Sensitive Groups and Social Issues

Are You Marketing Correct?

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Allegiance among members of sensitive groups has become a critical factor for marketers in the 1990s. Increasingly, media have reflected the criticism, anxiety, and overt demands from groups such as African and native Americans, the gay population and working women. The mainstream concerns of these groups regard marketing techniques – the way they are portrayed in advertising and the nature of the products targeted toward them. These controversies have consistently occupied center stage in national publicity, reflecting a highly volatile environment for marketers targeting such "sensitive groups".

A series of sociological, economic and other external variables have collectively created an atmosphere that warrants extreme caution and deliberation in considering social issues inherent in marketing plans. This is especially significant when the products, promotional techniques or target audiences are under current public scrutiny.

This article provides a profile of factors that may have spawned an emerging era of socially-conscious marketing. It offers a typology of "sensitive groups", and identifies dubious promotional techniques. Guidelines and proactive strategies for avoiding ethical

crises are also presented, and the concept of "marketing correctness" is explored.

An Emerging Era of Social Issues

So far, the 1990s have witnessed some major changes in consumer attitudes, buying motives and product-related values that reflect the heightened influence of social issues in the American marketplace.

Several factors in the market environment have synergized to create a new arena of competition, whereby social responsibility has become a salient means of product differentiation, and an effective instrument for developing brand equity. The growth of cause-related marketing programs exemplifies this trend. Through examining the reasons for the emergence of social issues in marketing, the ramifications of this development become strikingly clear. Strongly embedded in these social issues is the need for considering the concept of group sensitivity.

Causes for Focus on Social Issues
Changing Market Factors/Consumer Apathy
Recent trends generally portray a frustrated consumer, economically squeezed by high

living costs, disillusioned with poor product quality and inferior service. More importantly, a consistent barrage of new products has resulted in an overwhelming choice of brands, many of which are perceptually identical and lacking in unique innovations. In 1975, the average supermarket carried 9,000 items; by 1992, that number was 30,000, with more than 3,000 brands introduced each year (*The Economist*, 1992). The influence of product parity and proliferation has been further exacerbated by a major shift from traditional advertising to sales promotion emphasizing coupons and price reductions.

Evidence of Consumer Discontent

These developments have had a definite influence on consumer behavior. First, there has been an across-the-board erosion of brand loyalty. Of promotional dollars expended, 70 percent is being spent to push products through the retail channel. A major reason for people not having the same brand loyalties as in the past is that manufacturers have decreased the amount of advertising behind their brands (Alsop, 1990).

Second, consumers are demonstrating a growing sense of apathy toward advertising as an "institution". A recent US poll suggests that 72 percent of the nation believes few, if any, of the ads they see on TV or in print (Mandese, 1991). These findings are in stark contrast to the primary goal of most advertisers: to make credible claims that will encourage consumers to buy their products. Consumer discontent is further supported by the legislative attacks on Madison Avenue, and an unprecedented number of bills are before Congress relevant to marketing and advertising practices (*Business Week*, 1990).

Third, consumer anxiety is evidenced by a general disillusionment with shopping. The "shop till you drop" attitude has not totally disappeared, but shopping is not the leisure time activity it was in the recent past. Nearly one-third of respondents in a recent *Wall Street Journal* poll revealed that they "do not enjoy at all" window shopping or browsing (Schwandel, 1989). While they have less time to shop, they also feel stressed in facing parity products, and lower quality merchandise at exorbitant prices.

Changing Demographics and Cultural Values

Another major change in the marketplace, augmenting the focus on social responsibility, relates to changing demographics. Currently, close to one-third of the nation largely consists of baby boomers, many of whom are jaded in the aftermath of the turbulent 1960s, where concerns about civil rights, anti-marketing and the environment have been lying dormant for two decades. These late baby boomers have, for the most part, satisfied their material needs, but are spiritually frustrated with meaningless product differentiation and redundant promotional claims. Their anger has been vented in part by adopting cause-related marketing programs, and embracing the "green consumer movement". Many boomers are searching for self-actualization, and are increasingly influenced in discriminating between brands of similar quality based on environmental and social concerns.

A related demographic factor is the growth of cultural diversity and minorities in America. For example, there are now twice as many Asians as in 1980, up 40 percent or more in most states but Hawaii (where they represent 60 percent of the population), and the US takes in approximately one million immigrants a year. During the 1980s, all minorities increased by 30 percent to 60 million, including Asians, Hispanics, blacks, and American Indians (*Kiplinger*, 1991). These new consumers demand representation,

attention and acceptance from the marketing community. Portraying these groups as being highly visible, mainstream Americans creates distinct opportunities to penetrate these markets.

