BRANDING THROUGH GREEN MARKETING: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Recent time has witnessed increased recognition and adoption of green marketing by many firms as key strategies to promote their products environmentally friendly thereby benefitting themselves, consumers, and other stakeholders. In this backdrop, the purpose of the research is to present the role of green marketing in brand building in general using qualitative method. The findings suggest that most of the respondents view that green marketing helps brand building exercise. The study is significant for the marketers, academicians, consumers, and others. The limitation of the study is lack of empirical rigor, small sample size; consequently findings may not be worth theorizing.

KEYWORDS: Branding, Environment, Green Products, Green Marketing, Green Consumers, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

“You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”

R. Buckminster Fuller

Branding is an integrated strategic act of developing, positioning, and offering the commercially viable and socially satisfying solution through unique identity in a competitive market. Branding exercise has been so vitally needed in marketing program in today’s dog-eat-dog competition that none of the professionally managed organizations of any size can afford to underscore its values, on commercial and consumer turf, in the least. When it is conceived and fortified to multilaterally delight the customers, brand continues to glue to mind and heart of the patrons. Recent time has resoundingly convinced the brand builder to infuse endurance and sustainability in brand elements. In this perspective, the marketer either as a habitual innovator or laggard has turned to green marketing, which has benefitted them on commercial, environmental, and social front on intermediate and long term base. Green marketers primarily design, develop, and promote the products by educating the value of ecofriendly offerings. Beyond promotion, and awareness, the eco-firms integrate greenness of the product into health of the consumer, community, and planet. This also addresses most of the marketing elements necessary for brand building, notwithstanding the suspicion on claims and credibility on the greenness of a product.

PURPOSE

In this paper, the study attempts to study theoretical connection of green marketing mix with brand building, sustainable brand value, and complementarity between the two variables.

BACKGROUND

“Environmental degradation caused by human activity has a long and complex history” (Eckersley, 2006), whereas the related concept of green or eco environment is relatively modern. This was popularly championed by George Catlin to establish National Park for the conservation of wild life in the USA in 1830s. While the campaign on
environment in modern time took its root in 1950s but got accelerated in 1960s with public pressure, which led to National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 in the United States (Kinoti, 2011). The United Nations General Assembly orchestrated United Nations Conference on Human Environment in 1972, which realized the first World Environment Day on the 5th June of 1973 to create awareness on green environment and is since celebrated every year, which is similar to Earth Day, which and is observed under the stewardship of Gaylord Nelson on April 22 each year. Recently Brazil, for instance, hosted the World Environment Day with the theme, “Green Economy: Does it include you?”

To conceptualize and materialize the environmental concerns, several bodies on national, regional, and international scale are operating through various approaches. Examples include Ministry of Environment and Forests (India), Emirates Environmental Group (UAE), Green Alliance (UK), Environmental Working Group (USA), Plant A Tree Today Foundation (International), EarthWatch (International), and United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), Global Environment Facility (GEF) and European Environment Agency (EEA), Worldwide Fund For Nature (International).

The researchers worldwide now have started understanding, reviewing, and analyzing the concepts and practices of green marketing since 1990s. Otherwise, this subject was of great interest limited to the advanced world only. Its importance is growing and companies are towards it. Xerox, for example introduced a “high quality” recycled photocopier paper in an attempt to satisfy the demands of firms for less environmentally harmful products (Singh, 2008). Tuna and MacDonald’s, for example have shown green practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

American Marketing Association (Keller, 2008) defines a brand as a, “name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition.” Keller (2008) holds a brand in a perceptual entity rooted in reality, but it is more than that – it reflects the perceptions and perhaps even the idiosyncrasies of consumers. Aaker (1991) further adds “A product is something that is made in factory; a brand is something that is bought by a customer. A product can be copied by competitor, a brand is unique. A product can be quickly outdated, a brand is timeless”.

Branding plays a vital role in creating the difference in the market. “Strong brands constitute the largest asset for many firms (Leone and Raggio, 2009)”. In the cluttered products and service, a unique brand, no matter what strength, helps the seller and buyer to enter transaction with trust, confidence, assurance, and association, etc. Historically, branded products are deemed to be of superior quality, pricier, from a reputed company of global or regional scale. This holds true to service industry, consumer goods, or business goods. “Branding is not just for tangible goods; it is a principal success driver for service organizations as well (Berry, 2000)”.

Branding is a continuous and integrated act of connecting the supplier, consumer, and publics through the promised delivery. Various elements of brand like packaging, personality, identity, association, and so on are directed towards the consumer to induce them into eyeing, trying, and buying the offering wrapped to deliver and delight the user, failure of which results in cognitive dissonance and even eventually defection. A brand switch does not necessarily imply the buyer’s permanent departure from the same; rather it can be an indicator of several personal and non-personal factors. However, a strong, unique, and favorable brand is potent enough to sensitize, gravitate, and retain the buyers on long term basis. Some consumers are just die-hard fans of some brands without which their life appears to be deprived. Such buyers advocate in the market.

