beginning of a new global socio-economic policy, in which the concept of development is essential, and sustainability is a key element in environmental management (Mebratu, 1998), the rational use of resources, ecological awareness and international cooperation being permanently discussed at international conferences.

The concept of sustainable development began to be strongly studied in the 80s of the previous century, being considered: a triplet - socio-economic development, concept of needs and future generations (Klarin, 2018), a development as a structural transformation (Vázquez & Sumner, 2013), a development meant "to provide long-term perspectives" (Drexhage & Murphy, 2010), an opportunity to fulfil certain human needs derived from quantitative economic values (Ulhoi & Madsen, 1999), social changes that reach the objectives of traditional development, in accordance with the limits of ecological sustainability (Lele, 1991).

The analyses of this concept have drawn attention first of all onto the non-renewable resources, and thus different economic approach opinions emerged: some authors support stationary economies (Weaver, Lawton, 1999), others restrictive solutions (the zero economic growth proposed by the Club of Rome), whereas other authors have a technical-optimistic perspective, proposing the optimal extraction of non-renewable resources with innovative technologies, which could compensate for the negative impact on the environment (Črnjar & Črnjar, 2009). The term "spaceship economy" (Boulding, 1966) has appeared in the literature, metaphorically emphasizing the planetary limits, so that, in the author's opinion, the "resource-finite product" transfer must be minimized; other authors prefer the term circular economy that introduces the notions of reuse, recycling, reutilisation, so that the raw material is mostly made of recovered waste (Kirchherr et al., 2017), while P. Senge proposes the term "restorative economy" by which the interdependence that exists throughout the planet is recognized. In this respect, one proposes the harmonization with the habitat and the organization of society in close connection with the laws of nature.

As despite all the concerns related to sustainable development, environmental problems have worsened, a belief has emerged according to which, beyond the responsible initiatives of some companies, governmental concerns should be diversified, both through legislation and national projects, so that the impact of activities can be much more visible. Moreover, supervision and coordination actions by national and international authorities are required (Kammer & Chris-topherson, 2018), since the initiatives of the ecological associations have often failed, the consequences of the economic development up to this date being negative (Davies, 2013).

International actions (the Rio de Janeiro Summit, the Kyoto Agreement, the Copenhagen Agreement, etc.), although explicitly emphasizing the continued degradation of the environment, fail to create an optimal and secure framework for applying the ecological norms proposed in these meetings. After almost five decades of sustained concerns, human society is in major impasse in terms of "meeting the needs of present generations, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (The „Brundtland” Commission)

## **2. ECOMARKETING, MARKETING POSITIONING IN AN ECOLOGIST PERSPECTIVE**

Ecomarketing, or green marketing, is the marketing concerned with social welfare, sustainable development as an expression of concern for future generations. The ecological perspective becomes the essential argument for doing business and social behaviour. The entire activity of the company is focused on specific values: environmental protection, disappearance of social inequities, ensuring future generations of living conditions similar to those present. Cliche (2010) argues that these arguments are in fact an asset for businesses, a way to fight in an increasingly competitive market.

The literature, especially in the American writings, exhibits a profusion of terms such as: ecological marketing, green marketing, ecomarketing, enviroprenorial marketing, sustainable marketing. Analysing the works, we can deduce that most of the time these terms are used as synonyms, having thus the same meaning (Chamorro, Rubin, Miranda, 2009). But the multitude of terms determines the specialists in the field to state that “the diversity of terms suggests the impossibility of a universal interpretation of the concepts”(Durif, Boivin, Julien 2010).

For some authors, green marketing is just a technique used by businesses (Rex, Bauman, 2007), while others define it by the competitive advantages (Grant, 2009, Cliche, 2010). Equiterre (2010) and Konrad, (2011) address the ecological attitude of companies from an ethical perspective.

Ottman (1992) considers sustainable development "a total paradigm shift for society, which needs to start from the management sphere, in order to be implemented effectively", and Lowy, Rodary (2009) appreciates that green marketing is just the opportunity to put the foundations of a new paradigm in consumption, and to change in this way the social and economic evolution.

