

Consumption and materialism: Marketing's interface with consumer responsibility

Charlene Pleger Bebko
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

In a frequently cited statistic, 80% of the world's resources are consumed by 20% of the population. We are told that if everyone in the world were to consume at this rate, the Earth's ecosystem would collapse. Frequently, capitalism and the role of marketing are cited as the cause. But is it the 'system' that needs reform, or the human? What drives people to consume? Is there a need for self-reflection and self-responsibility in consumers that can be more powerful than the economic systems that are blamed for the crisis? Can the marketing strategies that some blame for creating this Behemoth be used to tame the beast?

Anti-consumption, consumerism, materialism, social responsibility

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INTRODUCTION

In America, the average family has much more material possessions such as cars, clothes, and a house twice as big as 1950. And yet happiness, as measured by National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago peaked in 1957 (DeGraff et.al.,2001). Figure 1, Appendix, illustrates this relationship.

Many are now asking, ‘have we become, irrevocably, a Feel-Good Society---a society in which instant gratification pervades (Hutton, 2005).’ Are we, as Hutton proposes, on a path of “unbridled consumerism---gorging on self-gratification, short-sightedness and an inflated sense of ourselves?” All signs seem to point to this, while the earth’s ecosystem suffers. Who amongst us can say that there is not at least one commodity they have more of than ‘needed?’ We are told, that at this rate, the Earth’s ecosystem could not support Americans’ standard of living worldwide (De Graff et.al., 2001). The concept of ‘Affluenza,’ is the highly publicized theme for the website, www.affluenza.com. How did we get to this point and who is responsible for this rampant materialism in America? What will determine whether or not we are able to return to a better balance between our desires of the present and our concern for the future?

When it comes to materialism and overconsumption, finger pointing always seems to include capitalism and marketing. One charge levied against marketing has been its tendency to adversely affect individuals’ values. In a society which uses products and services to satisfy, superficially, many deeply rooted needs (witness the owner of 25 or more pair of fashionable footwear in his/her closet), marketers have spent the last century developing, promoting and distributing their commodities to a consumer market anxious to salve themselves with their purchases. But is it marketing that really ‘creates’ demand? Do individual consumers not have the need for these commodities inherent in their very being? And while marketing may be the vehicle to take a product or service to the target audience, is it the same vehicle which can take the target audience to diminished, more sustainable, level of consumption?

THE MECHANISM AND REGULATION OF HUMAN CONSUMPTION

It has been said that while Europeans shop to get what they want, Americans shop to discover what they want (Will, 1996). That is, we shop to discover the possibilities for satisfying our basic human needs. Human needs and motivation are important in any context where we seek to understand why people do what they do. In the context of increasing consumption through increased demand, we may want to know which brand is favored over another and how to encourage brand switching behavior. In the context of decreasing consumption through decreased demand, we may want to know which alternative behaviors can satisfy those same human needs. Marketing to decrease demand, however, is more complex than the former strategic situation. But human motivation driven by human needs remains a consistent factor in each case.

According to motivation theory, unobserved needs and desires motivate behavior, the purpose of which is need satisfaction. Needs are innate and give >motivational content= to life (Deci and Ryan 2000). “Needs are >physiological deficits that disturb the organism=s quiescence and push the organism to behavior in ways that were learned because they satisfied the needs and returned the organism to quiescence (Deci and Ryan 2000, p. 6).@ While needs may be universal to humankind, the expression of these needs into behavior is subject to the

influences of our culture, families, and learning. One of the most commonly referenced theories of motivation and needs in marketing is Abraham Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation (1970). Maslow proposed a set of needs organized into five categories: physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem and self-actualization. The basic tenets of the theory imply that the satisfaction of lower level needs monopolizes the individual's attention, and behavior is directed at satisfying them. As they are satisfied, the next level of needs becomes active and directs behavior. In one study, a large percentage of people were shown to have a high priority for lower level needs (Kahle, Beatty and Homer, 1986). This would lead us to believe that these needs are never fully satisfied in humans.

In a sense, humans are not really completely aware of the true needs that motivate their behavior, just the mental representations of these underlying needs. These mental representations have been modified by the realities of the world as well as an individual personality (Wilkie 1990). Personal values are the individual's beliefs about what they need (Lai 1995). These personal values are both derived and modified through our personal, social and cultural learning (Clawson and Vinson 1978).

According to Rokeach (1973), there exist both terminal and instrumental values. The former represents what our behavior is directed at satisfying, and the latter, how we believe we should go about satisfying it. Both terminal and instrumental values differ between cultures and economic status (Rokeach 1968, 1969). In an effort to satisfy the true need for belongingness, then, the consumer may look to tangible possessions (terminal value), such as a beautiful home in a gated community, with an elaborate game room (instrumental value). Tangible possessions, then, become the mental representation of one's underlying need for belongingness. It is derived from the consumer's personal, social as well as cultural upbringing. People satisfy their needs through many behaviors, one of which is through exchange and consumption. But both economic as well as non-economic means can satisfy needs (Seely 1992).

In the exchange process, profit oriented marketers are attempting to have consumers satisfy their needs by offering different options with economic value to the consumer for the satiation of their needs. The degree to which people are able to actively synthesize cultural demands, values, and regulations and to incorporate them into the self is in large part a function of the degree to which fulfillment of the basic psychological needs is supported as they engage in the relevant behaviors (Deci and Ryan 2000). In many instances, marketers attempt to activate those needs so that consumers are motivated to purchase and consume what they have to offer. The consumer's terminal values (mental representations of their needs) will dictate the ways in which these needs will preferably be satisfied—the role of their instrumental values. Their beliefs and attitudes about whether or not the product or service will satisfy the needs in a manner congruent with their values, will be governed by these instrumental as well as terminal values. The former represents what our behavior is directed at satisfying, and the latter, how we believe we should go about satisfying it. See Figure 2 (Appendix).

