

# DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN UNDERGRADUATE SUSTAINABLE MARKETING COURSE

Mine Üçok Hughes, Woodbury University

## Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the design, implementation and achieved learning outcomes of a sustainable marketing undergraduate course for faculty interested in offering a similar course or integrating elements of sustainable marketing in their curricula. The instructional process incorporated several modes of learning including experiential and integrative learning, client-based projects, field trips and guest speakers. The two main learning goals were to explore the sustainable marketing practices and study how sustainability is marketed. The student evaluations indicate that the learning goals were achieved and student consumer behavior was highly affected.

## Introduction

The word sustainability seems to have become the buzzword of our times. Small and big corporations have recognized the importance of sustainability in its many forms as a means to gain competitive advantage and some have even turned it into a branding strategy (e.g. *Ecomagination* by General Electric). With the growing importance and relevance of the topic, more and more business schools are starting to open centers and offering courses and degrees for students interested in pursuing careers in sustainable business practices that will gain more significance with ever increasing laws and regulations. As the sustainability research stemming from the business schools is increasing in number and span (Aspen Institute, 2013), more efforts are made theorizing this phenomenon and providing a structure and framework to study it. Regardless, within the field of marketing education, most marketing curricula fall short in doing justice to covering sustainability. In addition, most major marketing textbooks either do not include the topic at all or at best dedicate a chapter on business ethics (Bridges & Wilhelm 2008). Sustainable marketing as a course taught on its own is an exception that seems to be confined to a few business schools, mostly at the MBA level.

It is argued that “as corporations embrace CSR (and related sustainability initiatives) and the number of CSR-related jobs grows, the imperative for business educators is to foster the mindset, to introduce students to the frameworks and tools, and to provide opportunities for students to develop the skill sets that enable them to be change makers for the companies in which they accept positions” (Borin and Metcalf, 2010, p. 141). Often times educators who recognize the prominence of the topic of sustainability (and the vast array of academic fields, disciplines, and areas it covers) and would like integrate it into business school curricula are faced with an abundance of information available to them through a plethora of popular press and academic articles. However, this abundance can have an adverse affect and could be a hindrance rather than an aid in creating courses that deal with sustainability in the business context.

The aim of this article is to present the design, implementation and achieved learning outcomes of a sustainable marketing undergraduate course for faculty interested in offering a similar course or integrating elements of sustainable marketing in their curricula. It is comprised of the following sections: the first section starts with an introduction to the key concepts including the definition of sustainability and is followed by a brief summary of the place and role of sustainability in business education. The following sections describe the course design, assignments, course assessment and evaluation. The implementation suggestions provided in the end are aimed towards guiding faculty interested in integrating sustainability into their curriculum.

## Sustainability in Business Education

In the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, better known as the Brundtland Commission, sustainable development is defined as "development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." While many argue that this definition is too broad that it fails to address the expansive nature of the term, it has been considered a good starting point for discussions on the topic. The concept of sustainable development "helped to shape the international agenda and the international community's attitude towards economic, social and environmental development" (UNECE, 2013).

The last decade has seen an increase in the importance given to the role of education for a sustainable future. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) underlined the importance of educating for sustainability by becoming the lead agency for UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) (UNESCO, 2013). In 2007 an international task force comprised of deans, university presidents and official representatives of leading business schools and academic institutions developed PRME: Principles of Responsible Management Education. Through their six principles of purpose, values, method, research, partnership and dialogue they inspire and champion responsible management education, research and thought leadership globally (United Nations Global Compact, 2013).

The revised standards in 2013 of The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) include a strong emphasis on commitment to corporate and social responsibility making it one of the three criteria that represent its core values. Diversity, sustainable development, environmental sustainability, and other emerging corporate and social responsibility issues are regarded as important issues that require responses from business schools and business students (AACSB, 2013). Moreover, AACSB standards dictate that "the school must demonstrate a commitment to address, engage, and respond to current and emerging corporate social responsibility issues (e.g., diversity, sustainable development, environmental sustainability, and globalization of economic activity across cultures) through its policies, procedures, curricula, research, and/or outreach activities" (AACSB, 2013 p. 6). "Social responsibility, including sustainability, and ethical behavior and approaches to management" (AACSB, 2013 p. 31) are considered among the general business and management knowledge areas business students of Bachelor's Degree programs and higher should study.

