Consuming desires

Consumption of non-essential goods is at the heart of unsustainable practice in much of the Western world, including Australia.
Sophie Constance considers the economic and marketing forces that drive our modern over-consumption habits, and introduces an increased significance of marketing in business and the emergence of 'Societal Marketing'.

Over the last 50 years, much has evolved in terms of production and consumption, affecting our sense of what is really needed, with the creation of many desires. More, more, bigger, better, Supersize Me! How and why is all that better? How much is actually enough and when are we actually satisfied?

Consumption is the spending we do after our basic needs are met (G Haigh, *Age Review*). More precisely, 'conspicuous consumption' – the term introduced by Thorstein Veblen, the American economist – or pathological purchasing, is a symptom observed in individuals in any society where over-consumption has become a social norm or expectation. The term is generally used for those forms of consumption that seem to be fully motivated by social factors.

However, behind the scenes of behavioural consumption are marketing-led personal drivers, such as concepts of better value for money, the perceived need for necessary replacements or upgrades, and, equally influential, the avoidance of confronting one's own feelings of worth by acting out social aspirations through shopping. Excessive consumption behaviour is largely due to societal influences reinforced and exacerbated by the mass media – and possibly government policy.

Sociologist Nick Turnbull, at the University of New South Wales, believes that 'the state, rather than undertaking the risk of deficit spending to stimulate growth itself, is using policy mechanisms to encourage households to do this,' (2004) leading to rising consumption and debt. Consequently, households and society undertake more of the state's function in maintaining growth, financed by their own rising consumption and household debt.

Societal and environmental effects

Unchecked consumerism has a range of adverse social and environmental effects. Its inherent pressures are leading to the development of problems such as over-eating and out-of-control debt, alongside other family and mental health issues. More deeply, there is a constant, societal agitation as described in Alain De Botton's mass-consumerism related 'status anxiety'.

The rate of consumption in modern Western life is at the heart of sustainability. Working towards more sustainable consumption patterns is an integral component of sustainable development.

Changing behaviour, however, is very challenging. Whether on a macro- or micro-level, sustainable consumption, in essence, refers to finding different, alternative and more efficient ways to consume. It isn't about going without, it's about being more fulfilled (satisfied) with what is really needed – and getting consensus on this is a challenge.

It is interesting to note that in China, which is currently experiencing a boom in resources demand, a new found desire of car ownership like that in the Western world has taken hold. Asking the Chinese to lead by example or learn from our mistakes, albeit noble, is tricky in the face of denying their choice and right to new goods. It's interpretable as slightly hypocritical.

Certain detractors from the 1950s to the present day have converged on the notion that consumerism is an elaborate corporate conspiracy against an unsuspecting public. As G Haigh demonstrates through Clive Hamilton's *Growth Fetish* (2003), in some extreme views 'all consumers are dupes leading "false lives" in thrall to the graven idols of marketing', and shopping is mainly a 'response to existential depression'. Haigh offers the solution of banning all advertising.

Surely people are not as naïve, sensing the fantasy in marketing and promotion as just that? The marketing industry and associated business, however, is constantly seeking subtle ways to 'cut through' in reaching Generation Y and 'tweens' in this over-cluttered global media environment.

Towards responsible marketing

In May 2004 I presented a paper on developing a global sustainability brand at the inaugural United Nations Environment Programme's Responsible Marketing conference in Berlin, where some large

tackle this issue is that the first step is to educate and eventually collaborate with the global marketing and advertising industries, to stop the perpetuation of myths and misconstrued meanings, through responsible marketing practices. Given the industry's lackluster turnout in Berlin this is no walk in the park. Superficial attempts by business at addressing such priorities are very much the norm, as is evidenced by recent corporate disasters such as those of One-Tel, Enron, HIH, and James Hardie, who all published great corporate social responsibility reports and won accolades.

The James Hardie scandal, particularly, where alleged deception and dishonesty have created enormous societal problems and global relevance, is a textbook example of how environmental and social priorities, including responsible company marketing, must be factored into business decisions. The need for increased business ethics is no longer an option but an imperative.

'Societal marketing'

Increasing anti-globalisation and anti-consumption calls have forced marketers to look for a new framework to help restore consumer trust. Management writer Philip Kotler coined the term 'Societal Marketing' over 30 years ago to define a new approach to the concept of marketing, suggesting that it was time for marketers to consider the 'long-term welfare' of consumers as significant a priority as customer satisfaction and profitability.

Societal marketing holds that blindly satisfying individual consumers and clients might not be in the best interest of society, and it therefore taps the overlapping tenets of Sustainable Development, 'Corporate Social Leadership™' and ethics. While not a new concept, it has remained dormant up until recently, where it is only just now emerging as a serious consideration among the more progressive companies.

'Societal Marketing' differs by being an integrated holistic process rather than an 'add-on' like the marketing of other causes. It requires a change in patterns of consumption behaviour and a re-consideration of marketing influences across all sectors, in an integrated manner.

While there are emerging areas of social concern, corporate citizenship and mobilisation of the community to understand and control consumption drivers is more challenging in Australia than in Europe. The main difference, according to current commentators, is that there is less engage-

ment and accountability by Australians in societal issues.

Exceptions occur when a disaster strikes, as has been the case with the recent Tsunami crisis, or the injustice in the James Hardie scandal and HIH, where concerns about health, livelihoods and loss of income are paramount to society. Interestingly though, in the James Hardie case, despite the public outrage and union protests, the company's share price jumped (*The Age*, 23 September 2004), raising questions about real priorities and share-market drivers.

In contrast, the broader issues of Sustainability are less 'in your face', therefore there is less concerted and sustained attention or action from the individual. Although there are myriad so-called 'green' programs appearing daily, there are two main problems.

Firstly, simplifying sustainability issues under the term 'green' is doing a disservice to the overall notion of sustainability, as it doesn't capture the inherent social elements at all.

Secondly, with sustainable development such a broad, dynamic and challenging notion, we cannot afford the subject focus or differentiation seen in other campaigns. There needs to be a link and connection toward making sustainable development communications coherent and compelling so people, and organisations, can be inspired to participate.

There is no real 'Market Category' established for sustainability. We have generic product categories for photocopiers such as Xerox, or cola soft drinks such as Coke, yet there is no clear core identity or notion of what sustainability is about. Establishing the 'market category,' and creating an identity for it should translate into acceptance, credibility, trust and transparency through adoption by society.

This process and journey can be facilitated by creating a brand platform as part of an Integrated Marketing Communications Campaign with behavioural change tools. It would use branding and marketing for positive societal change as part of 'Societal Marketing', and therefore help moderate consumption desires.

multinationals such as Unilever, British American Tobacco, McCann Erickson and Saatchi & Saatchi International were represented, no doubt to support the programme's initiatives. Historically though, to achieve access to markets, many corporations embrace an emerging trend, movement or imperative by seeking credibility through association with it. Often this is done in a non-genuine way. Sometimes it's called creative license; in the worst case of socio-environmental issues it's often called 'greenwashing' – a rather kind word for embellishment or deception, where consumer marketing is pitched dishonestly and without substance.

What emerged from UNEP's push to

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