Vital (2011) defines green marketing as “the activity that involves the marketing of a product or service with added environmental or social value. The added value is to diminish the negative impact on the environment.” He also believes that the objectives of green marketing are to communicate the attributes of products and services so that consumers are better informed about their quality. Bergeron (2011) has the same opinion and sees green marketing as "a strategy based on enhancing environmental attributes"; Kotler(2011) identifies green marketing under the concept of corporate marketing, whereas Yakup Durmaz, Hatice Vildan Yasar, (2016) see it as a process that protects and develops the well-being of consumers and society better than its rival firms.

The multitude and variety of the analyses made some authors try to systematize the works, according to certain criteria. Thus, Durif, Boivin (2010) propose a definition of green marketing from three perspectives: academic, industrial and consumer.

The academic perspective defines green marketing by addressing the product or service and its ecological characteristics. Thus, Chen (2007), considers that “green product development tackles environmental issues through product design and innovation; Albino, Balice and Dangelico (2009) see it as a “product designed to minimize its environmental impacts during its entire life cycle”

The industrial perspective means addressing the issues related to the 3 R's, those of certification and approval. The companies mainly approach the concept of social responsibility, they follow the way in which the production activity

corresponds from the point of view of the noxious substances, the quality of the waste water, they follow the application of innovative technologies.

The consumer perspective addresses the definition of green marketing taking into account non-toxic products, the non-use of animals for tests and experiences, the minimal effect of the products on the environment.

Other authors, Peattie (2001), Katrandjiev (2016), systematize the published works from the perspective of time, trying to highlight the main stages of ecomarketing.

Thus, Katrandjiev (2016) highlights 4 major stages in which the published writings:

Embryonic stage, before the year 1974;

Ecological marketing, between 1975-1989,

Green marketing, 1990-2000;

Sustainable marketing after the year 2000.

The embryonic stage refers to the beginning period of green marketing. In this regard, the first papers addressing this concern occur in the early 1970s, but debates on this subject are known even from the late 1950s when Wroe Alderson performs an analysis of economic society and the environment, showing their interaction and the necessity of marketing involvement in this equation.

After this date and especially after the 70s, the works that underline the importance of applying green marketing grow exponentially, with all marketing specialists approaching this topic more or less.

In the ecological marketing stage, Kotler, Levy, (1971), Fisk, (1973), Henion and Kinnear (1976) define green marketing as an activity that takes into account the environmental issues, highlighting the negative aspects that the industry causes through its more and more complex actions. Fisk tried, for the first time, to point out that marketing should address its ecological issues. The works published develop the connection between the increasingly expansive industry and the environmental problems, as marketing attempts to identify the products or companies that are big polluters and to find solutions for the recovery of these situations.

In the second stage, Prothero (1990), Ottman, J.A. (1993), Porter, Linde, (1995) show the importance of rethinking marketing strategies, arguing the need for long-term concepts, emphasizing the social benefits of this strategy. It is the stage when the concept of sustainable development appears and develops (Brundtland Report), so that consumers become sensitive to the environmental issues, being extremely attentive to the abuses of some companies on this subject.

In fact, during this period, the concept of social marketing also flourishes, the human society being viewed holistically, in its interdependence with the natural environment. Economic, social and environmental problems are beginning to be analysed in their continuous interaction, and the concept of development "becomes a fluid one, in continuous evolution" (Feraru, 2011.). As environmentalists increasingly criticize industries for the irrational exploitation of resources, marketing specialists try to rethink their economic activities so that existing imbalances can be alleviated. There is a growing concern of companies for reducing waste, for implementing clean technologies, for producing innovative products, with favourable consequences on the environment.

Green consumers are becoming an important market segment; companies finally understand that approaching activities from an ecological perspective

represents an opportunity in business, an opportunity to win increasingly fierce competition.

In the stage of sustainable marketing, the concern for environmental issues is increasing, the challenges are getting bigger as the imbalances are becoming more pronounced. Despite the claims that through the process of globalization many problems will be solved, the failures are predominant, the economic, social and environmental disparities are accentuated, the solutions are palliative, short-term. Consumers are focused on quality products, also paying attention to price, distribution and environmental issues.