Beyond Grey Stripes, a biennial survey conducted by the Aspen Institute's Center for Business Education, ranks full-time MBA programs worldwide based on their integration of social, ethical, and environmental content into the curricula. Availability of relevant courses, student exposure, number of relevant courses on business impact and faculty research compose the main criteria for rankings. According to the 2011-2012 report the percentage of schools surveyed that require students to take a course dedicated to business and society issues has increased dramatically over time: 34% in 2001; 45% in 2003; 54% in 2005; 63% in 2007; 69% in 2009; 79% in 2011 (Aspen Institute, 2013). In fact, the survey reports an increase in all main criteria measured including a 30% increase in faculty research on relevant topics. Specific to the discipline of marketing the new question being posed is "how does one make sustainable and ethical marketing decisions." It is stated that "the ethics of marketing to emerging markets, deceptive marketing, and marketing to children are frequent topics of discussion" (Aspen Institute, 2013).

The increase in faculty research related to sustainability issues has led to a number of academic peer reviewed journals, some interdisciplinary in nature. These include *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, *Business Strategy and the Environment*, and *Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy*, an open access e-journal. Having recognized its prominence, top marketing journals have dedicated entire issues to this topic as well. *Journal of Marketing*

*Education* (Vol. 35, 2, 2013), *The Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (Vol. 39, 1, 2011), and *The Journal of Advertising* (Vol. 24, 2, 1995) are a few good examples.

### **Sustainable Marketing**

Sustainable marketing is defined as “the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers in such a way that both natural and human capital are preserved or enhanced throughout” (Martin & Schouten, 2012, p. 10). Bridges and Wilhelm (2008) provide a list of terms that differentiate sustainable marketing from other sustainability related terms. They categorize the terms sustainability, sustainable development, sustainable marketing, green marketing, social marketing, nonprofit marketing, social entrepreneurship, corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability in terms of the type of organization (nonprofit vs. for profit) and their financial/economic, social equity and environmental objectives.

In order to adopt a sustainability perspective in marketing practices Borin and Metcalf (2010) argue that “marketing educators need to graduate students who are fluent in the language of sustainability as it pertains to marketing and who can apply sustainability frameworks to the design of new products and services” (p. 142). However, they also realize that this is more challenging than one can assume as sustainability-related concepts are relatively new ideas (Borin & Metcalf, 2010, p. 142) and marketing textbooks are falling behind catching up with the changing times and demands. The results of DeMoss and Nicholson’s (2005) content analysis of 21 introductory marketing books “showed limited, sporadic coverage of specific issues, with modest exposure to general environmental awareness” (p. 338) and they conclude that business schools have yet to incorporate the vitally important area of environmentally sustainable practices, into their curricula, in part because available textbooks lack sufficient coverage. Granted that it has been almost ten years since DeMoss and Niholson’s study. A more recent search of marketing textbooks with sustainability focus still yields to a low number (fewer than ten on Amazon.com on September 2014).

While we can hardly talk about a surge in the number of textbooks on sustainable marketing, it is encouraging to see that the number of marketing courses focusing on sustainability issues going beyond the limited scope of corporate social responsibility has increased in recent years (Aspen Institute, 2013). Beyond Grey Pinstripes web site indicates that while traditional marketing courses such as Consumer Behavior and Marketing Management are taught with a focus on social and environmental responsibility, many non-traditional courses have been introduced in recent years. Some examples include “New Media Green and Social Marketing” (Dominican University of California), “The Environment and the Marketplace” (Yale School of Management), “Consumerism and Social Issues” (Wright State University), and “Sustainability in Business” (University of Notre Dame).

### **The Course Design**

The sustainable marketing course described in this paper was offered as an elective marketing course in the spring 2013 and spring 2014 semesters at a small, private, non-profit, West-coast American university with average class size of 15. Course prerequisites were introduction to business fundamentals and principles of marketing in addition to minimum 40 credit units.

Course description as appeared in the syllabus read, “this course explores the roles of marketing in a sustainable society. Sustainable marketing has two imperatives: to conduct itself in a way that advances an organization’s economic success while creating a positive impact on society and the environment, and to help bring about a society that values and practices social and environmental sustainability in all its behaviors.” Key learning goals were: i) introduce key concepts of sustainable marketing, ii) learn to identify sustainable marketing opportunities, link them to marketing strategy, and offer specific tactics and applications, iii) learn to incorporate triple bottom line (social, economic and environmental) goals into marketing strategy and

practice, iv) learn to apply principles of sustainable marketing to an entrepreneurial context, v) improve teamwork and oral and written presentation skills.

