

**THE DURABLE USE OF CONSUMER PRODUCTS:  
New Options for Business and Consumption**

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CONSUMER PRODUCTS:  
New Options for Business  
and Consumption**

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"For me, an object is alive. This cigarette, this match box contain a secret life much more intensive than certain human beings".

Joan Miró (Taillandier, Yvon (1959) XXe siècle, Paris).

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## PREFACE

Do we need a new car or a new refrigerator every ten years? What happens to our PC which is exchanged for a new model every three years? Why do our shoes last only a year or so, while those of our great grandfather served for a generation? Are businesses deliberately marketing products in a way which encourages sub-optimal use and induces consumers to buy new products?

More and more consumers respond “yes” objecting to the business practices which reduce the life span of a product or pay no attention to efficiency in consumption. The growing concern with sub-optimal use of consumer durables arises as a response to the volume of waste, as well as to the growing conviction that over-consumption is encouraged by marketing techniques and approaches that favor lesser durability and sub-optimal use.

There are signs that those things will have to change.

Firstly, client orientation – a condition *sine qua non* of marketing success in the saturated markets of rich countries – is gaining popularity. Consumers are better informed and more influential and “intelligent consumption” is on the rise. Buyers are becoming more and more hostile towards marketing manipulation, inducing them to consume faster, more and at higher prices. The public increasingly resists messages in advertisements (preventive resistance) which are predominantly persuasive (rather than educational or informative) and conceived to stimulate demand for the “new”, the superficial and the fashionable. A growing number of users is also critical of consumer goods which become too complex to be repaired, used optimally or rendered compatible with systems based on newer technologies or fashions.

Secondly, innovative managers view the evolution of the marketing environment as a window of business opportunities. Indeed, a growing group of business leaders look at the “optimal use” option as a realistic profit-making proposition. The contributors of this collective book – authorities in the area of sustainable product design, waste management and marketing of services – argue that greater emphasis should be put on durable use of consumer products if marketing concepts such as client orientation, product stewardship or sustainable consumption are to be effectively applied in business. Case studies of leading firms such as Rank Xerox, Kodak, Daimler-Benz and Digital are included in this volume to illustrate how longer life spans of consumer products may bring about reduction in waste, greater market share, increased customer loyalty and higher profits.

Product durability strategies are gaining importance because they:

- emphasize performance and maximize client satisfaction rather than quantitative consumption;
- protect the environment through less waste and through more intensive use;
- open new opportunities to service clients and integrate specific products into more comprehensive service-based systems providing solutions to clients' problems;
- intensify the partnership between producers and their customers focusing on confidence, interaction and mutual commitment.

Strategies aiming at the durable use of consumer products necessarily involve producers, consumers and governments. Consumer durables, in order to be optimally used, require appropriate communication strategies, systems of retake and re-marketing, maintenance services, etc.. Marketing – the art of exchanges – is a key element of such activities.

This volume is a first book-length analysis of the durable use of consumer products from a marketing perspective. It offers a fresh look at a number of conceptual issues such as:

- What are the reasons for the shorter life of products?
- What are the functional, economic and symbolic attributes of product durability?
- How do those attributes relate to the consumer's utilitarian, cognitive and affective motives of buying?
- What methods of communication show the advantages of durability to the consumer (and when does it make sense to use them)?
- What are the managerial concerns in the area of retake and re-marketing?
- What management knowledge and marketing techniques still need to be developed to operate an optimal system for the usage of consumer durables?

Several authors of this volume challenge companies to seek radical improvements in the way in which they develop their product concept and think about product utilization by customers. They pull together hard-headed arguments for innovative companies to force the pace of optimal use.

The volume is divided into two parts. Part I, entitled "Concepts and Issues", offers an overview of the theoretical issues. It also provides an outline of the various approaches and methodologies used. Part II, titled "Cases and Business Perspectives", comprises the "practical" chapters presenting cases and specific business solutions.

Part I begins with an overview of the durability issue from the marketing perspective and an outline of the approaches and methodologies that are helpful in conceptualizing the optimal use of durables (Chapter 1). Following that, is a comparative analysis of a service economy and industrial economy (Chapter 2) giving the reader a better understanding of the environmental change affecting the use of products. Chapter 2 concludes with a series of strategic implications for consumer marketing.

The relationship between marketing strategies and the useful life of products is more explicitly discussed in Chapter 3, which also provides an overview of the

challenges facing managers. The concepts of product stewardship and extended product responsibility are presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 deals with sustainable design and Chapter 6 draws lessons from the experiences of the US electronics industry.

Chapters by practitioners comprised in Part II provide a wealth of hands-on advice on how to move towards a goal seen as too elusive for many businesses to bother about. Which sectors seem to be the most likely candidates for change? How does one find out whether the rising trend towards the optimal use of products has implications for a particular company? A useful tool for checking a company's attitude is the questionnaire (Annex 1) providing a benchmark from which managers may identify their company's current position and assess profitable opportunities.

We hope that this volume will assist managers, strategic planners, academics and government specialists. We also dare to expect that the book will be of interest to the public at large since the issues discussed are those confronted by many people in their day-to-day life.

M. M. Kostecki

Neuchâtel, January 1998

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