

Nudging consumers toward sustainable services?

Introduction

In 2018, a report by the Roland Berger consultancy identified ‘sustainability and global responsibility’ as a megatrend that will change how firms operate and strive for profitability. However, this trend is not yet reflected in management research, especially in services management and service communication. More than a decade ago, Ostrom and colleagues (2010) highlighted and proposed ten research priorities for the science of services. One of the research priorities, improving well-being through transformative service, included the following study area: “delivering service in a sustainable manner (i.e., one that preserves health, society, and the environment)” (Ostrom et al. 2010, p. 9). Five years later, Ostrom et al. (2015, p. 140) referred to designing and delivering services in a sustainable manner as one of the “pressing issues requiring research attention”. By and large, their call has not been heeded and the field still knows relatively little about how sustainable services should be designed and marketed, which is noteworthy given services’ economic importance.

In the European Union, services account for more than 70% of the GDP; they were the greatest growth driver between 2009 and 2019 (Eurostat 2019). If the market share of organic food products (approx. 6%, Statista 2020) is used as a proxy for the size of the market share of sustainable services, a considerable growth potential is evident. Accordingly, in many service sectors, such as retailing, hospitality and airlines, sustainability has become a major managerial consideration (Cocca and Meiren 2013; Destatis 2019; Leigh 2019). Other research areas like operations and supply chain management realized early the necessity to point out opportunities and research agendas to integrate sustainability issues (De Briot and Van der Laan 2010). However, service research has not kept up with the growing importance of sustainability in the service sector. We argue that research gaps span from studies on customer awareness of and responses to services’ sustainable properties to investigations of how sustainable services are marketed in terms of price and communication. Specifically, there is little research about if and

how it is possible to nudge consumers toward sustainable services.

Indeed, there appears to be a particular paucity of research examining the effects of sustainability-themed advertising, especially of temporally framed sustainability messages, on key customer outcomes. A literature search on Google Scholar, using the search terms ‘sustainable service’ and ‘message framing’ results in less than 25 articles (‘sustainable services’ and ‘message framing’ results in 10 articles). Against this background, this research aims to review the literature regarding the use of sustainability-themed message frames in service advertisements.

Background and research aims

Arguably, the growth potential of sustainable services can be best realized through effectively marketing sustainable services by means of communication (i.e., advertising messages). For example, in their advertisements, service organizations can emphasize the temporal distance (near or far) of their sustainability efforts and whether the efforts are present-, future- or past-oriented, that is, are ongoing, are planned or have already taken place. A case in point is Air France’s well-advertised Horizon 2030 initiative; the key (future-oriented) message stipulates that the airline will reduce its CO₂ emissions by 50% per passenger/km compared to 2005 (Otley 2019). It is unclear though whether Air France’s messaging is effective because extant research is limited and thus unable to provide guidance to service organizations wishing to market sustainable services. Moving from the general to the specific, we observe scarce service-related research into the effects of different intertemporal (i.e., near vs. distant) message frames on consumers as well a dearth of research regarding the use of past-oriented temporal frames in relation to service firms’ sustainability messages (see Table 1). This oversight is noteworthy, given that past research suggests that the temporal distance from the firm’s sustainability effort can shape consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., Chandran and Menon 2004) and that past vs. future frames bring about differential outcomes (e.g., Casado-Aranda et al. 2018).

Interestingly, while past-oriented message frames are used in service communication practice (see examples in Table 1), their efficacy has not yet been studied. A possible explanation for this lack of research into past-oriented frames may be that sustainability efforts are typically considered forward looking activities (Line et al. 2016). Construal level theory posits that consumers can only directly experience the present situation whereas temporally distant (i.e., past or future) situations need to be mentally construed (Trope and Liberman 2010). Applied to the context of sustainable services this means that when consumers think of a firm's sustainability efforts as close versus distant, they form different mental representations of it (Brügger et al. 2016). In turn, this should mean that a future- or past-oriented message emphasizing an equivalent distance from the present (e.g., "We go carbon neutral in one year", "We went carbon neutral a year ago") should involve the same degree of mental construal (i.e., high- or low-level construal). This said, theoretically it is conceivable that a past frame has a greater effect on consumers than a future frame because the service firm has already demonstrated its commitment to sustainability goals, whereas a future frame merely represents a promise that the firm will act sustainably. In other words, a service firm's sustainability deed carries more weight than a sustainability promise (Soman 2003). However, these assumptions have not been empirically tested to date.

