

Buying into sustainability:

An experiential learning exercise in analyzing corporate sustainability claims

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Abstract

Sustainability and corporate social responsibility have developed into important topics for business and are increasingly integrated in management education programs offered by business schools around the world. This article describes a group assignment for management students based on an experiential learning design. The assignment challenges students to buy a product of their choice at a local store, analyze its sustainability claims, dispose of the product, and prepare a presentation to share the results and their experiences. Through this assignment, students reflect on the credibility of sustainability claims and the role of consumers as a factor in spurring or frustrating sustainability. It engages students also as people who have certain values, political beliefs, and cultural backgrounds, inflicting a deeper sense of learning about sustainability dimensions than through merely analyzing sustainability reports or through lectures.

Keywords

Sustainability, corporate social responsibility (CSR), consumption, Sustainable Development Goals, experiential learning

Experiencing sustainability through management education

Nowadays, sustainability is part and parcel of many business school programs around the world (Doh & Tashman, 2014; Larran Jorge et al., 2017). However, sustainability may be relatively isolated from the rest of the curriculum (e.g., in electives) through so-called 'saddle bag' strategies that consist of simply adding courses to the program (Sharma & Hart, 2014), may have a limited study weight compared to other subjects or may only be addressed as part of a marketing course. In fact, some consider the attention to sustainability in many cases to be a mere polishing of business schools' offerings and primarily motivated by marketing considerations (Parker, 2018). These approaches are in contrast to approaches that strive for full integration of the subject into the management curriculum.

Integral to the mission statement of Antwerp Management School (AMS), sustainability has developed over the past few years from an elective topic that existed in the margins of the curriculum to the current situation that combines elements ranging from a saddle bag strategy to full integration. Having experienced that most students enrolling in AMS's master's programs only have little knowledge about the spectrum of manifestations of sustainability in a business context, aiming to immerse students in sustainability from day one onwards, and wanting to engage students in a concrete, direct, and personal way with the subject matter, the explorative and experiential exercise 'Buying into sustainability' was developed.

Through this exercise, students are challenged to collect, discuss, assess and present sustainability-related product and company information in a brief period of time as well as experience and reflect on their own impact on sustainability in their role as consumers. Although this exercise is used as part of the so-called on-boarding days at AMS for graduate students, it is equally suited as an exercise that can be used during rather than at the beginning of a program, can be easily adapted to fit a particular course (e.g., marketing) and is suitable to use for undergraduate students as well. Whereas the exercise is used by AMS as a group assignment for students from different cultural backgrounds, it can be used as an individual assignment, irrespective of a student's cultural background, as well.

Theoretical foundations

Sustainability is a relatively abstract, multifaceted, and contested notion (e.g., Okoye, 2009). As such, it is subject to interpretation and people may have different conceptions and opinions about it depending on their personal values, political beliefs, cultural backgrounds and geographic origins (Visser, 2008; Matten and Moon, 2008). Nevertheless, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an authoritative, universal agenda comprising 17 of the world's most pressing sustainability challenges, ranging from eradicating poverty to halting biodiversity loss.

In business, sustainability plays an important role as companies are seen as both being responsible for creating and capable of remedying many of today's social and ecological problems. Under the guises of 'sustainable business' and 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR), among others, companies engage in myriad activities through which they shape their roles in society, informed by ethical principles, strategic choices, political considerations or business case thinking (Garriga & Mele, 2004). Sustainability manifests itself in corporate practice through a range of activities, including cause-related marketing, eco-efficient production, sustainability reporting, establishing cross-sector partnerships and philanthropy. Also, with recent corporate scandals and instances of greenwashing in mind, the credibility of sustainability claims by companies has surfaced as a critical area of attention (Visser, 2017). This is not only relevant from an academic perspective, but also relates to the role of the consumer and his/her position towards CSR. Here, different

dimensions of sustainability come together, including decisions in the purchasing process, the use of products and the disposal of waste, and the effects of these activities.

Sustainability claims of products often go hand in hand with ecolabels or certification. With as many as 463 ecolabels in the world, according to the Ecolabel Index, a report by the Dutch Foundation Changing Markets aims to prove that certification schemes offer a false promise of sustainability, with a focus on the fishing, textile and palm oil industry (Senet, 2018). The report concludes its findings by stating that: “If there is to be a role for certification in the transition to a sustainable economy, it must undergo some serious reforms”. The authors also suggest abolishing the least ambitious schemes and reforming others with higher standards (Changing Markets Foundation, 2018).

Against this background, experiential learning, especially with an interactive and explorative outlook, seem particularly suited for learning about sustainability, since this enables students to integrate abstract and practical knowledge through doing and interacting and support the translation of their experiences into new knowledge through reflection (Kolb, 1984). Such an engaging learning process could open horizons for students as it enables students to experiment and put into practice what they have learned and to identify how they relate to products, companies, their role as consumer, and the kaleidoscopic nature of sustainability.

Learning objectives

- Experiencing teamwork and developing project and time management skills
- Identifying dimensions of the CSR and sustainability concept and recognizing their manifestations in corporate practice
- Recognizing sustainability as an eternally-contested concept and developing a susceptibility for different interpretations of sustainability
- Appreciating the role of personal values, political beliefs, culture and geography in defining CSR and sustainability
- Exploring the links between CSR and sustainability and functional management disciplines
- Finding and using relevant sources of sustainability data and assessing these data in the context of the sustainability claims made by companies
- Developing a critical posture towards CSR and sustainability and claims thereof by companies
- Experiencing and reflecting on the role of consumers in sustainability

Instructions for running the exercise

Overview

‘Buying into sustainability’ is a group exercise, inviting students to buy a product, analyze and discuss the sustainability claims made by the product and the company, dispose of the product, and prepare a short presentation about the results and their experiences. To accommodate for group diversity, groups consist of four to six students.

