

Effects of sociological modernization on new product development

Enhancing or impeding sustainability?

The author reasons the existence of the gap between the demand and supply side of the market with an exaggerated focus on consumer wants for concrete products and services, while playing down the real motivators of consumers' buying: the "bottom needs".



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Introduction

At a marketing oriented company the new product development (NPD) processes are based on consumption trends. At the same time, the underlying processes of these consumption trends are related to the modernization of the society. From this perspective, societal modernization has considerable effect on NPD. However, interconnections between NPD and sustainable consumption are slightly clarified in (triple bottom line based) sustainability discussions. Moreover, while in the discussions of sustainable consumption environmental as well as social criteria are involved, NPD practices and tools are limited only to environmental issues.

Modernization of societies

The changes of consumer behaviour are based on specific sociological processes: the transition of industrial societies into post-industrial ones, where service sector is increasing as opposed to the manufacturing. Consequently, most of the time people deal with other people and symbols, which means more effort focused on communication and processing information. Additionally, innovation and the freedom to exercise autonomous decision making are essential, which leads to a growing emphasis on self-expression. The emphasis in values is moving from economic and physical security towards a subjective well-being and quality-of-life (Inglehart, Baker 2000: 22). As

Bell highlights, pre-industrial life was a "game against nature", industrial life a "game against fabricated nature", and post-industrial life becomes a "game between persons" (Bell 1976: 147, 1973: 147-148, cit. in Inglehart, Baker 2000: 21-22).

Consequently, main features of post-industrial societies are the pluralization of values (as opposed to act upon norms) and a growing emphasis on self-realization and communication (as opposed to the materialist values of mass-culture) (Hradil 1992). These appear in consumers' buying behaviour, too: they are looking for new challenges, new experiences, new sensations, new styles and new fashions. Moreover, they need this "feeling" continuously. Thus, the deep motivators of buying a product are rather emotional than functional in character and can be conceived as "bottom needs", with reference to Elkington's triple bottom line concept. These hidden needs are related to identity and self-realization, character and personality, authenticity and competence, and confidence (Töröcsik 2003), and remain uncovered and even untargeted in the framework of actual consumption patterns.

Consumption

Handling actual consumption trends in the context of the modernization process of societies allows understanding, answering and forecasting the development of the bottom needs. Several examples sign an "altered" consumption where functional needs are overshadowed, and which is increasingly differentiated and a trend conscious one – leading to an aesthetic character. In the USA, e. g. the number of private cars exceeds the number of driving licences; and also, while the average household size is decreasing the new houses built in 2003 are 38% bigger than in 1975 (Dobers, Strannegard 2005).

The unsustainability of current consumption trends is evident, however there is not a generally accepted definition of sustainable consumption (usually criteria concern personal needs, quality of life, distribution of resources among rich and poor, waste and pollution, natural resources, future generations, life cycle thinking). The failure of achieving sustainable consumption can be reasoned from one side by the complexity of the forces driving our buying behaviour, and from the other side with ambiguities and tensions in our ethics of consumption. This latter refers to the enhanced personal (short term) interests by the values of individualism, personal freedom and sovereignty over the long term interest of the society (Michaelis 2003). The contradictions and problems

of current consumption patterns are highlighted by the trends of growing differences nationally and internationally, the increasing environmental consequence, and the growing personal stress and dissatisfaction over certain level of consumption.

Consumers

Consumption trends are determined by altering purchasing patterns of consumers. Drawing up the difference between main features of "typical" consumers before and after the modernization process allows putting the focus on the relevant changes. For this reason, in the current paper the average consumer of an industrial society is distinguished from the average consumer of a post-industrial society.

