

Role of Marketing in Building Business Case for Sustainability with Social-cause Brand

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Abstract

This research poses marketing practices at the core of business models design and development, and focuses on the role of marketing efforts in building business case for sustainability with social-cause branding. To build a business case for sustainability requires innovation in business models, i.e. in the way through which a firm creates, delivers and exchanges value with its internal and external stakeholders, and how it sustains its profit stream over time while integrating environmental and social challenges in its activities, structure and governance. We studied the business model of the French tea cooperative “1336”. This brand corresponds to the days of strike the employees of Fralib undertook to save their factory from shutdown by the multinational Unilever. We present the 1336 label commitments to social change and environmental responsibilities to strengthen the social-cause brand on which the cooperative was built, and to embed environmental, social, nutritional and economic performance aspects in its core business processes. Considering the role of marketing practices in building business cases for sustainability facilitates understanding how a company can leverage its economic performance while realizing voluntary social and environmental activities. The paper’s contribution is twofold: First, it links business model and marketing literature to business case for sustainability. Second, it studies a business case built on a social-cause and explores how the product’s social-cause brand and quality features are facilitating the transition of the cooperative business model core elements towards a sustainable, economically-viable, environmentally-friendly, and socially inclusive one.

Key words: Marketing, Social-cause brand, Business case for sustainability, Business model innovation, Sustainability.

Introduction

With sustainable development goals and requirements, marketing has increasingly become a tool to create value, deliver and promote products and services of business cases built for sustainability (Devine et al., 2012; Baldassarre and Campo, 2016). Building business cases for sustainability requires innovation in business models elements to achieve economic performance while integrating environmental and social challenges in business models elements (Schaltegger et al., 2012, 2016; Amit and Zott, 2012; Dooley, 2015; Bolton and Hannon, 2016). These elements are represented by the firm's key internal organizational processes, resources, partners, value proposition, key customers, market segments, customer relationships, distribution channels, and the product's features and quality, its packaging, advertising, and its cost and revenue streams (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010; Amit and Zott, 2012). These elements are designed and continuously improved with marketing functions and questions such as - who is your customer, what is the value proposed to him and how much is he willing to pay for it, how do you deliver him this value at an appropriate cost, and which place fits it best? (Drucker, 2002; Teece, 2018; Robertson, 2017). Thus, to study the role of marketing in building business cases for sustainability, it is crucial to understand the company's business model's purpose for society, and identify the marketing levers and practices that bring together and modify the business model's elements (Kotler and Armstrong, 2008) to create a competitive advantage grounded on the economic, social and environmental performance of the firm. Hockerts (2014) identified four dimensions of sustainable businesses linked to marketing strategy that induce firms' competitive advantages. These dimensions are risk reduction, efficiency gains, market creation and brand building. Brand building is a core dimension of business models as it articulates the other three elements. For a company, a brand represents the business model's visible identity (Kapferer, 2007; Todeschini et al., 2017). It promotes the company's value, culture, and mission in its ecosystem. Brands may reflect speed in delivery (e.g. amazon delivery system), ethical practices for Fairtrade or social equity (e.g. Max Havelaar label), environmental friendly practices (e.g. Ben & Jerry ice-creams), social-cause branding (e.g. Grameen's Shokti-doi or the "healthy yoghurt for the bottom of the pyramid") (Serhan and Nahon, 2016). In practice, these marketing promises linked to brands articulate business model key processes to each sustainable improvement in the product's quality, packaging, delivery, promotion, and partnership. While the sustainability marketing literature has generated an abundant literature related to firms' marketing strategies and practices that allow firms' transition to generate better environmental impacts (Sharma et al., 2010; Charter 2017; Charter et al., 2006; D'souza et al., 2015), research on how firms use marketing efforts to improve business model elements and develop a business case for sustainability grounded on social-cause brand remain underexplored. In this paper, we focus on the role of marketing in building business cases for sustainability through social branding. Through a case study, we present the marketing practices that were implemented into a French tea cooperative to strengthen the social brand on which the cooperative was built and increase customers loyalty (Hoeffler et al., 2006). We also show how these sustainability marketing practices expanded the cooperative social change commitments to afford fair work conditions and wages to its cooperators or employees, to embed environmental, nutritional and economic performance aspects in its core business processes. Considering the role of marketing practices in building business cases for sustainability through social-cause brand eases the understanding of how a company can leverage its economic performance while realizing voluntary social and environmental activities. The paper's specific contribution is to highlight the role of marketing in building business cases for sustainability. It links the business model and marketing literature with business case for sustainability. It argues that economic performance can be optimized through sustainability by (a) improving marketing strategies with sustainability principles, and