“It is only since 1990’s that the researchers have started academically analyzing consumers and industry attitude towards green marketing.” Partly-informed people view green marketing as the mere means of communication pull with
the ingredients of environment, while this goes far further than promotional tool. There are various terms to green marketing. The terminologies include; green marketing, environmental marketing and ecological marketing (Polonsky, 1994).

Green marketing concept emerges from societal marketing (Kotler, 1999). Khandelwal and Saxena views that “Green marketing is an attempt to characterize a product as being environmentally friendly (eco-friendly)”. The adoption of a green marketing orientation by a firm is principally a response to the increased pressures by society for business to meet its comprehensive ethical and moral responsibilities, while adhering to the marketing concept’s basic tenants as suggested by McCarthy and Perreault (1984) of meeting customer needs at a profit. According to the American Marketing Association green or ecological marketing refers to the “the study of the positive and negative aspects of marketing activities on pollution, energy depletion and non-energy resource depletion” (Henion and Kinnear 1976b, 1; Kinoti, 2011). Mishra and Sharma holds "Green Marketing refers to a holistic marketing concept wherein the production, marketing consumption and disposal of products and services happen in a manner that is less detrimental to the environment”.

Hemantha (Peattie 2001, n.d.) puts there are three phases of green marketing: first- ecological green marketing meant for helping and resolving environmental problems, second- “Environmental” green marketing meant for clean technology with innovation, and third- “Sustainable” green marketing meant for sustainable progress in the green marketing. Green marketing needs to be aligned with sustainable development, which is, according to Yazdanifard and Mercy (World Commission on Environmental development, 1978, 2011),“meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs”.

FRAMEWORK

Following is framework of the relevant variables, which are sequentiallyrelated to each other operating in a larger environment:

![Green Marketing and Branding Diagram](image)

Figure 1: Green Marketing and Branding

In the above framework, environment is the existing one in which a firm uses conventional and green marketing along with the external environment which generate sustainable value, which further impacts branding.
PROPOSITION (P)

P1: Green market has positive influence on branding.

P2: Branding through green marketing is more sustainable.

P3: Green marketing supplements conventional marketing in brand building.

GREEN PRODUCT AND BRANDING

Green products are typically durable, non-toxic, made from recycled materials, or minimally packaged (Ottman, 1997). Green based product strategies comprise any or a combination of recycling, reduction of packaging materials, reconsumption, dematerializing the products; using sustainable source of raw materials, making more durable products; designing products that are repairable, making products that are safe for disposal, making products and packaging that are compostable, and making products that are safer or more pleasant to use (Bhatt, 1993; Ashley, 1993; Polonsky et al, 1997; Ottman, 1998 and Charter et al, 1999; Kinoti, 2011). This concept of green design supports branding strategies used for “ingredient branding” and process branding, which largely determines the functional element of a product. Also, this helps such product address the needs and wants of targeted green consumers. The likely resultant is customer satisfaction eventually adding value.

GREEN LABELING AND BRANDING

Greenguard, Energy Star, Environmentally Preferable Products, SmartWoods, Green Label Plus, Leadership in Energy and Environment Design (LEED) are some popular labels, for instance. Label assures quality usually certified by a third party and help the consumer adopt the green-labeled product significantly. Eco-labels have emerged as one of the main tools of green marketing (Rex and Baumann, 2007, Zaman, 2010). Ashkin’s views as appeared in Zimmerman (2005) are “The certifications really help a purchaser who may not be a technical expert in any one area to buy a product with some level of confidence that it really has been tested”. As a resource protection tool (Charles, 2009) eco-label ensures that concise and specific measures have been taken for certain product in order to avoid or limit undesirable externalities on the ecosystem and the environment (Boude, et al., 2005). A green label is an impactful message to all, especially green consumers. This reinforces the products claim to be of superior value, functionally better, and rationally adoptable, which are arguably the constituents of branding mantra.

GREEN PRICING AND BRANDING

Green products are assumed to be pricy (Peattie, 1999; Polonsky, 2001). However, Peattie (1999) argues that these products are not unusually expensive, but the conventional products are unrealistically cheap because they exclude socio-environmental costs of production, product use and disposal. The green conscious consumers are usually willing to pay higher price for good or big brand if they find the benefits of such brand is multifold and green compliant. Such consumers advocate green planet and thus are allegiant to even pricy brands.

GREEN DISTRIBUTION AND BRANDING

The finished products travel from manufacture point to eventually consumers. In between manufacturers, distributors, agents, brokers, merchants, buying houses and other channel partners are constantly devising optimum and unified ways to fructify competitive advantage. And when this is eco-friendly, this further adds value to the entire operation, whose benefits eventually accrue to the consumer as well. This certainly helps build brand in a systematic manner.
GREEN PROMOTION AND BRANDING

Broek (2010) puts green promotions earn publicity with the local, regional or even national media. Ottman (1997) has suggested several green promotional strategies, such as consumer education, reassurance of green products, solutions to environment related problems, etc. Yazdanifard and Mercy hold, “when a company communicates this through their advertisements, promotions, publicity, and corporate social responsibilities, they are sure to get many loyal customers.” Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has proposed that such information is necessary to educate (Asadollahi and Fallahosseini, 2011).

