



BRAND STAND

When will they ever learn? Esther Maughan on the Limited Edition project, a 'hearts and minds' operation that dares to invest hopes for sustainable development...in the marketing department.

Three surgeons, preparing for theatre, are discussing which professions make the best patients. "I like accountants best", says one, "you open them up and all the parts are numbered." The second replies: "Builders are better, they understand if it takes a lot longer than expected." But the third surgeon concludes decisively: "Marketers are by far the best. They have no heart, no guts and no spine, and the head and the backside are interchangeable."

Yes folks, marketing has eclipsed management consultancy as Most Ridiculed Profession. If it's not being hounded by MP Debra Shipley for making children fat, it's being blamed for society's unprecedented levels of personal debt.

Do the charges stand up? Or, moving forward, could there ever be such a thing as sustainable marketing? And if so, how can marketers be persuaded to unleash their redoubtable creative and communications skills – and big budgets – for social and environmental change?

In theory, there's no inherent conflict with sustainable development (SD). All the 'seven Ps of the marketing mix', as drummed into marketing students to this day, can easily accommodate SD's environmental, stakeholder and wider societal considerations.

To add 'sustainable' to 'marketing', surely, you just add the interests of society and future generations to the traditional focus on consumers and investors? Yes, but....

Several big buts, in fact. Are marketers equipped to arbitrate between the individual consumer's needs and the needs of society, the planet and future generations? And is there a systemic problem right at the heart of the profession as it stands, to boot?

Nerdy and intellectual

Ken Peattie, director of the Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society (BRASS), thinks there is. "Real marketing is about the provision of real benefits that meet real needs, not about pumping stuff out and then persuading people to buy it; that's a sales approach. But our current economic system is based entirely around purchase and ownership, not access to use. Benefits can just as easily come through hire, borrowing and resale, which greatly minimise negative environmental impacts, but the 'purchase and ownership' tide is against marketers who try to do this."

This echoes the prevailing corporate view of marketing outlined by Alan Knight. "B&Q [part of Kingfisher, where Knight is head of corporate responsibility] is responsible for its employees and its

customers. In order to be successful we must increase our sales against competitors. It's almost unrealistic for marketers to give out messages to encourage people not to buy products."

And that's the real charge against marketers, that they use their dark side powers to seduce us into needless consumption, putting a physical strain on the planet with all their new gizmos, and creating a 'keeping up with the Joneses' cultural climate in which buying is seen as the only way to happiness. If marketers succeed in interesting their customers in the issues so that they switch to another brand with rosier credentials or, shock, horror, actually buy less, where might it all end?

This creates a real 'fear factor' amongst marketers, Knight admits. Combined with the ever-present possibility of 'greenwash' accusations, and the lazy universal assumption that 'the consumer doesn't care', it keeps them ploughing the same old furrow. Which isn't all their fault. It's not as though the sustainable development community has compellingly sold its own message to this most cynical and message-conscious of audiences. In Knight's words, "sustainable development gurus haven't made sustainability an inspirational concept to anyone. It comes across as nerdy and intellectual, either having nothing at all to do with me as an individual, or requiring individuals to make a sacrifice in their quality of life." Too little has changed, it seems, since Green Futures grappled with public perceptions of SD a couple of years ago [GF30].

But this is precisely the challenge that the aptly named Limited Edition project (it's about marketing and planetary limits to growth, geddit?) aims to tackle. It's a tricky balancing act requiring poachers to turn gamekeepers and confront some home truths, as project director Stephanie Draper admits: "Marketing can be seen as playing a large part in creating the problem of unsustainability, but a world without marketing is not realistic. With the Limited Edition project we're trying to harness marketers' skills as key message-makers for society." And in case marketers are reluctant to embark on such an adventure with a sustainable development think tank (yawn), the project steering group comprises red-blooded marketers such as Rita Clifton, chairman of Interbrand, and ex-Saatchi advertisers Steve Hilton and Giles Gibbons of Good Business.

Limited Edition	
<i>What it is:</i>	Forum for the Future's sustainable marketing project
<i>First participants:</i>	Unilever, British Gas (Centrica), Vodafone
<i>Objective 1:</i>	offer marketers the chance to spice up their act with SD innovations and add value
<i>Objective 2:</i>	harness communications skills of marketers to promote SD to consumers
<i>Contact:</i>	Stephanie Draper, s.draper@forumforthefuture.org.uk

Competitive advantage

So how does it work, this Limited Edition lark? Well, it kicks off with a series of workshops. Marketers from eager Forum partners get to grips with their key role in, and responsibility for, sustainable development. They scrutinise current advertising, and the patterns of consumption promoted, for instance, by fantasy images of sex, youth and escapism. They investigate how SD can be translated into new or improved products, services and campaigns. They develop action plans to incorporate these new ideas into the way they work, focusing on internal buy-in and competitive advantage. They keep in touch with other participating companies through a Limited Edition network. The network grows as the project is rolled out across different sectors. And the whole experience gets published in a year's time.

"Many marketers feel strongly about sustainability in their personal lives, but don't believe they have the licence to bring the issues to work."

That's the prospectus. And what actually happens behind closed doors? To a large extent, Limited Edition is about articulating personal values. As Draper explains, "many marketers feel strongly about sustainability in their personal lives, but don't believe they have the licence to bring the issues to work. Limited Edition gives them permission". But the cynics need encouragement too, as Neil Marshall at British Gas admits. As senior marketing manager, corporate responsibility, he says that "we worked hard before the first workshop to tailor the project to our business sector, culture and customer drivers, and demonstrate that sustainable development was not too fluffy to waste three days on".

