

Sustainable Brand Management: A Forward-Looking Perspective in the Business World

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Abstract

In the contemporary landscape, the heightened expectations of consumers for increased environmental and social responsibility have steered brands towards strategies centered around sustainability. Informed consumers now prioritize not only product quality but also gravitate towards brands that prominently feature environmental and social responsibilities. Consequently, businesses must concentrate on sustainable brand management to effectively maintain a competitive advantage. It is imperative to recognize that sustainability entails a comprehensive approach, encompassing not solely environmental aspects but also economic, social, and societal dimensions. This study contributes a nuanced perspective on sustainable brand management within the realm of business. The study accentuates the necessity for businesses to channel their efforts into sustainable brand management by formulating a long-term vision and seamlessly integrating sustainability principles into the corporate culture. This involves fostering transparent communication channels with employees and stakeholders. Furthermore, the study underscores the competitive edge enjoyed by brands whose management strategies are firmly grounded in sustainability, particularly given the growing consumer interest in environmentally friendly alternatives. By examining sustainable brand management through a business-centric lens, the study underscores the significance of establishing a resilient, sustainable, and competitive framework for the future. Sustainable brand management emerges as not just a strategic choice but a compelling necessity, emphasizing the fulfillment of consumer expectations, meeting social and environmental responsibilities, and serving as a pivotal requirement for long-term success.

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Introduction

Brands represent the image formed in the consumer's mind for various products and services. Strong sustainable brands should have a brand image that reflects positive efforts on ecological life and humanity through the products and services they produce. As consumers witness changing environmental conditions and the unsustainable use of resources, they show a willingness to change consumption patterns that align with environmental conservation. Consumers tend to think reactively about products and brands that provide them with sustainable value. Concerns about environmental degradation and the consumption of eco-friendly products are often significant features of contemporary consumer behavior. To express the value of sustainability in the brand communication channel, the brand must integrate all stages from the production process to the consumption process with fundamental elements that are entirely environmentally friendly.

The relationship between consumers and businesses and the power balance in this relationship have undergone significant changes from the past to the present. On one hand, there is an expectation from consumers for businesses to contribute to the increase in global welfare rather than just meeting their own needs, while on the other hand, businesses have become more aware of both maintaining their economic assets and addressing environmental concerns. An understanding based on respect for nature, the environment, and humanity has become a necessity for sustainable brands. Brands that successfully implement and share these practices become candidates for sustainable brands. With the right sustainable brand strategies, consumers begin to adopt a perspective of proper resource use and sustainability, which is one of the most beautiful contributions of sustainable brand strategy to societies.

Today, ensuring the sustainability of a brand has become more important than creating a brand itself. As brands become sustainable, it is essential to consider the concept of sustainability in all its dimensions, integrating environmental sustainability with social and economic sustainability into the overall brand. Sustainable branding, as a strategy, emerges by planning general business policies in a responsible stance towards humanity. Within the scope of this study, topics such as corporate sustainability, creating sustainable brand value, and sustainable brand management are discussed, highlighting the details that brands need to pay attention to regarding sustainability for their future.

Corporate Sustainability

In today's context, the concern for the future goes beyond professional perspectives in understanding and interpreting the concept of sustainability. For the simplest definition of sustainability, we can say, 'Acting with consideration for future generations in the use of resources.' Even this definition has evolved significantly over time, with various components added to encompass a wide range of considerations.

Sustainability is related to the continuity of societies and nature. In this context, it can be said that the sustainability principles are created to guide human activities towards a secure future, and to control dynamic and living systems. In addition to these goals, promoting opportunities such as enhancing resilience and safety, meeting the emerging needs of community members, and preserving natural values are also encouraged (Ozkan-Pir, 2022:11; Vehkamaki, 2005: 1).

Environmental and social issues, once the concern of countries alone, have become crucial for corporations, thanks to consumers who have become increasingly conscious in recent years. In other words, companies should no longer focus solely on economic issues but should also consider environmental and social issues in all stages of production. We are in an era of accountability, where developing technology and increasingly aware consumers, along with their demands on corporations and investors' expectations, make sustainability practically inevitable (Engin and Akgöz, 2013:88). The relationship between sustainable environment and technology is becoming increasingly important. Technology plays a critical role in achieving sustainability goals. By leveraging technological opportunities, businesses can increase environmental sensitivity, achieve energy efficiency, and support a sustainable future (Yinanç, 2023; 468).