The former is referred as traditional consumer, the latter as the modern one. According to Töröcsik (2003: 84-85) the traditional consumer tries to buy as much products as possible and prefers to mark the brand of the product. This latter helps the others in the appreciation, which (s)he needs often, as traditional consumer prefers to show (almost make pride in) the product possessed in order to get confirmation from others. Conversely, modern consumer is self-confident in choice and (s)he is interested only in the opinion of the reference group: people who are able to recognize the authenticity of a product through the small, almost hidden differences in product features. The objective is not the demonstration of the wellness any more, "the less is more": less but even



more expensive products are preferred. Notwithstanding, traditional consumer purchases luxury mass products and simply buys them without any need for adapting/changing them. (S)he is not interested in detailed "background" information and has no critics: if (s)he relies on the advertisements, (s)he buys the product offered. Contrarily, modern consumer is seeking for authenticity and individual feature and (s)he prefers to participate in the production process. Consequently, modern consumer is critical and checks as much as possible: (s)he controls the statements of the advertisements, producers, etc., which means modern consumer is well-informed. (S)he often examines not only the product but the producer as well.

New product development

As described above, the demand side of the market is altering: emotional motivators come to the front. This requires adaptation on the supply side, too. As currently products and services serve fulfilling consumer needs, they are the basic units of consumption. However, while the sustainability of consumption is discussed from triple bottom line approach, NPD theories, practices and tools are low developed from this aspect: predominantly environmental issues are handled and the integrated approach involving economic, environmental and social issues is limited. Actual methods are criticized as they stimulate gradual improvements. The need for radical changes is reasonable not only due to the fact, that improvement of eco-efficiency is outweighed by the continuously increasing consumption (Michaelis 2003), but also due to the gap between the sustainability approach of consumption and production.

While environmental-oriented NPD theories with a "factor X" target can be characterized by "doing the same – but better", the goal of NPD concepts with an integrated sustainability view (that are limited in number) is to "achieve radical improvement through altered way". Charter and Chick (1997) e. g. define the four levels of sustainable design. Although it has an environmental view, the goal the authors draw up is to "re-think" actual practice, which "will require significant leaps in thinking, driven by an emphasis on creative problem-solving and opportunity-

seeking" (p. 6). Similarly, Tukker and Tischner (2006) differentiate result-oriented product-service systems (PSS), which "are in fact the only true need-oriented ones" with significant sustainability potential, "provided that the PSS-supplier develops a fully novel way of function fulfilment" (p. 6).

This marks a NPD focus that has slightly moved towards bottom needs, focusing on the real motivators of consumer buying and answering them with solutions. NPD should be based on these latter, rather than on traditional demands for concrete products and services. According to marketing orientation the focus should be put on consumers' need and not on their want (for concrete products), and now we need one step further: the aim is to reveal the (emotional) motivators of these (mainly functional) needs.

Solution?

The features of the modernization process of societies have been appeared in consumption trends through an aestheticized character, where consumer motivators are rather linked to "abstractions" (personality, identity, self realization, competence, etc.) than to functional reasons. At the same time, the mainstream of the demands can be fulfilled by basically traditional, continuously "updated" products and services. In this view, traditional consumption patterns are dominant for fulfilling post-modern needs. This can be one reason for over-consumption, as several products are purchased for "indicating by possessing", rather than for using their function. Although NPD tends to integrate sustainability issues these have mainly environmental focus and are handled in an isolated form. However, an altered view of the market has emerged: the segmentation of consumers based on environmental consciousness (Ottman 1993: 30) and also, the segmentation of consumers based on ethical concerns (Corrado, Hines 2000) has been performed. Nevertheless, these segments are handled as static ones and are used mainly for positioning traditional products (Peattie, Crane 2005) (in our understanding: as opposed to solutions). Consequently, traditional NPD tools and even, traditional NPD approach is applied. However, strategic marketing activity should incorporate the development of the segments based on consumer behaviour

trends and realize feedbacks to NPD and product, service, or rather solution offer. NPD tools are low developed from an integrated sustainability aspect. In this sense, they are rather reactive than proactive, as their development is slower than the one of the demand side of the market. The feedbacks of an integrated sustainability view in marketing would transform NPD from technocratic, step-by-step improvement process resulting in efficient business answers to consumers "bottom needs". Besides this creative, proactive behaviour it needs integrated sustainability issues having relevant role in business strategy.

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