Shift in Consumer Values: "Me" to "We"

Perhaps the foremost cause for the focus on social issues and sensitive groups is due to societal and cultural change. The movement toward a sense of moral stability has indeed replaced the previous materialistic mentality and the "me" orientation of the 1980s. Social responsibility, cause-related marketing, and environmental concerns now portend the cultural direction of the 1990s. People are longing for some permanent and transcendent sense of values (Fisher, 1990).

The shift to this "we" orientation is further evidenced by an unprecedented growth in support groups in America, totaling over 500,000 and attended by 15 million people per week. The number of self-help groups has nearly quadrupled over the last ten years (*Newsweek,* 1990). These are people literally helping others with similar problems. For each support group member, several significant others probably share in moral support. Again, the notion of sensitive groups creates real opportunities for knowledgeable marketers.

Consumer Anxiety Translates into Focus on Sensitive Groups

Thus, changing values are shaping new consumption patterns and purchasing motives throughout America. Consumers have responded to "green marketers" at varying rates. Yet, in a recent survey, over 93 percent of those surveyed consider protecting the environment a very important factor in their decision to purchase a product (Manly, 1992). Marketers are also becoming much more

critical of social issues related to marketing and sensitive groups. There is a heightened awareness of what is being marketed, how and to whom. The consequences of marketing efforts on the individual consumer, target group and society are currently the focus of public scrutiny (Uehling, 1991) and are creating a national orientation toward social issues in marketing.

Boycotts are expected to reach unparalleled heights in the decade of the nineties (Putnam, 1993). This is due to the increasing propensity of sensitive groups to respond to the notions of political correctness, environmental and ethical issues as they relate to marketing techniques. For example, consumers have recently responded through boycotts of cosmetic companies engaged in animal testing. Animal rights groups have virtually crippled the fur trading industry. The previous boycott against the sale of Nestlé's infant formula in the Third World has been reinstituted. American consumers are still sensitive toward companies doing business with South Africa. Tuna companies were forced by environmental rights groups to respond to the dolphin crisis. Currently, the resurgence of "Made in America" has become a major influence in the marketplace. Television violence and its effect on children continues to be a burning issue.

The focus here is on social issues as they relate to marketing techniques involving the concept of sensitive groups. Basically, these are consumers who are responsive to social issues, or who perceive themselves to be disadvantaged by various marketing techniques. For example, the concept of "status vulnerability" has been utilized to explain the opposition to targeting African-Americans, as well as women and young people, for inherently damaging products such as alcohol and cigarettes (Spratten, 1991).

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The Nature of Sensitive Groups

The term "sensitive group", then, refers to a segment of the population generally perceived as being disadvantaged, vulnerable, discriminated against, or involved in social issues which consequently influence their consumer behavior. Admittedly, the concept is provocative, subjective and often influenced by contemporary media events which popularize a particular issue and bring national attention to the sensitive group. Thus, the degree of sensitivity is affected by the extent of media attention generated from consumer advocates, regulatory agencies, support groups, and the public at large. For example, recent concern about gays in the military has been translated into a focus on this group as a viable market segment and created ethical debates associated with targeting this group.

Problems of Group Isolation and Mutual Exclusivity

A strong argument can be made to suggest that all consumers, at some point, are members of a sensitive group. This is either by choice of lifestyle, situational circumstance, life cycle, or demographics. For example, one might be born into an impoverished community or with a physical disadvantage. Children are categorically "sensitive", due to their lack of information-processing skills and lack of maturity. Middle age may bring divorce, loss of loved ones, unemployment, or disability. Elderly consumers face debilitating health and vulnerability to being overly trustful to marketing ploys. This perspective also suggests that a large variance of intensity exists in terms of group sensitivity. This is a function of the consumer's situation and the marketing environment at a particular point in time.

It is also important to recognize that consumers may belong to several sensitive groups simultaneously and that they are not mutually exclusive. While identifying subsegments of sensitive groups may pose problems for marketers, aggregating these markets in terms of unmet needs may also create unique opportunities. This entails gathering groups with high probabilities of being "sensitive" consumers along several different dimensions.