(b) by linking social-cause brand to business social responsibility, business model improvement (Sheikh and Beise-Zee, 2011), market expansion (Kotler and Lee, 2004) and the ecosystem in which the company operates, innovates and evolves (Jacobides et al., 2016).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 1 presents the literature review. It focuses on the importance of marketing to business models design and its elements improvement. It also positions social-cause brand in sustainability marketing. Section 2 presents the methodology we used to collect and analyse data, and the interviews protocol. Section 3 presents the case study. This is followed by a discussion and conclusions.

1. Business Models and Sustainability Marketing

1.1. Marketing – Core Value of Business models

A business model represents the systemic business logic, i.e. the resources, knowledge, suppliers, customers, market, cost and revenue logic the business needs to create and deliver value to target markets (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010; Demil and Lecoq, 2010; Abdelkafi and Täuscher, 2016; Teece, 2018). Amit and Zott (2012) define a business model as an activity system grounded on three interdependent and co-evolving elements. The first element ‘content’ refers to the activities performed by a company. The second element ‘structure’ describes how activities are linked to each other. The third element ‘governance’ refers to who performs the activities. Marketing is grounded on and revolves around four central pillars that articulate these elements (Coombes and Nicholson, 2013). First, the products and services a firm offers, representing a substantial value to a target customer (value proposition), and for which he is willing to pay. Second, the relationship the firm creates and maintains with the customer, in order to satisfy him and to generate revenues. Third, the infrastructure and the network of partners that are necessary to create value and maintain a good customer relationship. Fourth, the financial aspects that can be found throughout the three former elements, such as cost and revenue structures. These elements allow defining the marketing mix or the 4Ps of marketing strategy. This strategy includes the combination of the product’s features (quality standards, labels, ingredients, and packaging (Kotler and Armstrong, 2006); the product’s price or value that is charged against the service or product’s value proposed (Kotler et al., 2008); the product’s place or where the product can be purchased and the distribution channels used to make it available to target customers (Hirankitti et al., 2006); and the product’s promotion, advertisement, or communication tools used with customers to increase the product’s visibility, promote its standards and value, to attract and persuade customers to buy it (Kanagal, 2009; Nuseir et al., 2015).

1.2. Business Model Innovation and Sustainability Marketing

Innovation in business models for sustainability (Lüdeke-Freund, 2010) can be achieved by introducing to market new business models or transforming existing ones to create business cases able to propose new products, services, techniques, create new markets (Holloway, and Sabastiao, 2010), or organizational modes that substantially reduce the environmental and social impacts of their activities (Schaltegger et al., 2016; Freudenreich et al., 2019). In agri-food systems, in order to improve these impacts, business models must differ from conventional models in one or more of these four aspects (FAO, 2018), all related to the marketing strategy focusing on a triple bottom line: planet, people, profit (Devine, 2012). First, the value proposition must provide economic, environmental, social, and nutritional value through offering products and services (Trystram and Serhan, 2020). Second, the supply chain

must involve responsible suppliers (Nosratabadi et al., 2020). Third, the customer interface must enable close relationships with customers and other stakeholders to facilitate sustainable relationships between production, distribution, and consumption systems (Hora et al., 2016). Fourth, the economic model must reflect an appropriate distribution of economic costs and benefits among various actors of the firm's ecosystem (FAO, 2014). These studies all show that achieving sustainability through an innovative business model means simultaneously improving the content, structure and governance of business models to create and exchange values between internal and external stakeholders (Freudenreich et al., 2019) who co-learn how to construct a business ecosystem and continually improve it (Jacobides et al., 2018; Tsujimoto et al., 2018).

Sustainability marketing involves developing and promoting products and services that meet consumer and business user needs utilizing society's natural, human, and cultural resources responsibly to ensure a better quality of life now and for future generations to come. Sustainable marketing draws on traditional marketing methods and in addition requires the three following practices (Devine, 2012). First, understanding of consumer's values, emotions, and buying behavior related to sustainability. Second, acquire and update knowledge of the evolving sustainability marketplace. Third, define the organizational commitment to sustainability and to positive relationships with their customers, communities, and the planet.

