

The Paradoxes and Challenges of Creating Social Good Through Environmentalist-Marketer Collaboration

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Abstract

Increasingly, collaborative relationships, commonly called *green alliances*, are emerging between marketers and environmental groups to promote corporate environmentalism and create social good (Stafford and Hartman 1996). Green alliances allow marketers to obtain ecological expertise, credibility, and linkages to consumers and other relevant stakeholders to support green marketing initiatives (Stafford, Polonsky, and Hartman 2000). Environmental NGOs benefit as well, gaining the opportunity to leverage their efforts directly with business (Stafford and Hartman 2000).

Despite opportunities, many green alliances have been challenged when striving to create social good. For example, in 1990, McDonald's was criticized in its partnership with the Environmental Defense Fund for replacing polystyrene clamshells with a paper wrapping. FDA restrictions prevented the new wrappers from being made of recycled materials, igniting controversy over its environmental improvement (Stafford and Hartman 1996). More recently, Starbucks was criticized for abandoning efforts with the Alliance for Environmental Innovation to develop a more environmentally friendly paper cup after test marketing failed (Gibson 1999). Balancing various stakeholder interests commonly results in compromise, inviting public scrutiny and questioning the social good derived from green alliance initiatives.

An Agenda for Marketing Research

To better understand the practice of doing social good through green alliances, we propose a research agenda, which incorporates *sustainability*, *corporate citizenship*, and *stakeholder management* perspectives. Marketing issues such as sustainable consumption and product take-back/leasing warrant consideration. Further, because social and environmental initiatives affect multiple stakeholders with diverging interests, researchers need to examine how relationship marketing and network linkages may be extended among stakeholders. Finally, promotions research needs to consider a *two-way, symmetric* model of stakeholder communications (Grunig and Hunt 1994) to facilitate mutual understanding, education, and collaboration.

To initiate this research program, we propose that the goal of creating social good be added to the environmental and economic goals commonly associated with environmental collaboration to achieve *corporate social sustainability*, which we define as the extent to which a corporation meets its economic, sociopolitical, and environmental responsibilities imposed by its stakeholders without compromising future generations to meet their needs. This concept integrates several converging literatures with green alliance research, including corporate citizenship, social responsibility, environmental sustainability, and stakeholder management. Ultimately, we contend that collaborative stakeholder exchanges are necessary for global social and environmental sustainability.

References

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