Group Sensitivity Is Product Related

In a marketing context, sensitive groups may also be product related. For example, an elderly consumer may have extreme competence in discerning product categories with which she or he has had a life's worth of vocational consumption experience. Yet, the same person may be vulnerable to life-saving communication beepers which may use high-powered fear appeals through telemarketing, and may be unscrupulously overpriced. Thus, products considered to be legitimate when targeting one group, may not be perceived as being socially responsible when targeting other sensitive groups. The question of promoting cigarettes to children is another case in point.

Sensitive Groups may Have Life Cycles

This hypothesis can be construed in two ways. The first view is that people transcend group sensitivity merely by living out normal life spans. Thus, there is an important temporal dimension to the concept of sensitivity. For example, permanently disabled individuals will face their inevitable problems longer than those facing temporary unemployment.

The second view is that some sensitive groups and social issues experience a life cycle. This results from the media collectively popularizing a particular group and social issue. Often, national talk shows, newspaper and other media events will focus

on a specific social issue related to a sensitive group. Eventually, a new issue will engage the public's attention and the cycle may repeat.

Proposed Typology of Sensitive Groups

Despite the lack of mutual exclusivity, it is important to provide a general means of categorizing the source and nature of various sensitive groups. The following typology identifies the primary sources from which groups derive their sensitivity.

In examining these groups, one should not only consider the perceptions of sensitive group members, but also attitudes of the public at large concerning related social issues. This most often exerts the real pressure on marketers for social responsibility and remedial action.

Culturally Dictated Sensitive Groups

These groups elicit a high impact media profile and, despite fluctuations in the intensity of public awareness, have captured the nation's attention and invite public scrutiny for an *enduring* period of time. They are usually associated with specific social issues.

In the last decade, the nation has embraced such sensitive groups as abused children, starvation in the Third World, subjects of sexual abuse, and victims of terminal illness. More recently, the homeless, gays and sexually harassed women have received acknowledgment from the general public, which has a heightened awareness of such issues.

Specific demographic groups are included. Children, the elderly and people of color are subcultures illustrating the notion of culturally-dictated sensitive groups. Many traditional means of segmenting markets can be used to identify these groups.

Situationally Influenced Sensitive Groups

These groups result from *temporary* environmental or personal circumstances which place the consumer in a sensitive group for a period of time. Divorce, temporary unemployment, family death or other circumstances can create a situation of consumer vulnerability. An example would be the controversy surrounding the "Smoking Joe" cartoon character. Many critics feel that he is easily recognized by children which may motivate them to start smoking. Similar allegations have been made against malt liquor marketers targeting low income African-Americans (*Wall Street Journal*, 1993).

Recently, a slender model nicknamed "Skeleton" appeared in a magazine ad for Diet Sprite. An advocacy group, BAM – an acronym for Boycott Anorexic Marketing – accused the company of encouraging starvation diets (Bass, 1994). Since specific advertising campaigns have a limited life, these are considered *situationally sensitive issues*. The broader question of advertising's collective influence on children and ethnic minorities in terms of alcohol and tobacco consumption, would represent a *culturally dictated sensitive issue*.

Marketing-generated Sensitive Groups

This term refers to groups that become vulnerable as the result of promotional strategies conceived and executed by marketers. Those groups are usually created through marketing innovation. Children are a particularly vulnerable population. Cartoon characters such as Little Mermaid, Smurfs and Ninja Turtles are examples of marketing-generated products that have translated into segments of young consumers who are very brand loyal to these promotionally conceived characters. The controversy surrounding "Barbie" doll as a role model for pre-teen

girls falls into this category (Leo, 1992). Licensing agreements allow thousands of manufacturers to utilize the characters as promotional leverage for selling a wide array of products. "Product-based programming" is an example of an ethical issue for marketing-generated sensitive groups. This refers to the notion that children may not distinguish actual programming from product-related ads that sponsor the show; i.e. ads for Ninja Turtle dolls, embedded in the Ninja Turtle TV program.

Issue-driven Sensitive Groups

Unlike the above-mentioned categories, these consumers need only to be sympathetic to cause-related or social issues, rather than being an actual member of a vulnerable group. These are defined as groups of consumers responding to social issues through observable changes in their purchasing behavior. "True-blue" green consumers, rain forest advocates, and members of other cause-related marketing groups are suitable examples.

Managerial Implications

The New Marketing Culture

The current cultural milieu accenting political correctness has become a critical factor in marketing management. Recent evidence suggests that marketers take great risk by ignoring the potential reactions caused by various interpretations of their marketing actions by concerned publics. Not only have boycotts increased dramatically in the last few years, but also other means of collective action to deter and publicly damage incorrect or socially irresponsible marketers have arisen. These actions can depreciate a brand's equity and tarnish a well-established corporate image.