In sum, past research into the effects of message frames has not fully explored service customer's attitudinal and behavioral responses to service firms' past-oriented sustainability messages. As a result, neither have past-oriented message frames that differ in intertemporal distance received meaningful research attention. Given the importance of temporal framing for affecting (or nudging) consumer behavior (Chandran and Menon 2004), the lack of both theory and empirical evidence concerning the effects of temporal frames in relation to service firms' sustainability messages is conspicuous. In this research, we discuss the pertinent literature and provide a brief research agenda.

The literature

Anderson et al. (2013, p. 1209) ask what might increase consumers’ “willingness to engage in more sustainable service behaviors?”. Interestingly, this question has remained largely unanswered. Given that many customers perceive firms’ sustainability positively (e.g., Brazytė et al. 2017), service firms increasingly embrace sustainability (Leigh 2019). As they grow their sustainability efforts in pursuit of the triple bottom line of economic, social and ecological sustainability (e.g., Norman and MacDonald 2004; Williams et al. 2017), firms realize the importance of promoting their sustainability message toward key constituencies, especially customers. Services seem to try and win over sustainability-minded consumers by communicating about their own sustainability initiatives. Currently, many service firms use either a present, past or future frame. Their decision in favor of either frame does not seem to be guided by theory, though (see Table 1 for current examples).

| | Past-oriented frame | Present-oriented frame | Future-oriented frame |
|-------------------------|--|---|--|
| Research example | | <p>Product Tangari and Smith (2012) Tangari et al. (2015) Chang et al. (2015) Reczek et al. (2018) Shao et al. (2020) Shen and Kim (2020)</p> <p>Service Strathman et al. (1994) Teng et al. (2014) Line et al. (2016) Zhang et al. (2019)</p> <p>Prosocial behaviour White et al. (2011) Xu et al. (2015)</p> | <p>Product Tangari and Smith (2012) Tangari et al. (2015) Chang et al. (2015) Reczek et al. (2018) Shao et al. (2020) Shen and Kim (2020)</p> <p>Service Strathman et al. (1994) Teng et al. (2014) Line et al. (2016) Zhang et al. (2019)</p> <p>Prosocial behavior White et al. (2011) Xu et al. (2015)</p> |
| Practice example | <p>“Remondis has been campaigning for consistent raw material recycling for more than 50 years.” (Remonis SE & Co. KG, Recycling)</p> <p>“Deutsche Bank’s commitment to sustainability is long-standing. Since 2019, it is also a central component of our “Compete to win” strategy.” (Deutsche Bank AG, Finance)</p> | <p>“In Australia we are now using reusable plastic containers (RPCs) and pallets to transport food from suppliers to warehouses. This simple initiative has saved about 4,000 tonnes of carbon emissions [...]” (HelloFresh SE & Co. KG, Food)</p> <p>“Today, we are approximately 78% of the way toward our ambition to source all packaging</p> | <p>“Air France is committed to: Reduce its CO2 emissions per passenger/km by 50% by 2030.” (Air France, Transport)</p> <p>“By the close of 2022, Netflix will achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions.” (Netflix Inc., Entertainment)</p> <p>“As a progression against those goals, the company commits to Carbon Neutral Green Coffee and</p> |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| | <p>“What we have already achieved in the last 5 years: 257 million pieces of single-use plastic have been avoided.” (TUI, Tourism)</p> <p>“We’ve achieved carbon neutrality across our operations for 2020, and we commit to maintain that going forward.” (Visa Inc., Finance)</p> <p>“Carbon neutral since 2007.” (Google LLC, Technology)</p> | <p>from renewable, recycled and certified sources.” (McDonald’s, Fast-food)</p> <p>“As of July 2021, 100% of Walmart U.S. Great Value black and green teas are now certified sustainable through the Rainforest Alliance.” (Walmart Inc., Retail)</p> <p>“We are currently providing project developers, investors and regional citizens’ cooperatives with more than 10 billion euros in loans for their wind, solar, hydropower and biomass plants.” (DKB AG, Finance)</p> | <p>to conserve water usage in green coffee processing by 50%, both by 2030.” (Starbucks Corporation, coffeehouse chain)</p> <p>“Carbon free by 2030.” (Google LLC, Technology)</p> |
|--|--|--|--|