The value of a business is determined by the potential demand it creates today, which is one of the determinants of future earnings. The magnitude of these earnings is strongly related to sustainable value, as it is a function of the associated potential risk. When a company proves itself as a sustainable business in financial markets and to other observers, the associated risk decreases, and the risk ratio used to reduce future earnings becomes lower (Gidwani, 2013: 3-4).

Corporate sustainability research highlights the interdependence between social and ecological environments and the company and social environment. Sustainability management is expected to contribute to economic and sustainable development in corporations. Sustainability is a significant value

that covers environmental concerns and flexibility for companies to achieve and sustain a competitive advantage (Kwarteng, Dadzie, and Famiyeh, 2016: 111-113).

In today's market conditions, businesses squeezed between stakeholder legitimacy expectations must ensure their social harmony and integration with direct and indirect stakeholders to sustain their existence. Therefore, businesses are now required to be transparent and accountable to society in financial and all other matters. This situation has surpassed corporate sustainability in performance, emphasizing the necessity for both social and environmental as well as financial performance to be pursued together (Atkinson, et al., 1997: 26).

Corporate sustainability has increasingly become both a corporate value and an integral part of business strategy in many companies. The foundations of corporate sustainability include corporate accountability, corporate social performance, corporate citizenship, corporate social responsibility, corporate governance, the people, the planet, profit, stakeholder approach, and corporate communication/corporate sustainability communication (Signitzer and Prexl, 2007: 3-4).

In recent times, it has been observed that both businesses and consumers exhibit a significantly higher level of awareness and sensitivity regarding the usage of products labeled as environmentally friendly compared to previous periods. Simultaneously, companies have commenced the development and implementation of a series of eco-friendly strategies to effectively navigate heightened competition and distinguish themselves in these market conditions. The adoption of these sustainable strategies has introduced an additional cost element for businesses. Consequently, businesses have found themselves compelled to inevitably incorporate these supplementary costs into the pricing of products produced sustainably (Ozkan-Pir, 2022: 99).

Environmental issues are seen as the root of the problem as they encompass marketing, production, sales, and return points. Consumer habits, especially those that help many unsustainable products remain in the market, and the demand for them has not decreased enough. The main reason for this is that existing products have become relatively cheap and performance-oriented due to marginal cost reductions in production, sales, distribution, and engineering costs. With increasing consumer awareness, sustainable marketing promotions contribute significantly to making customers willing to pay higher prices for sustainable brands. Furthermore, sustainable marketing enhances the environmentally friendly image, a crucial factor in building a strong brand. Brand value and sustainable marketing

are closely related to creating a positive image for the brand. Sustainable business must continually and actively inform customers about their products. The environmental compatibility of a product is a significant factor in a consumer's purchase decision. Therefore, consumers are willing to pay higher prices for sustainable brands due to their positive brand image and values (Martin and Schouten, 2012:65).

Creating Sustainable Brand Value

One of the most critical factors reflecting a brand's success in the market is brand value. Brand value is not only a monetary expression but also a concept that encompasses various success criteria for businesses, such as the quality of the products offered, the number of registered trademarks, customer relationships, and customer satisfaction. Therefore, the assessment process characterizes the brand's perceived and observable results, aiming to prevent unwanted subjective biases (Knapp, 2000: 41). The background of a sustainability-based brand strategy includes continuous improvement, enhancement, quality, and sensitivity to society (Amstrong and LeHew, 2011: 37).

In recent years, increased competition has compelled companies and researchers to explore various ways to differentiate themselves from their competitors. The primary reason sustainability initiatives have taken on a competitive dimension today is to increase customer value perception and enhance customer loyalty (Francés and Blasco, 2016: 168).