Consequences of Ignoring Social Responsibility: Damned Brands

If adequate analysis and foresight is absent from the marketing plan, the result may well be a "damned brand". This is a brand that, owing to a lack of foreseeing social response from a sensitive group, has received such negative publicity that the product is dropped for the sake of preserving brand equity and corporate image. Such adverse public reaction can arise from social issues relating to questionable products and promotional techniques, which are interpreted as exploitation of a particular sensitive group.

Given the adversarial climate towards marketers, caution should be taken to pre-empt the launching of a "damned brand", or initiating a new promotional campaign that might create a negative public image. Certain products invite public scrutiny because of their inherently injurious nature or ethical controversies may surround marketing campaigns targeting sensitive groups. Companies have been forced to "bail out" and abandon their efforts when such negative publicity (regardless of its legitimacy) has surfaced. Brands such as Uptown and Dakota cigarettes and Power Master malt liquor became "damned" by the allegations of exploitation in reference to African-American consumers (*Business and Society Review*, 1992).

Advertising and Media Considerations

Currently, the issue of political correctness has created great controversy in the advertising industry, as its influence is direct and inescapable. Many advertisers face the dilemma of sacrificing humor, creativity and effectiveness for mediocrity owing to the constraints imposed by the prospect of attack from special interest groups. Some advertising professionals refer to America as a "New Age Fundamentalist State" whereby their advertising execution must walk a fine

line between radical right religious groups and politically correct "police" representing sensitive groups. Copy writers feel stifled because they cannot portray ethnic dialects, use humor and create "break through" advertising without the threat of retribution from special interest groups. Conversely, special interest groups (often opinion leaders for large sensitive groups), know full well the power and strategic use of the media. Through criticizing advertising campaigns, the media become a conduit for their cause and a *de facto* spokesperson for the group.

Problems and social issues of sensitive groups, in and of themselves, are not noteworthy. However, once they are reflected through the boycott of a product associated with a nationally-known marketing campaign, for example, the issue becomes news and the cause becomes anchored to a tangible item about which the public is highly aware. With increasing frequency, the news media have focussed on the controversies surrounding marketing advertising and its negative portrayal or influence on sensitive groups. From the bizarre to the perhaps legitimate, the sensitive group/marketing issue phenomenon has become a major factor for marketing managers in the 1990s, as the media remain poised and ready for special interest groups to be heard, and later endorsed. These groups could never afford the promotion which is generated from the publicity associated with these social debates. Ironically, in many such cases, the marketer benefits from the experience when the majority of public opinion interprets the accusation as absurd. This is an area relatively unresearched, yet the need for identifying proactive propositions as guidelines are quite obvious – marketers cannot portray ethnic dialects, or use humor without the threat of retribution. Thus, it is important to identify some general proactive propositions as guidelines for avoiding the crisis of a "damned brand".

Proactive Strategies for Corporate Social Responsibity

Increasingly, addressing the subject of corporate social responsibility has become recognized as being vitally important to marketers (Gatten, 1991). The heightened concern about, and public awareness of, social issues has provided strong initiatives for the development of corporate social responsibility as a market-driven phenomenon. Employees do not want to work for companies looking for a social conscience, nor do consumers want to buy from companies that pollute the environment. Social responsibility can only become a reality if managers become moral instead of amoral or immoral (Carroll, 1991). A heightened concern and awareness of social issues has provided incentives for corporate social responsibility to be fully integrated into a systematic agenda within the marketing system, and aggressively implemented within marketing plans. With highly commendable companies such as IBM, Merck, Levi Strauss, and Cummins engine, American business is only now on the verge of seriously analyzing corporate social policy issues and how they influence business performance (Hutton, 1992). What, then, are some philosophical guidelines for marketers pursuing this task?

What Is Marketing Correctness?

In the last four years, the national debate over "political correctness" has emerged from college campuses and has migrated into the business environment. The central focus encompassed issues relating to vulnerable populations, multiculturalism and speech codes as they relate to gender, race and class (Taylor, 1993). Primarily, the movement involved challenging traditional views and social norms as related to these groups. Soon these principles were applied to the corporate world, concentrating mostly on

environmental issues and marketing to sensitive groups.

