

TEACHING SUSTAINABILITY MARKETING: FINDING COMMON GROUND BETWEEN THE CLASSROOM AND UNIVERSITY LIVING

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Abstract

In the mid 2000's in response to pressure from AACSB, business schools began to consider program-level learning objectives in the area of sustainability and developed measurements of how students mastered the concept and applied it to business decisions (Borin & Metcalf, 2010). Further during that same time, demands for more coverage of sustainability came from industry upon recognition of threats to our natural systems, and increasing disparities between those who have and those who have not.

Marketing educators were quick to respond to these pressures and demands. As marketing aims to meet the needs of customers, manage product strategy from production to disposal, and move products from producer to end user, it is logical for marketers to take a lead role in teaching sustainability and develop courses in sustainability marketing.

Bridges & Wilhelm (2008) were among the first to discuss the integration of sustainability into marketing curriculum. Textbooks emerged (e.g., see Martin & Schouten, 2012) and informative books/articles provided tools to assist marketing educators in the incorporation of sustainability into the classroom at the same time (see Timpson et. al, 2006 or Boris & Metcalf, 2010). But while much attention has been given to the integration of sustainability into the marketing curriculum, some educators acknowledge this is somewhat challenging (Von der Heidt and Lamberton, 2011). A sustainability mindset requires consideration of environmental, social, and economic impacts of business decisions. Often business students who embrace a capitalistic society have difficulty considering alternative business models and are skeptical of the sustainability movement.

One way to address the lack of understanding of the positive impacts of a sustainability-focused business model and the skepticism surrounding it is to provide students with the opportunity to work on sustainability projects that impact them personally. In other words, we should challenge them to put sustainability into practice where they live - their university housing, dining halls, student unions, recreational centers and libraries for instance. Providing opportunities to learn about sustainability in a way that touches their daily lives as students, could have a real impact to helping them embrace sustainability in business. At the same time, these projects can benefit the institution.

Anytime students are challenged to work on projects involving campus life, marketing educators can look to his/her university's strategic initiatives for project opportunities. Most universities are developing and adopting sustainability practices and programs, therefore making marketing projects focused on campus sustainability initiatives an easy fit. Further, when it comes to sustainability, colleges and universities are leaders. The Princeton Review classified 322 green colleges and recognized 21 US schools that achieved the 2013 Green Rating Honor Roll (the highest score). The Review reported on such initiatives as the development of sustainability courses, university dining halls converting grease into biofuel, and the development of campus bicycle programs just to name a few. The sustainability marketing course is an appropriate course for students to contribute to the university's sustainability initiatives, while learning, practicing, and eventually living sustainability. This approach integrates course objectives, university strategic initiatives, and campus life. Further, while students generally evaluate courses with experiential components more favorably than those without (Bridges, 1999; Drafke, Schoenbachler, & Gordon, 1996; Gruca, 2000; Hamer, 2000; Petkus, 2000), these university

sustainability initiatives also have student recruitment impact. The Princeton Review states that two of every three incoming students are looking for colleges where sustainability is evident. The Review suggests these students care less about luxury housing and high tech classrooms, and more about conservation and energy efficiency on their campus.

This approach to teaching sustainability marketing was adopted and tested during the fall 2013 term in a private university in the northeastern US (also an AACSB accredited business school). Students were challenged to develop a business plan for a campus garden. Campus gardens at other universities have provided food for underserviced members of the community, and harvests from the garden have been used by campus dining facilities (see Wake Forest University). Students were challenged to conduct primary and secondary research for the garden initiative, identify how the garden integrates into the mission and values of the university, and develop the plan for the garden including location, size, water supply, tools, plantings, funding, etc. They were charged with developing plans for the long-term sustainability of the garden as well as making recommendations for how the garden harvests will be used and how the garden will be marketed to the campus community as well as the surrounding community.

Students worked with various stakeholders from within the university as well as the community. Specifically, students met with members of the senior leadership team of the university, facilities management, the university chef, and outside nonprofit organizations specializing in community gardens. Some students even visited surrounding universities where such gardens exist. All individuals providing support for the project were invited to the final student presentations.

Other suggestions for sustainability marketing projects that could potentially have a positive impact on campus life include the development of a zip car program, a plan for sustainable ecology including sustainability plantings and landscaping, water refilling stations, and waste diversion programs.

References Available upon Request