When defining brand value, three different perspectives are considered. The first perspective regards brand value as the total value of a separable entity when the brand is sold or shown in inventory. The second perspective treats brand value as a measure of the strength of the connection between consumers and the brand. The third perspective takes into account consumers' associations and beliefs about the brand (Karpat Aktuğlu, 2018: 37).

Many consumers have increased their interest in sustainable products and companies. These consumers prefer products with environmental and social impacts, wanting to believe that brands embrace and implement sustainable values. Therefore, as a business takes steps toward sustainability, the value offered to consumers increases, and the brand reputation strengthens. Marketing strategies become effective tools for businesses to communicate their successes and commitments to sustainability (Alrubaiee et al., 2017: 105). Brands that have associations that are in line with the expectations of their target audience and differ from competitors have a strong position. Having associations is a prerequisite for creating an image,

and creating an image is a precondition for creating loyalty (Aaker, 2009: 110-113).

When brand value is evaluated in the context of sustainability, it can be stated that brand value refers to environmental and social sensitivity. Therefore, if a brand positions itself in a place that values social consciousness or social responsibility, this positioning should be supported by the product characteristics. In other words, the brand should carry the message of sustainability within the product structure in a perceptible way to the target audience. Otherwise, communication between the brand and the consumer will not happen in the right direction, and if the brand relies only on advertising messages, the speed of sustainable brand formation and, consequently, brand value may decrease (Michael, King, and Reast, 2001: 415).

The increasingly important concept of social responsibility today imposes significant responsibilities on both individuals and institutions (Yılmaz, 2018: 314). The expectations of businesses from sustainable brand value are not solely to serve social responsibility and community welfare. Because every socially responsible initiative will cause additional time and financial costs for the business, sustainable initiatives must be created simultaneously with the benefit of the business and society. Thus, while positioning products in the market with a sustainable brand, the business meets society's sensitivity to the environment, and at the same time, it expects the positive return of this argument as a favorable consumer behavior for the business (Oliveira and Sullivan, 2016: 2-3).

Sustainable Brand Management

The relationship between corporate sustainability and the brand is crucial, and businesses can strengthen their brands by embracing sustainability principles (Weber, 2008: 248-249).

Businesses act as environmentally sensitive entities and produce eco-friendly products as a marketing tool. The consciousness and responsibility towards the environment emerge as an approach that necessitates the love, exploration, and preservation of nature, seen as a perspective. This situation is increasingly becoming imperative over time, as the environmentally conscious behaviors of businesses directly impact their prestige and sales (Altunöz et al., 2014: 158-159; Pir, 2019: 1557).

Development and growth are possible through the continued operation of businesses. Imposing excessive restrictions on businesses' activities with environmental sensitivity or allowing excessive freedom for development can

lead to imbalance. Indeed, sustainability, one of the key business strategies that plays a vital role in achieving sustainable development, can be realized by integrating the three dimensions of business, society, and development (Emery, 2012: 7-8).

In today's market conditions, producing high-quality goods is not enough. Conscious consumers now value brands that incorporate corporate sustainability principles alongside quality products, and they are willing to make extra expenditures if necessary. Companies that transparently showcase corporate sustainability in the market can attract new consumer portfolios and thus build a loyal customer base. Sustainability adds deeper meanings to the brand image, creating stronger emotional bonds and differentiation. Moreover, by increasing brand awareness among the public, sustainability reduces various risks and keeps brands that may face financial challenges in the future financially afloat (Kotler and Lee, 2005: 91-103).

Sustainable brand management comprises multidimensional practices related to collaboration, learning, creation, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement. Therefore, considering sustainability as a "real marketing issue" requires delving into several mature concepts and considering them. For sustainability to be functionalized in the context of the brand, businesses must think of it as an integrated process in marketing and adopt sustainability principles comprehensively (Louro and Cunha, 2011: 853). Companies investing in sustainable practices and environmentally friendly projects build a more trustworthy and reputable image in the eyes of consumers. This can influence the preferences of potential customers and increase the loyalty of existing customers to the company (Cretu and Brodie, 2009: 274).