The papers published during this period begin to investigate how consumers react to environmental problems, emphasizing their sensitivisation and awareness of the importance of respecting the environment (Prothero, A. & Fitchett, JA (2000) Oyewole, P. (2001), Karna, J. , Hansen, E. & Juslin, H. (2003), Donaldson (2005).

There are three important problems in the works published in the last decades: the orientation towards the future, through the care shown to the generations to come (the approaches take into account in particular the non-renewable resources); justice, analysing the aggravation of social inequalities and inequities and social responsibility of companies and consumers alike, being considered as co-creators of value. Sustainable marketing focuses on meeting needs and not necessities (Peattie, 2001), the latter concept meaning the tendency of people to cover their desires and not necessarily their needs. Sustainable marketing becomes above all an ethical marketing.

### **3. APPROACHES OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION IN REȘIȚA**

Trying to analyse how the Reșița consumer relates to the problem of sustainable development, we used a questionnaire elaborated by the 1st year master students of the AATCS study program of UEMR in 2019. The questionnaire is applied to a non-representative sample of 594 respondents, of which 125 respondents aged under 20, 282 respondents with ages between 20 and 55, and 187 respondents over 55 years of age, trying to respect the demographic structure of the Reșița municipality. The questions of the questionnaire tried to highlight the consumer's attitude towards the organic products, as well as towards the environment.

In this respect, we tried to identify the level of awareness related to the concepts of ecological products and bio products. Over 58% of consumers questioned answered yes, they know the concepts and distinguish between the two categories.

Subsequently, we tried to detect the attitude of the respondents towards the problem of sustainable development, from their perspective of consumers. They were asked about the manner in which they buy organic food, whether they are interested in purchasing a car with ecological features at the expense of a polluting but more refined one, how interviewees report on recycling long-term products, or if they would agree to close the municipal downtown for car traffic on Saturdays and Sundays.

The questionnaire highlighted the lack of interest in concrete measures by which the pollution of the environment would be reduced. Thus, 60% of the respondents prefer the classic food products over the organic ones, because of the

lower price, and over 59% of them prefer the purchase of a polluting but cheaper car. As for recycling, reconditioning of end-of-life products, only 12% are particularly interested in this aspect. As for the closing of traffic in the downtown area for cars at weekends, only 40% agreed to it, and only if there are alternative routes.

The second part of the research consisted in the organization of a focus group, made of 7 people interested in environmental issues and ecological products. Following discussions on the issue of sustainable development, we detected a high degree of general culture, solid knowledge about economics and macroeconomics, interest in ecology and social responsibility of companies, knowledge of the economic and social environment in Reșița. We then proceeded to the actual activity, trying to find out the points of view regarding the following aspects:

What is the reason why consumers are less interested in organic products?

Why do consumers not agree with measures that would reduce urban pollution?

Why is there such a low interest in Reșița for recycling, reconditioning activities?

How do consumers appreciate companies trying to focus on economic activities that do not increase pollution?

Following the discussions, several aspects emerged:

Some of the Reșița residents consume organic food products quite in a sustained manner, but through family chains; basically, consumers are supplied from the rural area, directly from agricultural producers, who are relatives, acquaintances or friends. The relationships between them are tight, sometimes even exchanges in nature take place, in the form of barter;

The other part of the population eating organic products acquired from the commercial network is not very faithful to this behaviour, the reasons being numerous: the higher price, the consumers' lack of confidence in the quality of the products, the low distribution network, the absence of awareness of the products or of the producers, the seasonal character of the products.

As regards non-food products, concerns about these are even lower; consumers especially appreciate the products in terms of price and quality features that directly benefit them. Consumer convenience often prevails, the excuse of lack of time being almost invariable. The recycling or reconditioning activities are rare, alleging lack of time, poor organization in the field, lack of knowledge related to the subject.

The consumers do not trust the companies that declare to have ecological concerns; as the media is full of negative examples from this point of view, the feeling of doubt in the consumer's mind has emerged and generalised as regards any statement of the companies about their efforts, the suspicion of the correctness of the ecological activities being at a maximum level.

