Sustainable Marketing
B7654
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Course Description

What is the ultimate responsibility of companies? Fifty years ago, the consensus was that the answer to this question should be maximizing profit and shareholders’ value. Today, however, the answer is more complex. Companies are increasingly being held accountable for environmental and social responsibilities, in addition to their economic performance. As a result, the traditional principles of marketing developed during the 20th century are also being challenged and revised to embrace sustainability as a core component of business.

Sustainable marketing is the process of creating and delivering value to customers in a manner that respects or enhances both the environment and society. Through lectures, case studies, interactive discussions, and guest speakers, students in this course will learn about the principles of sustainable marketing across various industries (e.g., apparel, food, automotive, technology), as well as gain a deep understanding of the sustainable consumer. By the end of the course, students will be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to develop effective sustainable marketing plans that can drive positive change in the business world. In line with these learning objectives, the course is divided into three main modules: (1) Defining sustainable marketing, (2) Understanding the sustainable consumer, and (3) Developing a sustainable marketing plan.

This course is included in the Climate Change and Business Program initiative at Columbia Business School.
Module I: Defining Sustainable Marketing

In the first module, we will discuss how the principles of traditional marketing are being challenged by increasing concerns about sustainability. We will define sustainable marketing and connect it to other related business concepts, such as corporate social responsibility. Through the Everlane case, we will debate how companies may move forward when their sustainability promises are put into question. Next, we will discuss the “triple bottom line” (i.e., economic performance, environmental impact, and social impact) and examine the buy-one-give-one business model for Bombas. Lastly, we will review different corporate approaches to sustainability, discuss Allbirds’ pivoting strategy to maintain its competitive edge, and conclude with a discussion on Greenwashing.

1. Sustainable Marketing and Course Introduction

Learning Objectives:
- Explore why the marketing principles that evolved in the 20th century are often incongruent with today’s sustainability goals.
- Define sustainable marketing and related business concepts.
- Introduce the course and review assignments.

Readings:
- Defining Sustainable Marketing and Related Concepts, CaseWorks #240503, 2024
- (optional) How to build a career in sustainability, Harvard Business Review, 2022

Deliverable:
- Complete online survey

2. Case Discussion – Everlane

Learning Objectives:
- Assess the alignment of a sustainable apparel company’s stated values with its strategic decisions.
- Recommend how a company should move forward after a crisis putting into question its promise of ethics, transparency, and sustainability.
- Examine the viability of price transparency from a business standpoint.
Readings:

- Transparency and Ethics at Everlane, W21026-PDF-ENG, 2021
- (optional) Everlane’s Promise of ‘Radical Transparency’ Unravels

Deliverable:

- Complete online survey

3. The Triple Bottom Line

Learning Objectives:

- Review different perspectives on the ultimate goals and responsibilities of companies.
- Discuss the objectives of sustainable marketing and the triple bottom line (i.e., economic performance, environmental impact, and social impact).

Readings:

- Fink, L. “Larry Fink’s 2022 letter to CEOs.” 2022

4. Case Discussion – Bombas

Learning Objectives:

- Discuss the challenges of achieving growth while maintaining focus on the social mission of a company.
- Examine the viability of the buy-one-give-one business model.

Readings:

- Bee-ing Better at Bombas, 522038-PDF-ENG, 2022
Deliverable:

- Complete online survey

5. **Corporate Orientations toward Sustainability**

Learning Objectives:

- Discuss the different corporate approaches to sustainability (e.g., compliers, innovators, trailblazers).
- Examine best practices in managing the transition to more sustainable business models.

Readings:

- [A Guide to Greenwashing and How to Spot It](#), EcoWatch, 2022
- [How leaders can move beyond greenwashing toward real change](#), Harvard Business Review, 2022
- (optional) [Sustainability Lessons from the Frontline](#), MIT Sloan Management Review 2017
- (optional) [Yes, Sustainability Can Be a Strategy](#), Harvard Business Review, 2019

6. **Case Discussion – Allbirds**

Learning Objectives:

- Launching a sustainable business in a competitive market.
- Pivoting the strategy to remain competitive in the face of commoditization.