In marketing, although social and environmental commitment improve brand value and reputation, strengthen stakeholder relationships, and afford fair work conditions and wages to bottom line employees, little research focuses on the role of marketing in building business cases for sustainability with social branding. Thus, a business case built for sustainability is characterized by three requirements which have to be met (Schaltegger et al., 2012). Firstly, the company has to realize an activity with the intention to contribute to the solution of social, societal or environmental problems. Secondly, the activity must create a positive business effect or a positive economic contribution to corporate success. Such effects can be cost savings, the increase of sales or competitiveness, improved profitability, customer retention or reputation, etc. Thirdly, a clear and convincing argumentation must exist that a certain management activity has led or will lead to both, the intended societal or environmental effects, and the economic effect.

2. Methodology

This research is part of an ongoing study at AgroParisTech - Marketing division - aimed at studying the relationships between marketing, business model innovation, and business case for sustainability. For this paper we adopted a qualitative research method. This approach helps to study subjects (individuals, organizations) in an interpretative way (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) and raises questions about how actors create and give meaning to their social experiences (Gephart, 2004) and examine a contemporary phenomenon in its real context and capture its complex features (Yin, 2018). To collect our data, we used secondary and primary data sources. First, we studied the existing documentation on the struggle, strike, challenges, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats the employees of the cooperative faced with the multinational Unilever to save their jobs and the factory. Second, between January 2019 and September 2020 we conducted four semi-directive interviews with the cooperative representative and the marketing manager. The interviews averaged 90 minutes each. They were recorded, transcribed, and sent to the interviewees for correction and validation. The questionnaire focused on the cooperative primary goals and resources, partners, distribution channels, supportive local authorities,

organizational structure, governance, the products' value proposition, and its relationships with target customers.

3. Case Study

3.1 The French Tea Cooperative 1336: Emergence of a Social-cause Brand

When the multinational Unilever decided in 2010 to shut down 'Fralib', its tea and herbal processing and packaging plant in the south of France, the employees occupied immediately their factory to save the "Elephant" brand that was created 120 years ago. Supported by the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail) work union, the employees were claiming to retain the tea brand as a regional cultural heritage, to save their jobs, and restart the factory activity under the workers' control. This boycott-strike lasted 3 years and a half months (1336 days). In 2014 Unilever sells the firm (the site and factory equipment) to its employees at a symbolic price of one euro, but without their tea's "Elephant" brand. Of the Fralib's 182 staff, 76 employees decide to restart the activity by creating a tea and herbal processing cooperative and introduce to market products labelled with a social-cause brand "1336 days of strike". This organization is in line with the 'raison-d'être' of the company, and the will of employees to collectively work as cooperators without the pyramidal hierarchy they used to have. The originality of a cooperative organization lies in its mode of governance. The cooperative members decide on the nature of work, the working hours, and the wages. They create a value chain to collectively manage the activity, participate in the decision-making process, the choice of key suppliers and the marketing efforts and messages they aim to communicate with. Since its creation in 2014, the cooperative's marketing strategy is constantly improving. It has been revised three times. Built on a social-cause brand, the marketing strategy evolution is transforming the business model value proposition, continuously improving the products' quality features, enlarging the market segments and the supply chain. These innovations are creating a business case for sustainability aimed to reach an economic equilibrium while developing an innovation ecosystem focused on environmentally friendly practices and regional sustainable development. Table 1 illustrates the cooperative business model elements and the marketing efforts that are used to reach a financial balance while integrating and communicating on the ecological practices the cooperative is implementing in the ecosystem in which it operates and evolves.

3.2 Marketing Strategy and Business Model Innovation for Sustainability

In 2014, the cooperative marketing strategy was focused on the social injustice cause which involved employees in a 1336 days struggle with Unilever. This number became the brand affixed on all packaging. This strategy reached only a niche of activists fighting for social justice and proved to be limiting for the profit which was sought by the cooperators, who voluntarily accepted a 25% decrease of their salary to make the new business model quickly operational. In 2015-2016, a marketing manager was hired to improve the sales. He focused on the messages conveyed by the packaging by emphasizing the organoleptic quality and the local and natural origin of the raw material used. He declined the products portfolio into two brands. The "1336" social brand targeting specialty stores (e.g. organic stores) and the Scopti brand targeting mass distribution and sold as a retailer brand. The objective was to increase production and introduce to market conventional and organic products to reach more customers and consumers. In 2017, the marketing manager improved the sales strategy by focusing on two elements. First, by using low cost communication channels such as Instagram and the cooperative website. Second, by communicating on the noble quality of the products used (e.g.