Thus, the term "marketing correct" refers to the process of establishing a social responsibility policy as a fully integrated, systematic component of the marketing program, carefully incorporated into each promotional plan. Inherent in the philosophy of marketing correctness is the idea that social responsibility has become a salient attribute and a fruitful means of product differentiation. It is not an arbitrary "give away" program, but should enhance profitability, build brand equity and more clearly define product positioning in the marketplace.

The level of commitment to social responsibility is dictated by several factors, including the nature of the product, target market, corporate culture and mission statement. Companies selling tobacco and alcohol through inner city billboards, or handguns to women, obviously must answer to a higher sense of social responsibility because of the inherent controversy surrounding these products and sensitivity to their target markets.

Ben and Jerry's and the Body Shop, for example, are totally committed to social responsibility, in that it is deeply embedded in their mission statements and is a significant component of their corporate image. This is not to imply that all companies should be totally consumed by the subject, but that they should strive for a new perspective. Marketing corrrectness implies an awareness of how social responsibility can be incorporated into the marketing mix.

Integrating Social Responsibility into the Marketing Program

The development of a social responsibility program requires research, sensitivity and commitment from all levels in the marketing team. It should be consumer driven. Cultural diversity implies not only differences in language and lifestyle, but also temperament, perceptions and values intimately linked to consumer behavior. Knowledge of these differences can provide rich insights for product development, positioning strategy and promotional appeals.

Many customized training programs, video tapes series and other learning tools are available, replete with vignettes revealing cultural misunderstandings, and illustrating how managers, employees and sales personnel can better deal with these unique differences (Bahls, 1994). Many small business programs, including college seminars, the urban league and Chambers of Commerce, bring academicians, business professionals and community leaders together to discuss multicultural issues.

Contemporary periodicals offer rich insights into ethnic subculture and sensitive groups, often providing excellent cases of successful strategic planning from a myriad diverse companies. It is helpful for marketers to absorb the culture of their target markets through reading magazines, newspapers and viewing their popular films and television programs. Participating in community affairs and tracking relevant global issues is also suggested.

Concept testing, focus group studies and constant tracking of consumer attitudes is a critical component of social responsibilty policy. Often with incredible haste, an issue can develop which draws a particular industry practice, promotional technique or product attribute into the limelight of public scrutiny. Companies devoid of a crisis management program and contingency plan are at great risk in this volatile marketing environment. It is prudent to be prepared for the unexpected with systematic alternative measures, a central source of communicators, and pre-established decision-making authority. Finally, it is wise to establish an interactive

communications network and constructive liaison with opinion leaders of special interest groups representing the target markets that might react negatively to a particular market plan. Involving members of such groups in developing the plan, or alerting special interest group leaders concerning campaign concepts and the logic behind them, serves as an "inoculation effect", and can desensitize potentially damaging issues. Overall, a successful social policy program is predicated on awareness of cultural diversity, sensitive groups and their special interests; research on contemporary and potentially relevant social issues; a creative search for regional and cause-related marketing, preparedness for crisis; and common sense. Specific guidelines for proactive strategies are offered below:

(1) Establish corporate social responsibility as a component of a firm's marketing information system

(2) Introduce sensitive group and social issue research in the earliest stages of the new product development process

(3) Specifically, establish a model for tracking public attitudes and perceptions of relevant social issues and sensitive groups

(4) Consider alternative means of utilizing social policy to build brand equity and enhance relationship marketing with sensitive groups

(5) Utilize concept testing and focus groups among consumers representing targeted sensitive groups

(6) Develop an ethical rationale and defensive strategies prior to the introduction of a marketing plan

(7) Seek to gain endorsements from opinion leaders and respected celebrities within these groups

(8) Have a crisis management program intact and consider the crucial linkages of public relations and publicity to corporate social responsibility programs

(9) Consider optimizing the use of interactive marketing, and video news releases to enhance the use of CSR projects

(10) Examine opportunities with sensitive groups for socially-oriented, cause-related marketing programs and environmental issues.

Conclusion

It is very probable that America's concern with social responsibility will continue to create problems and opportunities for marketers targeting sensitive groups. Anticipating and incorporating these issues into a systematic social responsibility program is essential for competing in the 1990s. Social issues, cultural diversity, environmental concerns and cause-related marketing are becoming a central focus in many areas of consumer decision making. They represent great potential for product positioning and building brand equity among a growing number of socially responsible consumers. While product quality, value and service still reign supreme, the new era of competition asks – "Are You Marketing Correct?".

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