Utilizing marketing concepts and strategies, marketers might attempt to influence a target audience to decrease consumption and materialism. Unfortunately, the frequently used default is an alternative 'green' product or the 'idea' of recycling. But a more significant behavior change would be if the marketer does not offer the consumer an alternative product or service to satisfy their needs, whether it is green or just makes recycling more convenient. The offering that the marketer might present to the consumer is not an 'economic attribute,' but rather a non-economic satisfiers which will act as substitutes for economic satisfiers (Seeley 1992). People

satisfy their needs through many behaviors, one of which is through exchange and consumption. But both economic as well as non-economic means can satisfy needs (Seely 1992).

For the most part, economic satisfiers of human needs are not unique and new enough to cause an alteration in a person's terminal values. These economic satisfiers do not require a major change in lifestyle in order for them to be adopted and consumed. Rothschild explained this idea similarly when referring to primary and selective demand issues. He stated that most decisions for consumers of >commercial= products and services were of the nature of selective (brand) demand, while most social causes concerned a more primary (behavior) demand (1999). Most products and services, economic satisfiers, are merely a replacement item or service for what a consumer is currently using in order to satisfy a particular need. The product or service that consumers use is the means (instrumental value) by which they attain their goals (terminal values). An example of this is at the level of physiological need, with thirst as the motivator, and the need for convenience for the selected thirst quencher--- water. For many Americans in 2008, the mental representations of their need for a thirst quenching drink is bottled water. In other words, they don't 'think' to the extent that they are thirsty and have a need for a drink, they think only to the extent of 'I need a bottle of water because I am thirsty and at work.' Implied in that is, 'and that is how I have been taking care of that problem (need) for many years now---and that is how I will continue.' While current marketing practices would be looking at alternative methods of delivering that water to gain consumer acceptance, or alternative drinks to capture the water drinker, the proposed marketing interface would be to encourage drinking tap water, and for convenience, carry it in a reusable container to save natural resources. The former implies a change in instrumental values, the latter, a change in terminal values

HOW MARKETING PRACTICES CAN HELP DEVELOP CONSUMER RESPONSIBILITY

Can the marketing strategies that some blame for creating this Behemoth be used to tame the beast? Can the strategies that were used to lure consumers into embracing unbridled consumption be used to develop a more conscientious culture---one that rejects materialism and the 'right' to consume? The marketing practices themselves and how they are adapted are at the center of what differs between an exchange of an economic satisfier, or the exchange of a non-economic satisfier. The use of marketing and its success appears to be a matter of *how* we adapt these marketing techniques rather than understanding the underlying characteristics of the marketed economic or non-economic satisfier *to which we are adapting* these marketing techniques.

According to the newest American Marketing Association definition of marketing, that which is exchanged is not of relevance, but rather the exchange process itself sets the parameters for marketing activities. "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners and society at large." Of course, the very definition of marketing is the creation of an exchange of equal satisfaction between buyer and seller --- an exchange of either economic or non-economic satisfiers. Many social cause campaigns have entered into the arena of changing the terminal values of the consumer. Social cause campaigns on abstinence versus sex with protection (www.abstinenceassociation.org), savings versus spending (www.feedthepig.org), or reframing how we view our lifestyles versus setting limits within our current ones (www.smallstep.gov). It would not be a big leap at all for more such campaigns aimed at

materialism, 'unbridled' consumption, and waste. The first step in the process of change is making the target audience aware of the problem. How this is accomplished will be quite possibly the most difficult challenge for the marketer, because consumers tend to reject or dismiss those ideas for change where people have large vested interests (Andreason and Kotler, 2003). However, keeping the issue the chance for each member of the target audience to examine their materialism, overconsumption, and waste will accomplish nothing more than current campaigns. A campaign that shakes the very values that shape the way in which humans experience their thirst, loneliness, feelings of security, even feelings of 'self,' will indeed be monumental --- but necessary to halt unnecessary consumption of Earth's precious resources.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1
U.S. Income and Index of Happiness
National Opinion Research Center

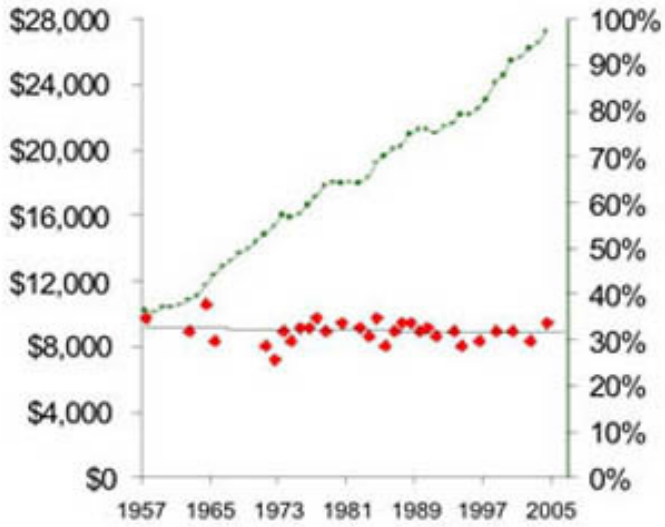


Figure 2