the flowers and not the leaves). This message was translated into “natural product” and “clean label” e.g. products without additives or artificial flavors. In 2019-2020, the marketing strategy became ecologically responsible. It aims creating and communicating on the values expected by tea and herbal market, claiming environmentally and socially responsible products. With these objectives the marketing efforts enlarged the targeted segments to reach today more than 800 sales points in France. The cooperative diversified its products’ varieties and distribution channels. It introduces to market 22 conventional tea and herbal varieties, 12 organic and 16 varieties sold as loose tea. It sells in different marketing models: B2B (restaurants, hotels, delicatessens shops, retirement homes), B2C via their website and to activists (e.g. work unions places), and B2B2C (e.g. mass retailers such as Carrefour, Auchan, Leclerc, Casino). Moreover, in October 2020, the iconic 1336 brand will be affixed to all the cooperative products. The goal of the cooperative is to remind customers and consumers about the “raison-d’être” of their business model’s continuous evolution and to keep the cooperators gathered around communitiship principles and causes (Mintzberg, 2009). This marketing strategy is articulated with five commitments related to sustainable development principles and required by key customers claiming local products that are socially inclusive and with less environmental footprint. These commitments illustrate the business model impacts on people, product, planet (3ps):

- 1- People “employees and consumers” are at the center of the business model;
- 2- Products are packaged in France;
- 3- Products are “Clean-labelled”;
- 4- The raw material is supplied by responsible suppliers;
- 5- The packaging is 100% recyclable.

With these commitments the cooperative seeks to achieve a financial balance while preserving the level of wages and working conditions of its cooperators, respecting the natural resources it is exploiting, creating mutually beneficial relationships with local producers, and reducing the environmental externalities of the activity system through local or regional sourcing and eco-responsible packaging (FAO, 2013). Moreover, the cooperative is collaborating with the regional council to create fully integrated systems around aromatic, medicinal or IGP (Geographically Protected Indication) certified plants, such as “thyme of Provence”. These socio-economic and environmental initiatives and practices push the producers in the south of France to produce the plants and medicinal herbals that are requested on the market and can be processed by the cooperative. These practices contribute also to job creation and territorial development.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The business model framework used as a tool of analysis to identify the evolution of marketing strategy and its innovation outcome, shows how the product’s social-cause brand and quality features are facilitating the transition of the cooperative business model core elements towards a sustainable, economically-viable, environmentally-friendly, and socially inclusive one. This case study conceptualizes business model innovation as evolutionary marketing efforts that encompass learning about how to use a brand to manage its marketing efforts to transform its business model with customers’ evolving requirements and market needs. This transformation is building a cooperative business case for sustainability grounded on a social-cause brand. This is accompanied by innovations in the three elements that compose the cooperative business model designed with a social cause: activity, structure and governance.

a- Innovation in the activity are mostly focused on product diversification and quality features. The creation of a web site increase the regional visibility of the company and its sales on one side, and allowed the creation of durable partnerships with local suppliers payed fair prices to their production. Innovation in activity is manifested in the fully integrated systems the cooperative is trying to create with the regional council and scattered local producers.

b- Innovation in the structure is represented in the new way of linking the cooperative strategic processes (e.g. supply chain, manufacturing, marketing strategy and brand) to its internal and external key stakeholders with goals that go beyond the social-cause, to create economic efficiency while protecting the environment, biodiversity and consumers health.

c- Innovation in governance are presented in the logic through which the cooperative is managed and evolves. Management processes are governed by an integrated management system based on international standards principles such as ISO 9001 for quality management, ISO 14001 for environmental management and International food standard best practices. These practices are maintained by skilled cooperators collectively working and participating in decision making and in implementing the eco-responsibility principles at a systemic level. This network of actors collaborate in order to maximize the benefits of the cooperative and the society by implementing the eco-responsibility commitments at a systemic level. Building such a collaborative model allowed the cooperative to receive an exemplarity label of its social responsibility. This label represents the cooperative story, history, expertise, values and collective action solutions that distinguish its business model in tea and herbal market. It also illustrates how the company credibility influence the its image and the implementation of social responsibility practices (Alcañiz et al., 2010).

These innovations have enabled the creation of a new business model that is socially inclusive, environmentally friendly, and economically profitable. If the financial balance has not been achieved yet, our interviewees point out that the turnover is constantly improving. It has been multiplied by 10 in 6 years and hope achieving the economic profit with the local strategy and partnerships they are creating by the end of the year 2020. Indeed, by seeking greater sustainability with a localism strategy, the cooperative is creating a territorial ecosystem, i.e. a group of interacting firms that depend on each other's activities by complementing their activity systems with the resources and competences that increase their value proposition and facilitate value creation and capture for all (Jacobides et al., 2017). This ecosystem is empowering, structuring and orienting the cooperators' intentions, behaviors, and marketing strategy and practices towards a sustainable transition pathway of tea and herbals production, distribution and consumption.

