Ethics and Environmental Marketing  

ABSTRACT. Corporations have scrambled to bring to market products positioned and advertised as addressing the needs of the environmentally-conscious consumer. The vast majority of claims presented in support of these products are best described, however, as confused, misleading or outright illegal. Ethical considerations have not yet been integrated into environmental marketing, and as a result, long-term harm on both the individual and societal level may result. A framework for reversing this trend is presented. It identifies the sequence of actions necessary for the development and communication of ethical environmental marketing claims. The sequence is based upon two aspects of ethical theory: moral style and normative behavior. Specific implications for marketers' actions at each stage in the sequence of framework development are also discussed.

The issue of ethics in marketing and advertising has been extensively discussed (for pertinent cases and essays see Beauchamp and Bowie, 1983; Braybrooke, 1983; Cavanagh and McGovern, 1988). A theme common to many of these discussions is the idea of truth, specifically the distinction between consumer and scientific truth in product claims. From a regulatory and ethical perspective, consumer truth can be defined as the reasonable interpretation a typical or average person assigns to a product claim. Scientific truth, on the other hand, can be defined as literal truth strictly according to the facts or, from a different viewpoint, that which is not legally false.

Marketer violations of legal and ethical principles typically reflect this dichotomy. Marketers tend to rely upon scientific truth to substantiate a product claim, waiting for regulatory agencies or consumer groups to make the determination that the scientific truth in the product claim is in fact distinct from consumer truth. Oat bran is a recent example. In an attempt to capitalize on the publicized health benefits of oat bran many products were formulated or reformulated to contain new or additional oat bran. Advertising developed for these products stressed the oat bran content, the scientific truth, in an attempt to imply increased health benefits. However, consumer truth was violated. Many of these products were typically no healthier than their non oat bran counterparts and/or many contained oat-bran in quantities too small to provide any of oat bran's health benefits.

While all violations of marketing ethics are equally distasteful and harmful from an absolute perspective, the reality is that not all violations have equal immediate or long-term consequences for consumers and society as a whole. The impact of ethical violations stemming from reliance on scientific truth can be arrayed along a continuum which reflects the potential degree of harm an ethical product claim violation produces at the individual or societal level.

One end of the continuum reflects ethical product claim violations that have slight immediate or long-term harmful consequences for either the individual consumer or society at large. It is likely that the majority of marketers' ethical product claim violations fall into this category. A detergent with a new ingredient and the implied promise of better cleaning, for example, which does not in fact clean better, merely disappoints the user and deprives him or her of a small amount of financial resources. Practically speaking, neither the individual nor society suffers any severe or long-term harm.

Dr. Joel J. Davis is Assistant Professor of Journalism at San Diego State University. Prior to joining the faculty at San Diego State, Dr. Davis was Vice President, Associate Director of Strategic Planning and Research at D'Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles Advertising.
At the intermediate stage in the continuum are marketing claims that, if not consumer truthful, have the potential for a strong negative impact at the individual but not the general societal level. Health and product safety are examples of claims occurring at this intermediate stage. ImPLYing that a consumer will be healthier or live longer if he or she eats one product versus another, or will be safer when selecting one automobile tire versus another (when, in fact, no such result is likely to occur) can have severe detrimental consequences for the individual. However, society as a whole likely suffers only marginally.

The extreme end of the continuum consists of ethical claim violations which have the potential to produce severe harm at both the individual and the societal level. Rarely do products or claims fit into this category but one such set of claims has recently arisen — those related to environmental or “green” marketing. These claims promise or imply that a specific product is better for, or less destructive to, the environment than prior versions or competitive products. Ethical violations resulting in deception at this level have a potentially profound long-term negative impact. Consumers using products they believe will improve the environment but which, in fact, continue to contribute to further environmental deterioration reduce the quality of living conditions for all individuals in current and future generations and lead to a general deterioration of social well-being.

The ethics of environmental product claims warrants further examination because of the profound negative impact these ethics violations create.

Environmental marketing

Corporations have scrambled to bring to market products positioned and advertised as addressing the needs of the environmentally-conscious consumer. The magnitude of the “green” marketing movement is indeed enormous. Marketing Intelligence Service estimates that nearly 10% of all new products introduced in 1990 were identified by their manufacturer as “green” or otherwise “environmentally friendly.” This is more than double the number of “green” products introduced just one year earlier and an incredible 2000% increase over the number of “green” products introduced in 1985.

Marketing and advertising claims in support of the rising number of “green” products have been problematic. The number of trivial, confusing, misleading and outright illegal claims is increasing. Marketers have attempted to take advantage of rising consumer environmental awareness by using the letter of the law (substantiation via scientific truth) to confound and skirt the law’s intent (the communication of consumer truth). Two examples clearly illustrate this trend. First, there is Mobil Chemical Company and its “biodegradable” Hefty trash bag. Mobil was literally truthful and scientifically accurate in stating that its bags were biodegradable and would “break down.” However, this literal, scientific truth masked the fact that the trash bags break down very, very slowly, if at all, under the circumstances in which they are likely to be used and disposed. Second, plastic bottles and containers are increasingly being promoted as recyclable. These products are technically recyclable, but at present, there are few programs or facilities currently available with the capability to actually accomplish the recycling procedure. Is it ethical or consumer truthful to say that such products are “recyclable” when there are no recycling facilities within several thousand miles of the majority of users?

There are two ways in which these types of claims can contribute to the continued degradation of the environment, thereby negatively affecting society and its individual members:

1. If consumers begin to feel that their genuine interest in the environment is being exploited, and in response rebel, they would no longer seek out or demand products that are in fact less damaging to the environment. If this were to occur, the environmental improvements that could have been achieved would be lost.

2. The tone, content and mass of environmental claims might lead the public to believe that specific environmental problems have been adequately addressed and solved. This, in turn, could actually impede finding real solutions to identified problems by causing consumers to set aside their environmental concerns making the assumption that these concerns had been addressed.

The environment is far too important to permit these outcomes to occur. The question, then, is: How