*Sustainable Marketing* by Diane Martin and John Schouten was chosen as the main textbook supplemented by additional readings (see Appendix). An in-depth rather than in-breadth approach was taken and the discussion topics were categorized under the following four main areas: housing, energy, food, and fashion. Several guest speakers were invited to give presentations on their areas of expertise related to sustainability in various fields. Some of these guest speakers were the two main designers of a sustainable village to host orphans in Uganda, the director of the company that caters sustainable food services on the university campus, the founder of a non-profit organization that combats world hunger, and the founding president of a social marketing agency. Two off-campus field trips were organized; to the local recycle center and an urban ecovillage.

### **Course Assignments**

In this section only two major group assignments will be mentioned briefly due to space limitation. One of the aims of the course was to explore how sustainability is marketed. A client-based project was designed to allow students apply their marketing skills. Marketing students teamed with students of another course titled “Urban Green Interventions” (UGI) from outside school of business to work on a joint project, which enabled and encouraged interdisciplinary integrative learning. The UGI course aimed at placing the students, called interventionists, in the role of the educator, facilitator and project manager and aided them to work with client middle schools, advocating better water and energy practices in the reduction of green house gas emissions.

The sustainable marketing students, divided into groups of their choice, worked similarly to various departments of a marketing communication agency and the instructor became the facilitator during the client-agency conversations. To promote the events and activities UGI students took part in, marketing students prepared a press kit, a web page and a social media plan document which included the following: description of the four social media platforms (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube) chosen, target audience, appearance and application of different social media and log in information for client access. Actual social media accounts were created and an interactive presentation was given. This project provided a real life experience as the clients critiqued their work, asked for revisions and commented on design and content aspects of the students’ presentation. The web site can be reached at <http://sustainablemarketing.webs.com/>.

For the other project, the students were required to create a web site in which they had to apply principle marketing concepts and create the content based on their course learnings. The students decided the target audiences to be prospective students of the course, current/future employers, current or prospective students’ parents, and university administration. This web site proposal was submitted to the university’s sustainable campus committee to be considered for a future actual web site.

### **Course Assessment and Evaluation**

The assessment (through analysis of student blogs, written exams, oral presentations, and group projects) of all course assignments indicates that course key learning goals (see above) were successfully met. Additionally the course attained further achievements.

It raised awareness to the concept of sustainability in general and sustainability from a business perspective in particular. It also raised awareness to social, cultural, ecological, economic and political issues in relation to marketing.

O.B.: *As a future marketing professional, I now think of sustainability as a growing trend in a rising market. I have learned that there is a growing population who are becoming more interested in the economic, social and environmental welfare of our planet. I am now capable of analyzing the different levels of competitive advantage that sustainability adds to an organization. This course has helped me develop a new way to think about sustainability. Though the word sustainability may seem too ambiguous to define, this course does a great job at helping one shape and define a clear understanding of how a sustainable company acts, and how marketers can integrate these actions and create brand value. As a marketing student, a consumer, and a future marketing employee, I have developed a new understanding of sustainability. As a marketing student, this course has enabled me to view sustainability as a culture rather than a simple term. The course has extended my understanding of how marketing functions within an organization. Through the lens of sustainable marketing, marketers can educate consumers and provide them with genuine information about the products they are buying.*

Through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) students applied their sustainable marketing knowledge and marketing communication skills and theory to real life projects. Overall, the class has been a transformative experience for all students. Expressions like “eye-opening” and “mind-boggling” along with words like “shocked” were commonly used in students’ weekly journals, blog entries and in-class discussions.

Z.M.: *The field trip to the recycling center was a great experience, an experience that really motivated me to start recycling... This class has been a huge eye opener for me. Especially coming from a smaller town, which is always either #1 or #2 in worst air pollution in the nation. Sustainability was never taught in my years of schooling. I also love learning a different side of marketing that is not about the entertainment industry and glamour.*

Some of the biggest impacts this course had on students were the changes it had on their attitudes towards and beliefs about sustainability and their consumption behavior. The course raised their awareness to topics they were not aware of before. Throughout the course the students regularly reported the changes in their purchase decision-making processes and consumption practices including the disposition stage.