Readings:

- Allbirds: CaseWorks 2024

Deliverable:

- Complete online survey

7. **Greenwashing**

Learning Objectives:

- Defining greenwashing and examining different types of greenwashing.
- Strategies for establishing credibility and avoid greenwashing.
Deliverable:

- Find a product or packaging that suggests the product is sustainable. Bring it to class or take a picture of it. In class, we will discuss whether it is greenwashing or not.

Readings:

- Summary of the Green Guides, FTC.
- Understanding the Effective Use of Green Product Labels, UL.
- (optional) A Guide to Greenwashing and How to Spot it.

Module II: Understanding the Sustainable Consumer

The second module will examine the sustainable consumer’s characteristics, psychology, and behaviors. We will discuss the Intention-Behavior gap, which is the discrepancy between consumers’ attitudes and their actual behavior when it comes to sustainable actions. We will examine possible ways to solve this discrepancy through the SHIFT framework, which provides a framework for addressing the underlying factors that contribute to the gap (i.e., social influence, habit formation, individual self, feelings and cognition, and tangibility). Next, we will review some sustainable consumer trends, such as voluntary simplicity, vintage, and sustainable luxury. Finally, we will examine the case of sustainable luxury by discussing the business model of Norlha, a yak wool textile luxury enterprise located on the Tibetan Plateau.

8. Segmentation and Targeting

Learning Objectives:

- Examine segmentation and targeting around sustainability interests, benefits, and values.
- Discuss green consumption values and consumer response to environmentally friendly products.

Readings:

- (optional) Segmentation and Targeting, 8219-PDF-ENG, 2019
- (optional) Gen Z, Millennials Stand Out for Climate Change Activism, Pew Research Center, 2021
9. **Sustainable Consumer Trends**

**Learning Objectives:**
- We will define and discuss several sustainable consumer trends:
  1. Voluntary simplicity and consumer minimalism
  2. Recycling, upcycling, and vintage
  3. Sustainable luxury.

**Readings:**
- (optional) Wilson, Anne, and Silvia Bellezza, “*Consumer Minimalism*,” Journal of Consumer Research, 2022

10. **Case Discussion – Norlha**

**Learning Objectives:**
- Identify the challenges faced by an indigenous community due to modernization and globalization.
- Explain a community-based business and its potential to offer an alternative to the dominant business model for sustainable development.
- Outline the challenges of a community-based luxury business model.

**Readings:**

**Deliverable:**
- Complete [online survey](#)

11. **The Intention-Behavior Gap and Possible Solutions**

**Learning Objectives:**
• Discuss why pro-environmental values, attitudes, and intentions often fail to translate into more sustainable purchases or recycling behaviors.
• Review the SHIFT framework to encourage sustainable consumer behavior.

Readings:
• The elusive green consumer, Harvard Business Review, 2019

Module III: Developing a Sustainable Marketing Plan

The third module will discuss the critical steps in developing a sustainable marketing plan. We will start with a guest speaker’s lecture on the future of sustainable marketing and the path to “net zero.” Next, we will discuss product development and marketing sustainable innovation and apply these concepts in the Aleph Farms’s case. We will then learn how to use the life cycle analysis to analyze the social and ecological impact of sustainable products. We will discuss sustainable supply chain management issues and examine managing recommerce platforms in the circular economy. Subsequently, we will host one guest speaker on the circular economy and one on sustainability in technology. Finally, we will analyze how to design effective communication campaigns around sustainability goals in the General Motors case on electric vehicles.

12. The Future of Sustainability and The Path to Net Zero

Guest speaker: Laura Corb, Senior Partner at McKinsey

Learning Objectives:
• Discuss the role of different stakeholders (i.e., governments, businesses, civil society organizations, and consumers) in shaping the future of sustainability.
• Understand the key challenges and opportunities associated with net-zero climate commitments.

Readings:
• Net Zero Climate Commitments: Realistic Goal or Branding Exercise? B6029-PDF-ENG, 2022
13. Sustainable product design and innovation

Learning Objectives:
- Review the key components of marketing plan focused on sustainability (in preparation for the course assignment).
- Introducing sustainable innovations.
- Branding and positioning sustainable products.