The primary reason for businesses to carry out activities related to sustainability is to gain a competitive advantage and meet consumer expectations in line with business goals. In the near future, due to the limited availability of raw materials and natural resources and the consequences of global warming, businesses will have to engage in sustainable activities. As a result, businesses will need to further develop sustainable marketing strategies. Particularly, the innovation approach is the most fundamental activity in sustainable marketing strategy (Reutlinger, 2012: 22).

When considered in terms of sustainable brand value, it can be stated that the target audience has a complementary effect on the brand. The crucial point here is determining the target audience's attitude toward the brand (Yoo, Donthu, and Lee, 2000: 196).

A business interested in long-term sustainable development needs to produce integrated solutions to enter new markets and create value-added solutions. An integrated sustainable approach can unlock numerous opportunities to increase competitiveness and enhance business reputation (Azapagic, 2003: 305). To manage the brand with a sustainable approach, transparency in commercial activities, internalization of respect for human, nature, and societal well-being in commercial/production activities, and the development of processes in this direction are necessary (Amstrong and LeHew, 2011: 37).

Looking at brand communication used in sustainable brand management, it is observed that it encompasses the business's efforts and success related to sustainability activities for a target group-oriented presentation across all communication channels. This includes opportunities such as presenting efforts related to environmental issues or repositioning products as environmentally friendly, offering opportunities for market recognition and support by conscious consumers, and increasing visibility with complex advertising tools that involve relabeling products (Morgan, Deeter-Schmelz, and Moberg, 2007: 375-379).

Conclusion

Enlightened consumers now prefer brands that prioritize not only quality and profitability but also social and environmental responsibilities, exhibit transparency, and value their employees. Brands aware of this trend are adapting their production to meet the demands of society, ensuring their competitiveness in the industry and the continuity of their presence in the market. They are conscious that failing to do so economically jeopardizes their sustainability. Sustainable branding requires more than just being an eco-friendly brand. Consumers are now aware that brands need to consider both society and the environment. It would not be wrong to say that consumer expectations guide the change in brand strategy. Therefore, brands that observe all consumer demands now strive to incorporate sustainability into their productions by considering economic, social, societal, and environmental aspects (Grubor and Milovanov, 2016: 79-82).

In addition, achieving a successful, sustainable, and competitive structure with a long-term vision and projecting the company's reputation is possible through the commitment and responsibility of managers. A clear message about sustainability commitment to employees and external stakeholders should be given to make daily practices more effective. The identification of strategic opportunities and threats, adherence to written rules, industry practices, standards, and future trends (such as clean technologies, new

techniques), competitors' strategies, community interests, and pressure groups should be considered (Gerlach and Witt, 2012: 21).

In recent years, consumer interest and expectations for environmentally friendly alternatives from companies and brands have increased. In marketing efforts, the attitude-behavior gap, defined as the inconsistency between consumers' attitudes and actual purchasing behavior, is attempted to be addressed by highlighting the sustainable qualities the brand exhibits. In this context, when brand performance and image are supported by sustainability concerns, it becomes a pioneering way of differentiation. Thus, sustainability takes center stage in brand management strategies, and the one-sided traditional brand management theory evolves into a more dynamic business process (Louro and Cunha, 2011: 853). According to Yınanç (2020: 806), when the environment is examined, the concept of physicality is no longer sufficient on its own. Today, development, digitization, and environmental impact go beyond the physical environment. According to Kılıçkaya (2023: 149), digitization has emerged as an indispensable aspect of the contemporary business environment. The rapid development of digital technologies has fundamentally changed businesses' operational paradigms.

Considering marketing research, an increasingly recognized relationship between marketing and sustainability can be asserted. When examining the relationship between these two phenomena, the impact of the brand representing the business, producing sustainable solutions, and being attractive to consumers in terms of purchasing decisions is considered. Therefore, sustainable marketing can be evaluated specifically in terms of the brand.

The strategy of sustainable brand management is the necessity of integrating the concept of sustainability into the brand in line with the interests of society. Brands that highlight sustainability with the right strategies encourage consumers to adopt a holistic green lifestyle. This increases the brand's preference among consumers and essentially makes the brand sustainable in all dimensions. At this stage, all the work, stages, and results of the brand's sustainability perspective must be communicated to society accurately, and channels must be used correctly in this regard.

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