J. J.: *For my third journal entry I would like to concentrate on things I have done and items I have purchased this past week to begin my road to a more sustainable lifestyle. I made a trip to [name of store] and decided to consider new “greener” approaches to my purchase behavior. When I went to the grocery store, I remembered to bring my reusable bags so I brought my groceries home in them versus plastic or paper bags. This weekend I also made the effort to fill a bag with my recyclables and bring them over to my boyfriend’s apartment which does have a recycle bin. Although it is not the most convenient thing, I felt really great about taking that extra step. I would really like to turn these decisions this week into habits.*

A.H.: *This course has encouraged me as a consumer to change many of my consumption habits. Since attending this class, I think more frequently about the effects and impacts that my behavior has on the environment. Although, I am far from being sustainable, this course has definitely influenced my purchasing decisions. I am trying to buy products that I truly need instead of purchasing items that I will waste in the end. I attempt to eliminate waste as much as I can and conserve water and energy usage. It is important for a consumer to change their attitude and understand that each action, small or big, makes a difference in the environment and that everyone can be part of a more eco-friendly consumption society.*

Many students stated in their journal and blog entries that this course has led them to the understanding that sustainable business practices can lead to competitive advantages.

*A.H.: This class has taught me many views of marketing. The most important aspect that I have learned during this course is how sustainability can give an organization a competitive advantage. Especially, if the company is a first mover in their industry, they benefit and profit from the innovation even more.*

They also realized that gaining a deeper understanding of and appreciation for sustainability within the business context have given them a competitive advantage in the job market as well. As business school graduates applying for jobs, they will need to brand and differentiate themselves from the competitors.

*T.D.: As a marketing student this course has definitely given me a competitive advantage over my peers. When I apply for a job in the future this will unquestionably be something I highlight in my resume or in my portfolio. Not only does the average person not know enough about sustainability, but they most likely have never learned about it in a business or marketing sense. For example, when working on the press kit in my midterm project group, we had the idea of making a completely electronic press kit. This would not only eliminate all paper waste that we would have produced, but also will not go against our mission of sustainability. This course has prepared me for the sustainable future that is rapidly approaching; I am one step ahead of everyone else. Pretty soon, sustainability will not be a marketing strategy, it will be a requirement. Knowing what I know now, I will be an irreplaceable asset to any company. I can guide a company on how they can change their current practices to be more environmentally conscious and what future decisions they can/should make on remaining on the sustainable path. As I mentioned above, I definitely have a competitive advantage over all of my competition when applying for a job in the near future.*

Sustainability touches upon all areas of our lives and from an academic standpoint it covers all disciplines. It can only be understood when studied and researched as an interdisciplinary topic. The course aided the formation of the integrative student (Huber & Hutchings, 2004). The students who had taken the business ethics course and the academic writing course with focus on sustainability were quick to make connections between these courses. Moreover, the graphic design minors identified opportunities for their future designs.

*P.C. (a graphic design major, marketing minor): Another interesting part of the field trip to the recycle center was when [the director's name]'s coworker talked to us about a drink he found in the vending machine and how many companies now use multiple plastics and new methods. From a designer's standpoint, I actually liked the packaging. It definitely stands out from the rest of the soda/juice market, packaging-wise. However, it didn't even occur to me that our decisions as designers might cause problems down the road, when people go to recycle the product. We did not learn anything about that in class. We focused on the design and user functionality of the product. Having the coworker rant about these new designs made me think and be more aware of the consequences of my design choices.*

### **Implementation Suggestions**

In this section some implementation suggestions for the sustainable marketing course are provided briefly. Naturally some of these suggestions are valid for any course.

- The sheer amount of available information and resources on sustainability might be overwhelming. Deciding between an in-depth versus and an in-breadth approach would be useful.

