

The Role of Sustainable Marketing Practices in Enhancing Organizational Marketing Effectiveness

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Abstract

Sustainable marketing practices are now common in many organizations, but scholars still debate whether they help a firm reach its marketing goals. This conceptual article asks how sustainable marketing practices can improve marketing effectiveness, which means the degree to which marketing activities achieve the goals set for them. Drawing on the resource-advantage theory, the resource-based view, stakeholder theory, and the commitment-trust theory, the article reviews the literature on sustainable marketing and marketing effectiveness. It then proposes a framework in which environmental, social, and economic practices influence marketing effectiveness through three mechanisms: customer trust and satisfaction, brand and reputation assets, and innovation capability. The framework also includes two conditions that may strengthen or weaken these links: top management commitment and market orientation. Six propositions are offered for future testing. The article contributes to theory by separating effectiveness from efficiency, by linking sustainability to marketing outcomes through clear mechanisms, and by showing when sustainable practices may fail to pay off. It also offers guidance for managers who want to build sustainability into their marketing strategy and measure its results.

Keywords: sustainable marketing; marketing effectiveness; resource-advantage theory; customer trust

1. Introduction

Marketing has long been asked to deliver results: more customers, stronger loyalty, a larger market share, and higher profit. At the same time, society now expects firms to protect the environment, treat people fairly, and act responsibly. This creates a practical question for every marketing manager. Do sustainable marketing practices help the firm reach its marketing goals, or do they only add cost?

The idea that marketing should serve society as well as the firm is not new. Kotler (1972) proposed the societal marketing concept, which asks firms to consider the long-term welfare of consumers

and society and not only their short-term wants. The idea became more urgent after the Brundtland report defined sustainable development as meeting present needs without harming the ability of future generations to meet theirs (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). Since then, marketing researchers have produced a large body of work on sustainability. Chabowski et al. (2011) analyzed more than 1,300 articles published between 1958 and 2008 and found that stakeholder theory, corporate performance, and the triple bottom line are core themes in this field. McDonagh and Prothero (2014) later reviewed the literature from 1998 to 2013 and asked for deeper reflection on the systemic and institutional problems of the discipline.

1.1 Problem and research gap

Despite this progress, three problems remain. First, the field still lacks conceptual clarity. Kemper and Ballantine (2019) reviewed more than 200 papers and noted that the meaning of "sustainability marketing" varies widely across studies. Second, many studies link sustainability to broad outcomes, such as firm value or reputation, but say little about the marketing function itself. For example, Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) showed that corporate social responsibility can raise customer satisfaction and, through it, market value. Yet their study looks at the firm as a whole and not at how well marketing meets its own goals. Third, the term "marketing effectiveness" is often mixed with "marketing efficiency." Effectiveness is about reaching goals, while efficiency is about using resources well. Without this distinction, it is hard to judge what sustainable practices really change.

1.2 Purpose and research question

This article addresses these gaps. Its main question is: *How do sustainable marketing practices enhance the marketing effectiveness of an organization, and under what conditions?*⁹ To answer it, the article has three objectives:

1. To clarify the concepts of sustainable marketing practices and marketing effectiveness.
2. To explain, using established theories, why and how these practices may improve marketing effectiveness.
3. To propose a conceptual framework and a set of propositions that future studies can test.

1.3 Contribution

The article makes three contributions. It defines marketing effectiveness clearly and separates it from efficiency. It shows through which mechanisms sustainable practices may lead to better marketing results. And it names the conditions under which these practices may not work, which helps explain the mixed results found in earlier research. For managers, the framework offers a simple way to plan and evaluate sustainability actions inside the marketing function.

1.4 Structure of the article

Section 2 reviews the literature and the theories behind the framework. Section 3 presents the conceptual framework and the propositions. Section 4 discusses the implications for theory and practice. Section 5 concludes and suggests directions for future research.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

2.1 Sustainable marketing: meaning and evolution

The link between marketing and society has developed in stages. Kotler (1972) first argued that marketers should look beyond immediate consumer wants and consider the long-term welfare of consumers and society. In the 1990s, the focus moved to the natural environment. Menon and Menon (1997) described "enviropreneurial marketing" as a strategy that brings environmental concerns into marketing policy and practice, and they showed that it can work at different levels of the organization. Later, the idea widened from the environment alone to a balance of economic, social, and environmental goals, often called the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997).¹