Promotion along with integrated marketing communication is vital in brand building exercise. The well-planned promotion diligently educates, informs, persuades the customers and substantiates the existential reasons of the offerings. Besides, it rationally gains share of strong, unique, and preferred brand image in the mind, which may simultaneously resonate with heart as well. This is where the marketer initially strategizes promotion to grab and increase the market share. But winning the consumers on rational (mind), and emotional (heart) turf has been increasingly uphill task for today’s marketer. Faced with such clutter, product parity, and “me too” race in the conventional market, green-laced promotion strategy is resoundingly meaningful to everyone. Thus branding through green promotion is by corollary all viable in terms of the ever increased acceptability of green marketing.

GREEN CONSUMERS

Green consumers are the ones “Who is mindful of environment related issues and obligations, and is supportive of environmental causes to the extent of switching allegiance from one product or supplier to another even if it entails higher cost ( www.businessdictionary.com, 2012)”. Research suggests that perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE), or an individual’s belief that s/he can make a difference or impact by purchasing environmentally friendly products, which are important predictors of green consumption (Kinnear et al. 1974; Roberts 1996; Webster 1975, Smith, Ramirez, and Martinez, 2009). The green customers usually hail from affluent people, who are price inelastic and thus indulge in discretionary buying. In general, green consumers understand the values of environmentally friendly products (n.d.). Harris Poll (2009) reveals that a quarter of US adults (26 percent) say that environmental issues are either “extremely” or “very” important to them when deciding which products or services to purchase.

METHODS

The total number of interviews was 20, of which 10 were academicians, 10 were marketers. These participants were largely from Indian origin, in the age group of 30-50, from both the genders, between master and doctoral qualifications, from Dubai. The sampling technique used was non-probability, convenience, and judgment based. The research was designed to follow qualitative method and collect the information using primary data through interview and secondary one through texts and internet, etc. The researcher used open ended questionnaire five in number, which follow as below:

- Do you think green marketing is a viable strategy? Explain.
- Does green marketing positively influence branding exercise? Explain.
- How can you say green marketing is sustainable alternate?
- Is green and conventional marketing supplementary in brand building? How?
- Do you think consumers want become green consumer? Elaborate.
One focus group was conducted to collect a preliminary input and ensure the subsequent viability of the research problem as postulated in the propositions, which acted as a mini pilot study. Then interview was carried out in person and by phone. The duration of the study was from September 20, 2012 to December 25, 2012. The data was analyzed using content analysis through naturalistic paradigm. In this direction, summative content analysis technique was employed for the data analysis against the propositions.

DISCUSSIONS

On viability of the green marketing, response was mixed, but overall response showed positive views, some suspect on the credibility element of green marketing. Green marketing did not influence brand building was the majority’s view. The response to third question summed up on a positive note in a way that initial or intermediary cost was apparently high, but the long-run return and corresponding social benefit justified the initial higher cost.

This was further strongly advocated and substantiated by an eminent personality, former UNEP director. Both green marketing and conventional marketing enhanced the brand value. Respondents viewed that consumer transformed into green consumer, though it was more of affluence-centric.

Based on the content analysis of the response, theoretical foundations, the researcher got valuable findings but not surprising, though. Most of the participants were supportive to the Proposition No.1 (P1), “Green market had positive influence on branding”.

Thus this was confirmed and accepted. While some from consumer side showed lesser degree of support to the proposition. Referring to “P2: Branding through green marketing was more sustainable.” Most of the respondents showed moderate support for the propositions as they raised question on sustainability in the face of fierce competition and volatility.

Thus this was also largely confirmed. On the third assumption or proposition, most of the respondents strongly supported this assumption. This implied the assumption was accepted. Thus, all the assumptions were accepted.

CONCLUSIONS

The concept and practice of green marketing has recently emerged as one of the key strategies for good number of organizations worldwide, which together with conventional marketing strategies has made brand building process more resounding, sustainable, and ecofriendly. This has been evident in the secondary data sources and augmented by the qualitative research herein as well.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The study assumes a great significance as it contains comprehensive coverage on green marketing and accompanying concepts and analysis on the two constructs of the caption.

The compilation of relevant literature and revelation of summated views through qualitative research offers a blended and valuable piece of concepts, information and insights to the practitioners, academicians, budding researchers, students, consumers, and others publics in several ways.

DELIMITATION

Research method is qualitative and sample size is small. Also analytical tool is manual. Besides, the outcomes and conclusions are subject to bias. Hence, the findings may not be scientific enough to generalize as theory.
FUTURE DIRECTION

The researcher can work on constructs closely related to this study, such as green packaging, green consumer, and so on. Also, the researcher can use some other constructs or methods using statistical tools to produce empirical work.

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