Table 1: 1336 Tea Cooperative – Business Model and Marketing Practices

Business Model Elements			Marketing Practices			
<p>Activity (since 2014)</p> <p>SCOP-Ti: Société Coopérative Ouvrière Provençale de Thé et Infusions</p> <p>Unique tea and herbal processing and packaging activity in France</p>	<p>Value proposition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brand's social-cause value: 1336 days of strike 	<p>Key resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technologies Employees know-how Regional medicinal plants Organizational good practices (ISO 900, 14001) 	<p>Marketing Strategy and Products' optimization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three main evolution of marketing strategy 1. (2014) - focus on social-cause branding for a militant niche 2. (2015) - focus on organoleptic quality and products diversity, creation of 2 brands – retailers brand & Cooperative brand 3. (2017) - focus on the 3Ps: Product for Profit and the Planet Brand's 1 "1336"- converting ScopTi brand to 1336 the iconic brand in October 2020 Expanding product portfolio Sustainable Packaging 	<p>Place/Access</p> <p>22 conventional products, 12 organic, 16 loose tea) distributed to 800 sales points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - in France: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> B2B2C - 800 salespoints (Key mass retailers with ScopTi brand) B2B – hotels, restaurants Biocoop (1336 brand) -Network of associations/militants -International: Belgium and Switzerland with both brand - Cooperative website <p>(60% for mass retailers and 40% other sales points)</p>	<p>Quality/Price</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clean labelled products (no chemical additives or ingredients) Use of plants' noble parts (flowers) Higher price than the market's products 	<p>Promotion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of digital channels - social medias (Instagram), cooperative website (15% of sales) Direct marketing – give sense to customers experience Involving consumers in the cooperative sustainability (sociofinancing plan: 405 867 euros from 3199 donators) Messages on packaging - "engaged for human and for taste"; "Awaken conscience, awaken taste buds" Organization of tasting initiatives in local events (organized by militant volunteers)
<p>Partnerships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional organic producers Regional council to create fully integrated short systems with key medicinal plants (organic thyme, verbena, lime tree, chamomile) Sicarappam (coopérative agricole de producteurs de plantes médicinales et aromatiques bio) Fair trade for imported tea Creation of new chain for wild plant (<i>Tisanes paysans d'ici</i>) 	<p>Suppliers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organic plants Recyclable packaging Natural flavors (e.g. caramel & apple chips) 	<p>Governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social and solidarity economy business model Democratic governance Strategic decisions are taken at the general assembly Factory activities are managed under workers' control (quality control, working hours, wages, direct marketing initiatives...) 	<p>Ecosystem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Innovation ecosystem - commitments to sustainability through organic/eco-responsibility plan: Made in France; 100% natural ingredients, responsible suppliers, environmentally friendly packaging 			
<p>Cost structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The manufacturing technologies (7 million euros from Unilever) Investment cost - 177000 euros Cooperators wages are the most import cost Plants and herbals cost (Unilever used to pay 5€/kg now it costs 22€/kg) 	<p>Profit formulae</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Profit is mostly generated from volume and quality Employees accepted an initial 25% reduction on their salaries to start the cooperative activity in 2014 Continuous product and packaging innovation (3 new products in December and rechargeable metal packaging for loose tea) 		<p>Territorial strategy</p> <p>Create mutually beneficial relationships with customers, communities, and the planet</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retaining the manufacturing site as a cultural heritage Rehabilitating the lime tree (Tilleul) production in the region Organic plants fields are expanding in south of France to satisfy the cooperative needs for medicinal herbals Creation of seasonal and permanent jobs to manage the integrated plant systems 			
<p>Economic performance</p> <p>In 2019:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 260 Tons were sold Turn over was multiplied by 10 in 6 years Deficit is continuously decreasing and financial equilibrium is expected by December 2020 	<p>Social aspects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social-cause brand Cooperative governance Offer organic products Create a new market for local small producers Paying fair price to suppliers (> 1,5 the market price) 		<p>Environmental impacts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agroecology practices Water management for ecological industrial processes Carbon footprint reduced with locally supplied products 100% recycled packaging 			

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