Table 1: Extant framing research and practice

On closer inspection, the sustainability-related service literature displays an overall lack of research on the sustainability framing in advertising messages and its effect on customer outcomes. Moreover, relevant empirical service and marketing research is scarce, and it has yielded mixed findings. For example, in the context of public bicycle sharing schemes in China (which represent a form of shared sustainable consumption), Yin et al. (2018) show that sustainable services can be effectively promoted to the public through communication efforts that highlight the sustainability and ethical features of these services. Brockhaus et al. (2017) report that service firms with a reputation for poor service quality may not benefit from sustainability efforts in terms of improved reputation. Surveying a Dutch consumer sample in relation to tour operators, Hardeman et al. (2017) show that sustainability-related self-benefit appeals are more effective than normative appeals. Kronrod et al. (2012) have studied the effectiveness of assertive environmental messages for issues consumers perceive as important, but found no effect for the considered service, public transportation.

Overall, extant research is too limited and patchy to make claims, or provide recommendations, about the effective use of message frames in service firms’ sustainability communication. Indeed, there is scarce research into message frames used to promote the

purchase and use of sustainable services. Thus, if service researchers were to take stock of the extant knowledge regarding customer evaluation and use of sustainable services, they would have to conclude that Ostrom et al.'s (2010, 2015) call for more research into sustainable services has not yet been heeded. We therefore advocate the use of insights from construal level theory and call for an empirical foundation to guide service firms' decisions regarding sustainability-related advertising messages.

In construal level theory, psychological distance is defined on four dimensions—temporal, spatial, social and hypothetical (Fiedler et al. 2012; Trope and Liberman 2010). Service firms can choose to frame their sustainability messages in any number of ways. Also, the focus of past studies is not service marketing outcomes, as the comprehensive, if not exhaustive, overview of prior services research in Table 1 indicates. Service outcomes offer promise for providing new insights on the role of service firms' sustainability efforts, so customer-related outcomes delineated in services and related literature are of particular interest. Marketing research should draw on construal level theory and apply a temporal distance lens to examine effects of temporal proximity of a service firm's sustainability efforts (temporally proximal vs. not temporally proximal) framed in a past-oriented way on key customer outcomes. Furthermore, empirical studies should consider contingencies of these relationships. Additionally, research could investigate the effects of advertisements for sustainable services on internal stakeholders, such as frontline employees. It is conceivable that service employees feel empowered by such advertisements, which turn could mean that they engage more in customer-oriented behaviors. We conclude by formulating specific research questions which could form part of a broader research agenda. Our review of the pertinent literature leads us to believe that marketing scholars should explore the following seven research questions:

- 1) Can consumers be nudged toward favoring a sustainable vs. conventional service?
- 2) Do these nudging efforts differ in effectiveness for different temporal message frames?
- 3) Does the effectiveness of different temporal message frames differ for hedonic vs.

utilitarian services?

- 4) Do sustainability efforts presented with a past-oriented frame differ in effectiveness when the efforts are presented as temporally proximal vs. temporally distant?
- 5) Do sustainability efforts framed as temporally proximal vs. distant differentially impact key service marketing outcomes, such as customer trust and (re)patronage intention?
- 6) Are the relationships between framing effects and behavioral consequences moderated by company attributes (e.g., size, reputation) and/or customers' sustainability-related knowledge and concerns?
- 7) Do framing effects in sustainability advertisements shape behaviors of internal stakeholders?

In summary, to date, no existing research seeks to investigate service firm's sustainability efforts and the way they are communicated to their customers, using past-oriented message frames that differ in temporal proximity. The service field would benefit from further research.

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