

Assessing the influences on purchase intention for environmentally friendly products

The objective of this marketing research project is to assess the relative importance of emotional benefits on the purchase intentions for 'green' outdoor apparel

PROBLEM Over the past couple of decades environmental concern and interest in the environment has slowly been rising, but market shares for environmentally friendly products remain low and marketing sustainable products is perceived as unprofitable adventure by the majority of companies.

A key part of sustainability marketing is the switch to alternative materials (e.g. from renewable or recycled resources) in the production process. From an economic perspective, foreseeable depletion of oil-based resources will be a catalyst for change while increasing environmental pollution is a moral driver of corporate responsibility. When quality and functional standards for sustainable products can be met and corporate culture facilitates the 'greening' of the entire value chain, innovative product development can turn out to be a solid, long-term competitive advantage.

Nevertheless has consumer demand for ecologically sensible products been rather unstable and unpredictable.

OBJECTIVE Therefore the goal of this study is to shed light on the consumer behavior for environmentally friendly products and the variables influencing purchase decisions in the context of eco-friendly outdoor apparel. The market for quality outdoor clothing is heavily saturated, highly competitive and offers little chance for differentiation through functional product attributes. With the majority of product attributes equal and environmental advantages hidden from clothing customers (credence goods) emotional triggers might qualify best to sway preferences in the marketplace.

Thus offering products containing materials from renewable resources (i.e. hemp fibers) or recycled substances (i.e. polyester) might present itself as a great opportunity for differentiation through emotional benefits – an influence that has been issue to comparably few theoretical discussions and empirical findings.

Emotional benefits like the so-called 'warm-glow effect', auto-expression or nature-relation are likely to overcome motivational conflicts – the result of pursuing egoistic rather than altruistic goals.

Explanation of emotional benefits in this context:

- Conscious consumption of products that are, to a certain degree, made from components out of alternative material can protect the environment and strengthen this market segment in the long run (warm glow effect).
- Positional and clear eco-labeling could make the purchase a notable statement of personal opinion towards individuals' social surroundings (auto-expression benefit).
- Connectedness to nature as big part of some consumers' self-identities could be a strong predictor of consumers' intentions (nature-relation benefit). Practicing outdoor activities is seen as a positive supporting factor in this context.

METHODOLOGY Eco-friendly product design can be seen as a unique selling proposition, if developed sensibly and marketed to the correct target group. A conjoint analysis sheds light on the relative importance of key product attributes including environmentally friendly material. Its results are then compared to significant variables influencing purchase intentions: perceived obstacles in the buying process, effects of values and attitudes (cognitive product evaluation) of the consumer, influence of social pressure (auto-expression) and perceived benefits from complying to one's environmental self-identity (nature-relation).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING MANAGERS:

- The results from the conjoint analysis can be used to derive market segments with different preferences (price, quality or eco-orientation)
- The respective target groups can be clearly described through the significant behavioral and attitudinal influences contributing to the purchase intentions and using common demographics
- Obstacles can be identified and eliminated and facilitating measures can be implemented, i.e. through innovative product development with alternative materials or optimized context-related marketing strategies, to suit consumers' complex environmental concerns and perceptions