

Cooler Than Boycotts. Carrotmob as an Innovative Form of Ethical Consumption.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

With increasing intensity consumers base their consumption decisions on ethical considerations. The most prominent and visible examples of ethical consumption are consumer boycotts. However, the effectiveness of this kind of action is questionable for two reasons: First, boycotts are based on a punishing strategy. Companies considered socially irresponsible are post-hoc penalized for their behavior. The impact on other companies and the possibility to proactively educate companies is rather low. Second, and even more important, consumers participating in boycotts have to refrain from buying products that they like or even prefer, and thus, most consumers are not willing to boycott.

To overcome these limitations, and to establish a new form of political influence by means of purchasing behavior, the concept of carrotmob has evolved. More than 80 carrotmobs have been arranged in North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Australia during the last two years (www.carrotmob.org). As a special type of consumer buycott, this action rewards business enterprises for socially responsible behavior. In this way, consumers do not need to restrict their consumption patterns, but to increase purchases from those companies which are to be supported by the carrotmob activists due to desirable social business behavior. In contrast to boycotts, carrotmobs are win-win situations. Ethical consumers (who are concerned about environmental issue, for example) are capable of forcing companies to behave in an intended way (e.g., reduce their energy consumption), and businesses can take advantage of carrotmobs in terms of improving their image and developing their sales figures. As the action is unconventional and spectacular, the media coverage of the carrotmob will raise additional attention and intensify the target company's publicity.

So far, this innovative type of ethical consumption has not yet been discussed in academic literature. To fill this void, the present paper introduces a conceptualization of carrotmobs combining elements of buycotts (consumers collectively reward a company's behavior by means of their purchasing behavior), auctions (the company within one industry sector setting the bid for the highest share of its sales volumes for ethical investments will be the target of

the carrotmob), and guerrilla tactics (here: flashmobs, where customers collectively undertake a certain behavior, e.g. swarming stores and purchasing).

Theory Development

The article builds on boycott/buycott literature to describe the characteristics of the carrotmob. In particular, the paper extends the Friedman's (1996) taxonomy to show how the carrotmob differs from boycotts and buycotts. The rationale of the carrotmob is embedded in five streams of research with the first two considering the general rationale of the carrotmob and the last three examining the motives of different groups for taking part in the carrotmob.

First, the paper builds on the corporate social responsibility literature to describe the objectives of the carrotmob (e.g. Baron 2001; Ferrell and Maignan 2004; McWilliams et al. 2006). Second, theories on consumer power are discussed to analyze the means of influence between consumers and companies on a meta-level (Denegri-Knott et al. 2006; Kozinets et al. 2004). Third, the focus is put on the activists as the initiating and connecting actor. In this regard, the carrotmob is described as a subtype of the guerrilla tactic (Hutter/Hoffmann 2011; Levinson 2007). Fourth, to explain the target company's motivation concepts of auctions are taken into account. The paper considers how companies draw their decision to place a bid for becoming the target of the carrotmob. The appropriateness of four major forms of auction for carrotmobbing is discussed (Menezes and Monteiro 2008). Fifth, the paper puts the focus on the consumers who participate in the carrotmob. Different motives to join are investigated (i.e., environmental orientation, attitude towards boycotts). In particular, literature on buycott and boycott motivation helps to understand the motives of individual consumers that take part in a carrotmob (Hoffmann/Müller 2009; Klein et al. 2004; Sen et al. 2001).

Conclusions

The article sets an agenda for further empirical research on the efficacy of carrotmobs and the motives that influence willingness to participate. For example, different factors are suggested why consumers may participate in carrotmobs, such as political orientation, environmental orientation, or perceived efficacy. Additionally, the paper provides managerial implications on how companies may apply the carrotmob as a marketing instrument.

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