Readings:
- (optional) The Marketing Plan, Chapter 3, Alex Chernev, Strategic Marketing Management

Deliverable:
- Students will communicate the composition of their teams via email and will share the name of the brand and/or product for their project group.

14. Case Discussion – Aleph Farms: A New Culture of Meat

Learning Objectives:
- Assessing various value propositions for an innovation and mapping them onto various segments.
- Anticipating barriers to the adoption of an innovation and determining the effectiveness of a substitute vs. complement approach.
- Planning the next-generation pipeline of new products.

Readings:
- Aleph Farms: A New Culture of Meat, 522071-PDF-ENG, 2023

Deliverable:
- Complete online survey

15. The Socio-Ecological Impact of Products
Learning Objectives:
- Assessing the socio-ecological impact of products (e.g., life-cycle analysis, complete sustainable package framework).
- Students will analyze the socio-ecological impact of a product of their choosing and determine its level of sustainability.

Readings:
- The Incomplete Package: What’s Missing in Sustainable Products, Winterich, 2020

16. Case Discussion – Going Plastic Neutral

Learning Objectives:
- Discuss plastic neutrality initiatives and sustainability.
- Deliberate on the role of different stakeholders in implementing a sustainable initiative like plastic neutrality.

Readings:
- Going Plastic Neutral: The Nestle Philippines Experience (A), IM1219-PDF-ENG, 2021

Deliverable:
- Complete online survey

17. Sustainable Supply Chain Management

Learning Objectives:
- Understand the key sustainability challenges facing supply chain management and how they can be addressed.
- Discuss sustainability issues for e-commerce platforms and online marketplaces.
- Explore collaborations with stakeholders (e.g., suppliers, customers, regulators, NGOs) to promote sustainability throughout the supply chain.

Readings:

18. Case: AptDeco
Learning Objectives:
- Growth and customer acquisition in a two-sided recommerce platform, including converting buyers to sellers and sellers to buyers.
- The importance of identifying “super users” as suppliers and buyers in a two-sided market, thus reducing acquisition costs.
- Evaluate a rebranding initiative with a focus on sustainability.

Readings:

Deliverable:
- Complete [online survey](#)

19. **Communication**

Learning Objectives:
- Understand the complexities and risks of developing communication campaigns for sustainable products and services.
- Examine the differences between conventional marketing communications vs. sustainable marketing communications.
- Review the approaches to ensure the development of open, credible, and interactive communication strategies.

Readings:
- [Artificial Intelligence and the Circular Economy, Google, 2019](#)
- (optional) [Linear Risks](#), Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2018

20. **Case Discussion – General Motors**

Learning Objectives:
- Measuring, monitoring, and reporting sustainability goals
- Analyzing sustainability-focused communication campaigns
- Comparing different strategies for Electric Vehicles.

Readings:
- General Motors, CaseWorks 2024
Deliverable:
- Complete online survey

21. Projects Presentations

Six randomly drawn teams will present a short version of their marketing plans to the rest of the class. The presentations will be 10 minutes long, plus 3 minutes for Q&A.

22. Course Review

23-24 Final Exam

Method of Evaluation

Class attendance and participation (individual) 35%
Final Exam (individual) 30%
Sustainable Marketing Plan (group) 30%
Life-Cycle Analysis (individual) 5%

Class attendance and participation (individual)
- Attending class and being on time (10%) – Classes are in person, there will be no streaming on zoom.
- Participating in class (20%) – Sharing insights and viewpoints in class is essential for learning in this course. Therefore, all students are expected to contribute to class discussions. Students should be prepared to comment during sessions and may be randomly cold called during discussions. Completing the required readings and cases for each session is the best way to prepare for class discussion. Evaluation of class participation is based on the quality, rather than the quantity, of comments. Comments will be evaluated based on their relevance, insightfulness, and coherence.
- Being prepared before class (5%) – Class preparedness will be assessed based on your responses to short online surveys to fill out before case discussions. Note that several of the survey questions may not have a unique answer. You will receive full credit for each survey if you complete it before class and provide a reasonable justification for your answers.
- Extra Credit – You can earn extra credit by contributing content relevant to the course in a few ways:
o Posting on the discussions thread on the Canvas course page. You can contribute content by participating in these discussions.

o Sending me a short presentation (i.e., about 5 slides) about a case relevant to the course discussion that caught your attention. Each student can send up to one presentation; I may ask you to share the case in class or on Canvas with the other students.