Today, several definitions exist. Gordon et al. (2011) argued that sustainable marketing can be built from three existing fields: green marketing, which develops more sustainable products and services; social marketing, which encourages sustainable behavior; and critical marketing, which questions the current marketing system. Hunt (2011) linked sustainable marketing to equity and economic growth through the resource-advantage theory. Sheth et al. (2011) took a customer-centered view and introduced "mindful consumption," which asks consumers to care for themselves, their community, and nature. More recently, Sheth and Parvatiyar (2021) argued that firms should drive the market toward sustainability and not only follow what the market demands. Kemper and Ballantine (2019) reviewed this large and varied field and showed that sustainability marketing works at different levels of engagement, from small changes in existing practice to deeper changes in how marketing is understood.

In this article, **sustainable marketing practices** are defined as marketing activities that aim to meet customer needs and the firm's goals while protecting the natural environment, respecting social well-being, and supporting long-term economic value. They can be grouped into three dimensions:

2.2 Marketing effectiveness

Marketing effectiveness is about results. Kotler (1977) described it through a marketing effectiveness audit, which rates how well an organization performs key marketing functions and how strongly it applies a customer-focused way of thinking. Since then, researchers have studied how to assess marketing performance in a more complete way. Morgan et al. (2002) reviewed marketing productivity, marketing audits, and performance assessment systems, and argued that these perspectives should be combined. Rust et al. (2004) proposed a broad framework for marketing productivity and concluded that it is possible to show how marketing spending adds to shareholder value. O'Sullivan and Abela (2007) studied senior marketing managers in high-technology firms and found that the ability to measure marketing performance has a positive effect on firm performance.

Building on these works, this article defines **marketing effectiveness** as *the degree to which an organization's marketing activities achieve the goals set for them*. These goals can be grouped into three levels: customer outcomes (satisfaction, trust, loyalty), market outcomes (market share, brand strength, sales growth), and financial outcomes (profit and return on marketing investment). Marketing efficiency is different. It compares outputs with the resources used. A firm can be efficient but not effective, for example when it produces cheap advertising that reaches the wrong audience.²

2.3 Theoretical foundations

Four theories help explain why sustainable practices might improve marketing effectiveness.

Resource-based view and resource-advantage theory. The resource-based view says that a firm gains a lasting advantage when its resources are valuable, rare, hard to imitate, and hard to replace (Barney, 1991). Hunt and Morgan (1995) extended this logic with the resource-advantage theory, which describes competition as a search for resources that allow a firm to serve market segments better or at lower cost. Crittenden et al. (2011) used this theory to argue that firms can align sustainability with marketing strategy and so create a competitive advantage. From this view, sustainable practices are not only costs. They can build resources such as knowledge, reputation, and relationships that are difficult for competitors to copy.

Stakeholder theory. Freeman (1984) proposed that a firm should manage its relationships with all groups that affect or are affected by its activities, not only its shareholders. Sustainable marketing fits this view because it addresses the expectations of customers, employees, communities, and regulators at the same time. Chabowski et al. (2011) found that stakeholder theory is one of the central pillars of sustainability research in marketing.

Commitment-trust theory. Morgan and Hunt (1994) argued that successful relationship marketing requires two key ingredients: commitment and trust. Honest, fair, and responsible behavior is one of the clearest ways to build trust. This theory therefore helps explain how sustainable practices may strengthen customer relationships.

Shared value. Porter and Kramer (2011) argued that companies can create economic value by also creating value for society. They described three ways to do this: reconceiving products and markets, redefining productivity in the value chain, and building supportive local clusters. Their view suggests that the interests of business and society can meet inside the marketing function, especially in product design and market choice.

2.4 What earlier research shows

Evidence on the link between sustainability and marketing results is encouraging but mixed. Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) found that corporate social responsibility improves customer satisfaction and, through satisfaction, market value. Importantly, they also found that in firms with weak innovation capability, social responsibility can reduce satisfaction and harm market value. This suggests that the effect of sustainability depends on the firm's abilities. Menon and Menon (1997) pointed out that the success of environmental strategies depends on how well they are integrated

into marketing and corporate strategy. Review studies add that research has paid more attention to consumers and firm-level performance than to the effectiveness of the marketing function itself (Chabowski et al., 2011; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014).

Three gaps follow from this review. First, few studies treat marketing effectiveness as the main outcome. Second, the mechanisms that connect sustainable practices to results are not always explained. Third, the conditions that make these practices succeed or fail need more attention. The next section addresses these gaps.

