
Authenticating sincerity

The effects of corporate social responsibility campaigns in the fashion industry

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Climate change, and environmental concerns, are at the forefront of most industries now. In those industries that rely on public consumers, such as fashion, there has been a monumental shift toward convincing consumers that each brand is concerned about their impact on the environment. With protests such as the Extinction Rebellion in London during April 2019, as well as Netflix releasing a new series narrated by David Attenborough about climate change, the world is firmly fixed on changing how we do things. The threat is becoming more real, and there is a prevailing feeling that not enough is being done by those organizations that cause the most harm. It is not news that the fashion industry is one of the most damaging to the environment. Yet of the public consumers know the extent to which some brands and producers in fashion and textiles are going to improve. Worryingly, however, some fashion brands are purporting to have corporate social responsibility (CSR) when it comes to their environmental impact, when in fact their approach is only to utilize marketing campaigns to improve sales.

The issue, considered by Childs *et al.* (2019), is how sustainable brands compare to disposable brands in terms of consumer perception, when CSR campaigns are promoted either on their own website, or in news sources. The question at hand is whether promoting CSR is beneficial for either type of fashion brand, and how they should do it to best effect. Brands such as H&M have long promoted their in-store recycling program, where old clothes can be brought in for a reward of an H&M voucher. Interestingly, this promotion, whilst massively successful, and inline with the brands overall push to become sustainable and at the forefront of environmental concerns in the fashion industry, has had to be cancelled. This is due to the global bottleneck of clothing recycling, and the limited options to do this sustainably and on a large scale. H&M has resorted to renting huge warehouses to store the unwanted clothing whilst it searches for a solution to this issue.

Honest branding

Brands such as Patagonia have long been considered sustainable. They promote an ethos of fixing rather than replacing, to the extent that any product bought from them can be sent to a store to be fixed at minimal to no cost. When brands such as this promote their CSR, it chimes with their overall ethos. Yet brands such as ASOS, current king of disposable fashion, have no ability to convince consumers that they are being sincere with environmentally orientated CSR programs, due to their disposable focus caused by the pursuit of the lowest possible price point. This CSR behavior is not reserved just for budget or technical brands. Gucci has collaborated with UNICEF to create a bag where 25 percent of product sales was donated to charity. Other brands, such as Levi Strauss and Madewell have also followed in the footsteps of H&M by offering to take unwanted or old clothes with the reward of credit or discount.

These brands, like many others, have attempted to convince the consumers that their CSR direction is legitimate through both brand platform advertising (on their website, social media accounts, etc.) and through traditional news and advertising outlets. As CSR campaigns and promotion are becoming more prevalent across all forms of brand-consumer



marketing, consumers are becoming increasingly skeptical. The power of social media has in part been a cause of this. As more people are able to reach out to a broader, global audience, information about brands that they may wish to keep secret are becoming hard to contain. If a brand promotes environmental concerns but is shown by a factory worker or tourist who ventures near one of their sites that they are engaging in harmful practices, it is impossible for the brand to prevent a damaging leak. As such, sincerity is becoming increasingly difficult for brands to get across.

Branding for good

As would be expected, when brands already associated with sustainability promote CSR initiatives to further their environmental concerns, consumers react with positive and supportive behavior. Consumer support for a sustainable brand is improved the most when the brand promotes their CSR through their own media outlets, such as their website and social media accounts, rather than through traditional media outlets such as TV. Owning and promoting themselves seems to suggest a desire to be taken sincerely, whereas publishing that a brand is trying to save the planet across all forms of media appears like a marketing ploy. Despite the fact that successful CSR marketing does improve brand performance, it has to be clear this is not the reason for engaging in CSR.

For disposable brands, the work of Childs *et al.* (2019) has shown that promoting CSR practices in any form creates negative responses from consumers. The belief in the insincerity of the brand is formed because disposable, fast-fashion brands are implicitly marketing themselves on the cheapness of their goods, and the ability for consumers to buy multiple outfits and not worry about keeping them. What is disturbing is that it is disposable brands, such as ASOS and other online giants, or Primark, are the ones whose impact on the environment is massive due to the size of their operation. Therefore, these are the brands that need most to adopt CSR initiatives to reduce their environmental impact. Yet without the support of their customer base, it will be hard for things to change.

Comment

The review is based on “Sincerity or ploy? An investigation of corporate social responsibility campaigns” by Childs *et al.* (2019).

Reference

Childs, M., Woo, H. and Kim, S. (2019), “Sincerity or ploy? An investigation of corporate social responsibility campaigns”, *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, Vo. 28 No. 4, pp. 489-501, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-07-2018-1953>