Despite the claims related to the affinity to the environmental concerns, when the problem of measures affecting the comfort of the consumer is raised, the reactions are of refusal or categorical rejection; thus, when they were questioned about a traffic closure in the centre of the municipality at weekends, none of the consumers agreed to this measure, unless there are alternative traffic options. Following discussions, consumers were informed that such a measure would not reduce pollution, would move it to another area, and would increase fuel consumption; however, they remained inflexible, considering this measure a reduction of the right of movement and transport, a reduction of the possibilities of entertainment at the weekends.

Consumers do not regard environmental problems directly; it is more a theoretical, diffuse, equivocal and imprecise approach. Most of the times, public companies and authorities are considered responsible. Discussions are often diverted to ecological disasters, where responsibility is diluted. Consumers are also convinced that these issues need to be addressed on the level of human communities, the individual not being able to contribute effectively to the overall solution.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS**

The concept of sustainable development has probably constituted the largest and most debated problems on the planet in recent decades, both among specialists in the field, as well as on the level of government or civil society. However, the results do not raise to the expectations of action plans, the agreements concluded between states, the programs of international bodies or the promises of companies. On the contrary, the economic and social life seems to become more and more complicated, insecure, weakening the security of life not for the "future generations" but for the present ones. The pace of resource use is higher than ever, irrational overproduction and consumption being, through the process of globalization higher than a few decades ago.

The concept of sustainable, fluid and dynamic development includes not only aspects related to environmental protection, but also social and human emancipation, combating poverty, alleviating discrepancies between the living standards of different social categories. The economy and the environment are seen as two complex entities in a single equation of life on earth.

This is how the concept of companies' social responsibility appeared, stipulating that "they have the obligation to follow those policies, to make those decisions or to follow those lines of action that are desirable regarding the objectives and values of our society" (Bowen, 1953). The concept has evolved over time and is now understood as an essential construct for those concerned with sustainable development. Responsible behaviour generates the integration of social, environmental and economic aspects into their own cultural values, so that action strategies are always taken from this perspective. However, this is not easy, there are many difficulties when a company tries to adopt such an approach in the competitive market (Engle, 2006). Often this approach is based on the ethical attitude which presents certain challenges most often determined by the cultural values of the respective society, the behaviour of consumers and their attitude towards these positions.

Many actions that intended to be environmentally friendly failed, were found to be greenwashing or simply a marketing strategy. Economic solutions have often been mere improvements in technology, the measures announced with much noise have finally proved to have a minor impact on the environment or society.

On the other hand, there are few genuine green consumers. Most consumers support measures that protect the environment and society only to the extent that they are not disturbed in their pecuniary interests or those related to comfort, habit, or settlements. From the case study presented, the conclusion can be drawn that the majority of consumers residing in Romania approach the problem of sustainable development from a pecuniary perspective. The main reason why organic products are not purchased is the one related to their high price compared to

the classic ones. The problem of product quality, the impact that the product has on the environment becomes a theoretical one.

However, it is clear that sustainable development cannot take place without a major change in the approach to consumption, a new paradigm in which society understands that *less is better*. Overconsumption has negative repercussions on society in general and the individual in particular, the consumer must be educated to satisfy their needs not their desires (which are infinite). In this context, ecomarketing, which has the mission to inform consumers correctly, to communicate facts in a responsible manner, to improve the awareness of consumers, to make them understand that the fulfilment of their personal aspirations enhance life quality more than material accumulation. Of course, in order to achieve all the above, the economic paradigm must also be changed by companies that must focus on sustainable activities in meeting the intellectual, spiritual, educational needs of consumers.

As ecomarketing is the marketing that addresses long-term strategies, it is more appropriate than the classical marketing in a society that has to redefine its values and carry on the economic activity in a sustainable environment. Lemke & Luzio (2014) state that consumers' lack of confidence in companies that declare to have adopted ecological approaches is essential in the purchase decision. In this context, ecomarketing must approach its communication in a responsible, transparent, credible and efficient way, in order to trigger the desired response from the part of consumers.

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