3. Conceptual Framework and Propositions

3.1 Overview of the framework

The framework has four parts, shown in the chain below.

Sustainable marketing practices (environmental, social, economic) → **Three mechanisms** (customer trust and satisfaction; brand and reputation assets; innovation capability) → **Marketing effectiveness** (customer, market, and financial outcomes)

Two **conditions** shape the strength of this chain: top management commitment and market orientation.

The logic is simple. Sustainable practices do not improve results by themselves. They work because they change how customers think and behave, because they build valuable assets, and because they push the firm to learn and innovate. When these changes happen, the firm is better able to reach its marketing goals.³

3.2 Direct link

The resource-advantage theory suggests that firms succeed when they build resources that let them serve customers better than rivals do (Hunt & Morgan, 1995). Sustainable practices can create such resources, for example by giving a firm a stronger reputation or better knowledge of customer values (Crittenden et al., 2011; Hunt, 2011). Stakeholder theory adds that meeting the expectations of several groups lowers conflict and builds support for the firm's marketing activities (Freeman, 1984). This leads to the first proposition.

P1. The more a firm applies sustainable marketing practices, the higher its marketing effectiveness.

3.3 Mediating mechanisms

Customer trust and satisfaction. Commitment-trust theory states that trust and commitment are key to lasting relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Fair prices, honest claims, safe products, and responsible communication all signal that a firm can be trusted. Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) found that customer satisfaction links social responsibility to market value. Satisfied and trusting customers are more likely to stay, buy again, and speak well of the firm, which are central customer and market goals.

P2. Customer trust and satisfaction mediate the effect of sustainable marketing practices on marketing effectiveness.

Brand and reputation assets. Over time, consistent sustainable behavior can build a brand that customers see as responsible and reliable. Such an asset is valuable, hard to copy, and slow to build, which matches the logic of the resource-based view (Barney, 1991). A strong reputation can also support higher loyalty and make marketing communication more credible. At the same time, reputation is fragile. Exaggerated or false green claims can destroy it quickly, so honesty is a condition for this mechanism to work.

P3. Brand and reputation assets mediate the effect of sustainable marketing practices on marketing effectiveness.

Innovation capability. Porter and Kramer (2011) argued that firms create shared value by reconceiving products and markets and by redefining productivity in the value chain. Sustainable thinking pushes marketers to design new products, find new segments, and improve distribution. This activity builds the firm's innovation capability, which in turn improves its ability to meet customer needs. Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) found that low innovation capability can turn social responsibility into a weakness. This suggests that innovation capability is both a result and a resource: practices build it, and it helps practices pay off. Future studies should test this two-way role, for example through studies that follow firms over time.

P4. Innovation capability mediates the effect of sustainable marketing practices on marketing effectiveness.

3.4 Conditions that strengthen or weaken the chain

Top management commitment. Menon and Menon (1997) showed that environmental strategy must be part of the firm's wider strategy to succeed. When top managers support sustainability with budgets, targets, and example, marketing teams can apply practices consistently. When support is weak, practices become short campaigns that customers see as marketing tricks.

P5. Top management commitment strengthens the effect of sustainable marketing practices on marketing effectiveness.

Market orientation. Crittenden et al. (2011) proposed that aligning sustainability with market orientation helps a firm turn sustainability into competitive advantage. A market-oriented firm collects information about customers and competitors and responds to it. Such a firm can choose sustainable practices that customers actually value and communicate them in ways customers understand.

P6. Market orientation strengthens the effect of sustainable marketing practices on marketing effectiveness.

3.5 Summary of propositions

No.	Proposition	Main theoretical support
P1	Sustainable marketing practices are positively related to marketing effectiveness.	Resource-advantage theory; stakeholder theory
P2	Customer trust and satisfaction mediate this relationship.	Commitment-trust theory; Luo and Bhattacharya (2006)
P3	Brand and reputation assets mediate this relationship.	Resource-based view
P4	Innovation capability mediates this relationship.	Shared value; resource-advantage theory
P5	Top management commitment strengthens this relationship.	Menon and Menon (1997)
P6	Market orientation strengthens this relationship.	Crittenden et al. (2011)

Table 1. Propositions of the conceptual framework.