- Invite guest speakers. It is hard for any one person to claim to be an expert on all aspects of sustainability, which is an overarching topic across multiple disciplines. Inviting guest speakers allows people with different areas of expertise on sustainability to share their views, opinions and experiences and alleviates the assumption that the instructor is expected to know it all about sustainability.
- Encourage and facilitate integrative learning. Relate course material to students' prior knowledge of business, marketing and courses from other disciplines.
- Engage in cross campus collaborations. Sustainability covers all disciplines and all sciences making it a perfect topic to approach from many different angles. You might find other instructors looking for collaborations.
- Use online forums to encourage out of class discussion. It is recommended (Seagle, 2013) to use social media sites like Facebook, rather than university online systems like Blackboard or Moodle, as most students use social media daily and find it more natural to engage with such platforms.
- Make the students create a(n) (online) knowledge bank. This encourages research and evaluation of information.
- Learn on the field from the field. Use your institution, city, state, and country as your field of exploration. Contact local businesses, recycle centers, sustainable establishments and nonprofit organizations for collaboration.
- Apply experiential learning. Find a company that has sustainability challenges and work with them.
- Make the course relatable and useful to your students. While this suggestion holds true for all classes it is of particular importance for the sustainable marketing course as students may not see the relevancy of the topics to their immediate careers or may question the applicability of course contents to their everyday lives.
- Discuss careers in sustainability. There are plenty of resources online to guide students in careers in sustainability. Great green careers website (<http://www.greatgreencareers.com/>) is a good start.

### **Concluding Remarks**

We live in times when global climate change is not only part of our everyday vocabulary, but is also a reality that affects the business world. The corporate world is faced with complex challenges due to diminishing natural resources, changing consumer demand along with human induced natural disasters. As business school faculty it is our obligation to educate our students for future business models and careers. There is an increased demand for managers who can address issues beyond corporate social responsibility and tackle with business solutions that adapt to the changing times. The business schools have the increased responsibility to integrate sustainability issues into their curriculum especially given the fact that business world is seen as the main culprit for many natural disasters.

References Available upon Request

## Appendix

This Appendix provides a brief list of resources faculty might find useful. The list is by no means an exhaustive one.

### Textbooks

- Sustainable Marketing (2012) by Diane Martin and John Schouten, Prentice Hall.
- Sustainable Marketing: Managerial – Ecological Issues (1999) by Donald Fuller, Sage Publications.
- Sustainability Marketing: A Global Perspective (2009) by Frank Martin Belz and Ken Peattie, Wiley.

### Books

- Overdressed (2012) by Elizabeth L. Cline, Portfolio Penguin.
- Waste (2009) by Tristram Stuart, Norton.
- Naked Fashion (2011) by Safia Minney, New Internationalist.
- In Defense of Food (2009) by Michael Pollan, Penguin.
- The Ecology of Commerce Revised Edition: A Declaration of Sustainability (2012) by Paul Hawken, Collins Business Essentials.
- Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things (2002) by Michael Braungart and William McDonough, North Point Press.

### Useful Web Sites

- <http://www.storyofstuff.org/>
- <http://michaelpollan.com/>
- <http://www.tristramstuart.co.uk/>
- <http://ipcc.ch/>
- <http://www.greenamerica.org/>

### Relevant Ted Talks

- Tristram Stuart:  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/tristram\\_stuart\\_the\\_global\\_food\\_waste\\_scandal.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/tristram_stuart_the_global_food_waste_scandal.html)
- Michael Pollan:  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/michael\\_pollan\\_gives\\_a\\_plant\\_s\\_eye\\_view.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/michael_pollan_gives_a_plant_s_eye_view.html)
- Suzanne Lee: [http://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne\\_lee\\_grow\\_your\\_own\\_clothes.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne_lee_grow_your_own_clothes.html)
- Jessi Arrington: [http://www.ted.com/talks/jessi\\_arrington\\_wearing\\_nothing\\_new.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jessi_arrington_wearing_nothing_new.html)
- Dan Phillips:  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_phillips\\_creative\\_houses\\_from\\_reclaimed\\_stuff.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_phillips_creative_houses_from_reclaimed_stuff.html)
- Ernesto Sirolli:  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/ernesto\\_sirolli\\_want\\_to\\_help\\_someone\\_shut\\_up\\_and\\_listen.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/ernesto_sirolli_want_to_help_someone_shut_up_and_listen.html)

### Films

- Food Inc.: <http://www.takepart.com/foodinc>
- King Corn: <http://www.kingcorn.net/>
- Tapped: <http://www.tappedthemovie.com/>
- Taste the Waste: <http://tastethewaste.com/info/film>
- Dive!: <http://www.divethefilm.com/>