Having completed the full workshop programme, Marshall is well placed to reflect on the process. "We're delighted with the practical action plan we developed, but our biggest challenge was to get to grips with what sustainable development actually means, and how it relates to corporate responsibility. The British Gas brand values are trust and responsibility, so for us corporate responsibility is not a discrete activity but a way of doing business. If you go to the board saying 'SD is the latest thing, we must have a new strategy', people will be terrified of this grandiose jargon monster, or else dismiss it as a fad. Marketing shapes the overall direction of the business, and we can now show that taking account of sustainable development in our marketing processes can help us derive maximum competitive advantage from meeting our statutory targets on renewables and energy efficiency."

(Is that 'sustainable' marketing – or 'responsible' marketing? Is there a difference and does it matter? Giles Gibbons takes the pragmatic view. "Responsible marketing may be a lower bar than sustainable marketing, but organisational change occurs incrementally; there is no point in raising the bar so high that marketers don't even attempt the jump.")

Peas and pot noodles

While regulatory pressures are a clear external prompt for British Gas, the big brands developer Unilever has taken a more piecemeal approach. "So far", says the company's head of UK social and environmental affairs Helen Lo, "we have not developed our marketing initiatives to focus entirely on our sustainability programmes. This is because we must ensure there are sound business cases when developing such initiatives and that local markets and consumer needs are being met effectively. Birds Eye brand managers, for example, appreciate the sustainability impacts surrounding the sourcing of raw materials for their peas and fish fingers; there is a clear business case for sustainable sourcing and to communicate that process in the brand proposition. At the other end of the scale, the Pot Noodle target audience has prioritised convenience and taste above sustainability and so marketing sustainability wouldn't enhance their perception of the product in any way. If sustainability were to be introduced into the product, it would be through our internal reviews on production and processes rather than the brand marketing." You can see her point, even if you'd love to see them try to inspire the nation's Pot Noodle eaters to arise, push aside their pints and PlayStations, heave themselves off their sofas, don their parkas and visit the lonely old lady next door.

Ice cream ethics

Attracted to Limited Edition by its brand development (not lonely old lady) focus, Unilever began the workshop programme with the ice cream brand Ben and Jerry's, already a high profile good corporate citizen in its own wacky way when Unilever bought it. "We all thought Ben and Jerry's would be easy to crack given its brand value and proposition," says Lo, "but the workshop highlighted that each of us had our own understanding of what sustainable development means, and we developed a common understanding. Future workshops will focus on getting to grips with the sustainability impacts of the whole product lifecycle, and explore opportunities to market the products in a different way." And how might this look for Ben and Jerry's? You'll have to let your imagination run wild on that one, for Lo remains discreet – in deference, perhaps, to commercial sensitivities.

Beyond bleeding hearts

The next of seven Unilever brands to undergo the Limited Edition experience will be Sunsilk shampoo. Sunsilk's a huge player in the company's Personal Care division, which Lo admits has not yet teased out the marketing potential of sustainability. She sees a clear opportunity "to explore the marketing of personal care products on their sustainability credentials", posing the pertinent question: "apart from The Body Shop, and Aveda, which other well known and valued brands are doing so?" And Aveda are right at the luxury end; their prices could leave a girl with a daunting debt problem. Room, surely, for new no-chemical brands, health-friendly products, perhaps even some sensitivity over water use....

Not all brands can win competitive advantage from sustainable marketing (after all, if everyone was doing it, where would be the advantage?). But all brands stand to lose competitive advantage – Gap boycott, anyone? – by failing to adopt a risk management approach to brand reputation.

Meanwhile it's increasingly clear that engaging the skills of marketers will bring benefits in getting the messages of sustainable development across. Cause-related marketing campaigns have a growing impact – Nouvelle bog roll for badgers, Walkers Crisps for books for schools (now over – it's those obese school kids again). Genuinely cool youth action websites such as www.popsustainability.org ('pro-corporate, pro-consumer, pro-solutions') and www.adbusters.org show how compelling these issues can be when treated by creative industry professionals.

It is still early days for marketers, as Lo admits. "It's great that we've got this far, and commitment has come right from the top for us to be involved in Limited Edition. I can't say how the project will affect Unilever's marketing programmes in the future, but the fact that we're even willing to consider and commit resources to this area is a real step forward." But who knows? One day that surgeon might be rejecting marketing patients as a bunch of bleeding hearts.

*Esther Maughan is director of Strong Language, a responsible marketing consultancy.
esther.maughan@strong-language.co.uk*

Those seven marketing Ps

People: (customers and their needs)

Planning: (fancy name for research)

Positioning: (relative to competitors)

Product or service: (design and manufacture)

Price: (surprise, surprise)

Place: (distribution and purchase points)

Promotion: (communications and advertising)

B2B 4SD?

Business to business marketing may be less funky than marketing to the consumer, but Ken Peattie is excited about its potential for taking SD on board.

- The reputational risks of buying the 'wrong' product from the 'wrong' company are far greater for an organisation than an individual consumer.
- Consumers are notoriously fickle, but large companies or government departments are less likely to be inconsistent from one day to the next.
- Whereas consumers can only choose between repeating a purchase or going elsewhere, organisations can work with their suppliers to achieve change – and it's the suppliers' marketers who must take the lead in responding.

No surprise, then, that the Office of Government Commerce is encouraging its purchasing teams to adopt a more sustainable understanding of 'value for money'. Marketers, be warned!

s.draper@forumforthefuture.org.uk

This article first appeared in Green Futures magazine www.greenfutures.org.uk