4. Discussion

4.1 Theoretical implications

The framework offers three contributions to theory. First, it puts marketing effectiveness at the center and separates it from efficiency. Most earlier work links sustainability to firm-level results such as market value or reputation (for example, Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006). By focusing on the marketing function, the framework asks a more direct question: does sustainability help marketing reach its own goals?

Second, it combines four theories that are usually used separately. The resource-based view and the resource-advantage theory explain why sustainable practices can create lasting advantage. Stakeholder theory explains why many groups matter. Commitment-trust theory explains how customer relationships are built. Shared value explains how business and society can gain together. Together they give a fuller explanation than any single theory.

Third, it explains mixed results. Earlier studies report that sustainability sometimes helps and sometimes does not. The framework suggests that results depend on the mechanisms that are activated (trust, reputation, innovation) and on the conditions in which the firm works (management commitment, market orientation). This gives researchers clear variables to test and helps explain why two firms with similar practices can reach very different results.⁴

4.2 Managerial implications

The framework suggests five practical lessons for marketing managers.

1. **Treat sustainability as part of marketing strategy, not as an extra campaign.** Practices should be built into product design, pricing, distribution, and communication, so they are visible and consistent.
2. **Be honest.** Trust is the most important mechanism in the framework. Claims that cannot be proved can damage reputation and lower effectiveness, so firms should communicate only what they can support with evidence.
3. **Build innovation capability first or together with practices.** Because weak innovation capability can turn social programs into a weakness (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006), firms should invest in learning and product development alongside sustainability actions.
4. **Secure top management support.** Clear targets, budgets, and leadership example help marketing teams keep practices stable over time.
5. **Measure effectiveness, not only costs.** Managers should track customer outcomes (satisfaction, trust, loyalty), market outcomes (share, brand strength), and financial outcomes (profit, return on marketing spending). Evidence suggests that the ability to measure marketing performance is itself linked to better firm results (O'Sullivan & Abela, 2007), and that marketing spending can be linked to shareholder value (Rust et al., 2004).

4.3 Implications for small and medium-sized firms and for policy

Smaller firms often have fewer resources, so they may start with a few high-impact practices, such as honest labeling, fair customer treatment, and local community programs, and expand step by step. Policymakers can support effectiveness by setting clear rules against misleading green claims and by encouraging reporting standards. Such rules protect honest firms and make it easier for customers to trust sustainability messages.

5. Conclusion

This article asked how sustainable marketing practices can improve the marketing effectiveness of an organization. Using the resource-advantage theory, the resource-based view, stakeholder theory, and commitment-trust theory, it proposed a framework in which environmental, social, and economic practices improve effectiveness through customer trust and satisfaction, brand and reputation assets, and innovation capability. It also proposed that top management commitment and market orientation make these effects stronger. Six propositions summarize the framework.

The main message is that sustainability pays off in marketing when it is real, consistent, and supported by the firm's abilities and leadership. It is less likely to pay off when it is used only as a message or when the firm lacks the capability to deliver it.

5.1 Limitations

The article has three limitations. First, it is conceptual, so the propositions have not been tested with data. Second, the literature review is selective and focuses on well-known works in marketing; other fields, such as operations or accounting, may add useful ideas. Third, the framework is general and may need adjustment for specific industries or countries, where consumer expectations and rules differ.

5.2 Directions for future research

Future studies can test the propositions in several ways. Survey research with structural equation modeling can test the mediating and moderating effects. Longitudinal studies can examine the two-way link between practices and innovation capability. Case studies in different industries and countries can show how context changes the results. Researchers can also compare the three dimensions (environmental, social, economic) to see which one has the strongest effect on each type of outcome, and examine consumer groups that react differently to sustainable offers. Finally, studies in developing and emerging markets would help check whether the framework holds in settings where income, regulation, and consumer awareness differ from those in most existing research.

Notes

¹ The triple bottom line is also described as the "3 Ps" (people, planet, profit). In this article, "sustainable marketing" and "sustainability marketing" are used with the same meaning, although some authors treat them differently (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019).

² In this article, effectiveness answers the question "Are we reaching our marketing goals?" Efficiency answers the question "Are we using our resources well while doing so?" Both matter, but they are different measures and should not be mixed.

³ A mediator explains *how* an effect happens (the mechanism). A moderator shows *when* or *for whom* the effect is stronger or weaker (the condition).

⁴ The propositions are statements for future testing. They are based on theory and earlier studies, and they are not empirical findings of this article.

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