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Ethics, Sustainable Marketing and the Green Consumer

■ Introduction

There is a growing trend within marketing to work towards a more sustainable agenda, in which the ethics of both the production, dissemination and consumption of marketing materials is becoming increasingly questioned. Sustainability has been a significant theme in THEF for a number of years. There is a long traditional of sustainable tourism experiences that range from trekking in undeveloped areas to visiting Centre Parcs, while food production has developed clear links with the 'Fairtrade', organic and slow food movements. Organisations such as Marriott Hotels have invested heavily in their green credentials and large events such as Glastonbury Music Festival have their foundations in raising money for charities. As such the notion of sustainability has become one of the central themes of experiences marketing and has seen the emergence of the green consumer.

The theme of sustainability within experiences marketing can be seen to fulfill a number of objectives that can be broadly divided into three elements. The first is where sustainability is used as a means of product differentiation, adds to the brand value, reinforces the credentials of the organisation, and impacts on buyer choice – in other words it adds an economic value to the company's or organisation's product. The second element is the impact the notion of sustainability has on the consumer's perception of products, how it makes us feel and

ultimately how it makes us behave. Finally, is the view that organisations pursue these agendas as ends in themselves; simply for altruistic reasons and a belief that it is the right thing to do. This chapter will examine the greening of marketing has on THEF marketing.

■ The greening of experiences marketing

It is argued that current marketing practices have failed the sustainability agenda (Mitchel & Saren, 2008). This failure may be seen to be the direct result of the paradox that exists between marketing and the concept of sustainability. Marketing is fundamentally a commercial activity that encourages people to buy products, to purchase things they do not need or require. As Kotler states, marketing is:

...a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others. (2008:7)

As stated previously, experiences marketing needs to be understood as being different from other forms of marketing and as such, the above quote needs to also reflect the social and cultural practices that underpin the production and consumption of food, tourism, events and hospitality, and the impacts that occur as society and culture is shaped and consumed in relation to their production. Parsons & Maclaran (2009:14) summarises the criticism of marketing as “fueling consumption and encouraging materialism by stimulating wants as a means of satisfying human needs”. Whereas, sustainability is underpinned by notions of anti-consumerism, sensitive development and not encouraging waste etc. *Our Common Future* (The Brundtland Report, 1987) provides one of the most useful and widely used definitions of what is meant by sustainability. The report defines sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without depleting resources or harming natural cycles for future generations”. As marketers we have to reconcile this paradox and question our role within the global economy. As Mitchell & Saren (2008:399) state:

The philosophy of marketing speaks the language of mate-

rial possession, individuality, and newness, and works on the assumption of unlimited growth and the accumulation of waste”

Thus, every time we promote a form of food, destination, event etc. we need to understand that our behaviour and actions have an impact upon communities, individuals, hosts and the environment. Sometimes this is positive and sometimes it is negative. Nevertheless, all of this makes the assumption that notions of morality and rationality are a given, and that all organisations and consumers are concerned about their ethical footprint (Moisander & Pesonen, 2002).

However there has been a growing movement by companies to adopt, or to be seen to adopt, more sustainable practices, and for many companies these form the basis of their campaigns (Mitchel & Saren, 2008). For example, Starbucks and Cadbury’s have used their association with ‘Fairtrade’ as the core message of the campaign, while McDonalds have focused on the zero additives approach to their products. These strategies not only enable them to attempt to maintain their market position, but also to develop the brand value of their companies. This approach is reflected in the Chartered Institute of Marketing’s Ethics and Social Responsibility framework which states that:

The role of the marketer these days could be seen in terms of connecting with stakeholders not only in terms of value, but in terms of values. In a world where intangible assets and corporate reputation are centre stage, the marketing team needs to focus on ethical issues more than ever before. (CIM, 2010)

This movement within the marketing industry is not purely motivated by philanthropic actions, but has its foundation in maximising profit or protecting the market position, or in marketing speak the ‘Triple Bottom Line’. The CIM (2010) declare that the Triple Bottom Line:

...creates a framework for companies to become sustainable without ignoring the importance of the financial bottom line and other concerns that are vital to a company’s survival, growth and economic success.

This raises the question as to what is exactly meant by the phrase or