Final Exam (individual)
The final Exam will be two-hour, open-book, open-notes exam. The Exam will take place in the classroom and will be designed to test your understanding of the topics covered in the lectures, readings, and cases. The Exam will be a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

Sustainable Marketing Plan (group)
This is a group assignment. Each group may have up to five students and no less than three students. The group project involves the design of a marketing plan for a sustainable product or service of an existing or a new (even hypothetical) company of your choice. Students are expected to apply the marketing concepts, frameworks, and templates learned in the class in constructing the plan. It is important to support the plan with data (e.g., publicly available data on sustainability issues, industry reports, consumer surveys you may run) and provide rationales for all recommendations (e.g., you recommend a specific product positioning or price because of your analyses and reasoning).

The marketing plan should be a PowerPoint presentation of 20-25 slides. Students will also create a shorter version of the plan to present in class during one of the last sessions. All groups will record a video presentation of their plans and post them on Canvas for other classmates to view and comment. Moreover, on the second to last session, six randomly drawn teams will present a short version of their marketing plans to the rest of the class.

Plans will be evaluated on the following criteria: (a) Completeness (addressing each element of the Marketing Plan); (b) Clarity (well organized, easy to understand); (c) Consistency and Thoughtfulness (the different elements of the marketing mix are consistent with each other, for example the positioning justifies pricing and distribution decisions); (d) Depth / Effort (detail level, sources); (e) Originality.

Life-Cycle Analysis (individual)
We will work on this assignment together in class. Choose a product you like and perform a qualitative life-cycle analysis (i.e., socio-ecological impact matrix, complete sustainable package framework). You can use information on the product’s packaging, its website, publicly available online, reports, etc. Include a
brief description of your assessments (i.e., if you rate “water usage in manufacturing” as high, write one or two sentences to explain the rating). You can do it on one of your company’s products, but in that case, you should also perform a life-cycle analysis for one of your competitors. The assignment should be maximum 2 word pages long, or 2 ppt slides. Please submit it via Canvas.

Classroom Norms and Expectations

Core Culture

Students are expected to adhere to CBS Core Culture in this class by being Present, Prepared, Participating.

Inclusion, Accommodation, and Support for Students

At Columbia Business School we believe diversity strengthens any community or business model and brings it greater success. The School is committed to providing all students with equal opportunity to thrive in the classroom by providing a learning, living, and working environment free from discrimination, harassment, and bias on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or ability.

Students with documented disabilities may receive reasonable accommodations. Students are encouraged to contact Columbia University’s Office of Disability Services for information and to register for services.

Columbia Business School adheres to all community, state, and federal regulations as relate to Title IX and student safety. Read more about CBS’ policies to support Inclusion, Accommodations and Support for Students.

Honor Code and Academic Integrity

The Columbia Business School Honor Code calls on all members of the School community to adhere to and uphold the notions of truth, integrity, and respect both during their time in school, and throughout their careers as productive, moral, and caring participants in their companies and communities around the world. All students are subject to the Honor Code for all of their academic work. Failure to comply with the Honor Code may result in Dean’s Discipline.

Course materials (videos, assignments, problem sets, etc) are for your use in this course only. You may not upload them to external sites, share them with students outside of this course, or post them for public commentary without the instructor’s permission.

Course Attendance Policies
Attendance is tracked and will affect a student's participation grade. This course may use PollEverywhere as a tool to increase student engagement. PollEverywhere may also be used to confirm student attendance and participation records. Class sessions lasting 90 minutes typically do not have a break, while those lasting three hours typically have a 15-minute break near the session midpoint.

**Generative AI Policy**

You may use Generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, for your work in this course, but not for the online surveys to fill out before case discussions. When you use any of these tools, you must include a citation describing how you used them to generate your response to the assignment. Be careful not to plagiarize. Using these tools to generate responses to assignments violates [CBS's Honor Code](#). Turnitin and similar systems can find plagiarism in your work if you use AI generated written material without attribution.