Logistics

The exercise is run in the afternoon after students have been introduced by their professors into foundational CSR and sustainability knowledge. A morning session aims to identify and familiarize students with key issues and concepts, including the SDGs, transparency, materiality, greenwashing, and the role of consumers in achieving and compromising

sustainability (see e.g., Moratis, 2014; Visser, 2018). At the end of the morning session, students receive a 15-minute instruction about the exercise by a professor. The duration of the exercise is three to four hours, including the short presentations by the students as the final part of the afternoon.

Instructions

After rendering the general idea and flow of the exercise as well as the timeframe of the exercise, students obtain the following instructions by the professor:

- Create groups of four to six people (students are encouraged to choose to work with fellow students they do not already know well)
- Buy a product of a maximum of five euros of their own choosing in a store nearby (students need to find consensus on the product they will buy, which may already trigger debate and make assumptions students have explicit)
- Collect, discuss and assess sustainability-related product and company information (the professor gives some suggestions for identifying data sources)
- Reflect on the various aspects and interpretations of sustainability related to the product and the company (the professor explicitly invites students to bring their diverse backgrounds and personal values to the table)
- Reflect on the roles of the consumer in achieving and compromising sustainability
- Dispose of the product in a sustainable way (during the exercise or afterwards)
- Prepare a short presentation based on the findings, impressions and experiences during the exercise

Variations

The exercise can be run in different group sizes and may even be used as an individual assignment. In this latter case, the exercise may serve as an assessment of a student's understanding of the various aspects of sustainability and his or her critical attitude towards the information presented through product labels or the company's website.

Also, a professor may ask an international student body to create groups based on geography, cultural regions or level of economic development (i.e., developing versus developed countries) in order to investigate differences in interpretations of the sustainability concept and the assessment of sustainability-related information.

Another variation of the exercise is focusing it on a single functional management discipline. Examples include a focus on operations (emphasizing sustainability issues in the production process), logistics (emphasizing sustainability issues in the supply chain) and human resource management (emphasizing social aspects of sustainability).

Also, the exercise can focus on services instead of products, allowing for students to experience differences in the availability of sustainability-related information between intangibles and physical goods.

Instructions for debriefing the exercise

The observations regarding the findings and experiences of the students in Exhibit 1 provide direction for the debriefing of the exercise. The debriefing strategy deployed during the on-boarding days when the exercise was used simply consisted of reflecting on students' findings and experiences through questioning. Several suggestions for questions that can be asked in the debriefing, categorized by topic, are listed below.

EXHIBIT 1 AROUND HERE

Assessing the credibility of sustainability claims: Do product sustainability claims need to cover both ecological and social aspects to be credible? Can such claims also be credible when only one aspect is covered? In general, what factors make sustainability claims credible? Can companies in so-called 'vice industries' (e.g., tobacco, alcohol, weaponry) make credible sustainability claims? To what extent have you been able to obtain factual sustainability information about the supply chain of the company during the exercise? Have you encountered examples of greenwashing during the exercise?

The role of the consumer in sustainability: In general, do you consider consumers as a force for positive change when it comes to sustainability? With the aim of spurring sustainability, do you consider sustainable consumption a better strategy than reducing consumption? What would be reasons for you to boycott a product or a company? That what extent do you think boycotts are effective in influencing corporate behavior? What are the main barriers for people to buy sustainable products, according to you?

Differing interpretations of sustainability: Did you notice different interpretations of sustainability by group members during the exercise? What, in your opinion, explains differences in people's conceptions of sustainability? Do you consider sustainability to be a universal value? Should companies market sustainable products differently to different target audiences? How do think that demographic factors influence interpretations of sustainability?

Disposal of the product: Was or will it be easy to dispose of the product in a sustainable way? Were the product and/or its packaging designed to dispose of in a sustainable way? If not, can it be? Is there always a responsibility for the company when it comes to the disposal of the product? Should costs of disposal be accounted for in the product's pricing?

After the presentations, the findings may also be briefly discussed by the professors and students through a more personal reflection. Since many sustainability professors and students are also involved in sustainability as consumers, they may recognize the dilemmas and cognitive dissonance many consumers experience and discuss different coping strategies for dealing with this cognitive dissonance (see Thøgersen, 2004).

Conclusion

While the exercise can be easily seen as objectively weighing product-related sustainability claims, it is clear that it engages students also as people who hold certain values, adhere to certain political beliefs, and have different cultural backgrounds. Through designing this exercise as a way of experiential learning, students were not only challenged to bring these dimensions to the table, but also consciously and concretely experienced their role as consumers in achieving or compromising sustainability – from purchasing a product to disposing it. In addition, the exercise challenges students not only through collecting relevant sustainability-related product and company information, but also through assessing this information and conclude to what extent they find the claims credible.

It is hoped that such an approach will inflict a deeper sense of learning about sustainability dimensions than through merely analyzing sustainability reports or through academic lectures. It is also hoped that students integrate their experience into other learning processes to strengthen learning (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997) and perhaps feel to apply the experience into the decisions they make in daily life and within the organizations they will be working for. Possible tensions with the beliefs and ambitions they have held that this exercise

incurs may lead to implications for how they look at their roles and responsibilities in society and perhaps even result in behavior change.

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