

DOES THE GREEN SHOE FIT? EXAMINING CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF FIT AND CSR ACTIVITIES

Mark R. Gleim, Florida State University, United States of America
Jeremy S. Wolter, Florida State University, United States of America

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the proposed research is to identify the various ways that the sustainability related actions of an organization may impact consumers' perception of the firm. Fit may be defined as the congruence between the socially responsible initiatives of a firm and synergies in firm activities (Ellen, Webb and Mohr 2006). Consumers likely see the socially responsible initiatives firms engage in, however the way that the socially responsible actions are viewed will vary from firm to firm depending on fit. Organizations need to recognize that there is no universally perfect strategy for all firms, and each firm needs to adapt to what consumers believe is appropriate. While firms may engage in sustainable behaviors, they may not be as beneficial as intended, thus eliminating the potential advantages gained through appropriate CSR initiatives.

The extent to which enviropreneurial strategies are successful hinges on many things. Contingency theory suggests that there is no perfect way of doing things for every firm, but rather each firm should decide what works best for itself (Ruekert, Walker and Roering 1985). Currently firms conduct sustainability related activities that are redundant and mimic the actions of other firms. This "copycat" strategy may be efficient; however, it does not allow firms to capitalize on their distinct capabilities. Consumers likely perceive the actions of each firm differently based on their perceptions of a firm's primary activities and socially responsible actions. Thus, it is important that each organization create a unique strategy that fits the corporate image. While one firm may pursue an enviropreneurial strategy that works very well, another may attempt to mimic it and fail miserably. Thus, it is important that firms approach sustainability oriented marketing strategies with a keen perspective as to what works best for itself, rather than what has worked well for others.

Given the lack of successfully enacted large scale sustainability-oriented marketing strategies, research examining sustainability remains stark in the marketing literature. As a recent poll suggests that 77 percent of Americans are concerned about the environment (Saad 2006), firms are launching socially responsible initiatives at a tremendous rate, yet the results have not been as overwhelming as expected. Past research has examined the role of fit in other areas of social responsibility; however, the role of sustainability and fit has yet to be examined. As firms conduct sustainability related activities in areas that have only a slight association with characteristics of the organization or products offered, there is likely a disconnect, or lack of fit, in the mind of consumers. As the demand for sustainable products represents only a small fraction of global product demand, a mere one to four percent, research examining sustainability is needed (UNEP 2005). Thus, the proposed research seeks to help fill the void regarding consumer perceptions of fit and firm-directed sustainability efforts.

More specifically, the current research seeks to answer the following questions. How does what an organization sells (i.e., type of good or service) impact consumers' perceptions of a firm's CSR activities? How does a consumer feel about specific CSR initiatives related to their own personal beliefs (e.g., firm offers paperless billing, but consumers think it's pointless)? What impact does firm familiarity have on consumer perceptions of the CSR activities utilized by a firm? Does perceived corporate credibility (i.e., trust in the firm) moderate the relationship between consumer perceptions of CSR activities and behavioral intentions? The questions above illustrate the criticality and potential impact that sustainability related actions can have on a firm.

To accomplish the objectives of the proposed research a scenario based structural equation model comprised of real and fictitious firms will be utilized. Consumers will read information regarding the sustainable actions of a specific firm from their own websites and asked questions regarding their perceptions. Approximately 400 consumers will be assigned to one of eight companies. The measures that are used in the research are based on established scales and modified to fit the research context as necessary. The independent variables of interest are selected to assess the research questions identified. The survey instrument includes measures to assess the following constructs: (1) perceived fit between the firm and its green initiatives, (2) perceived fit between the consumer and the firms green initiatives, (3) firm/brand familiarity, (4) perceived trust, (5) perceived firm motivations, (6) attitude toward the firm, (7) numerous behavioral intention scales.

References available upon request.