

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENT KNOWLEDGE OF SUSTAINABILITY CONCEPTS AND PRODUCT CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

Trends are converging to provide a clear justification for incorporating education for sustainability (EfS) into business and marketing curricula. First, deans from business schools across the globe have joined with the United Nations Global Compact, a network of over 375 business associations devoted to pursuing sustainable practices in their organizations, to develop *Principles for Responsible Business* and *Principles for Responsible Management Education*. These agreements provide a framework for integrating EfS across all business curricula, including a set of principles in the areas of human rights, labor, environment and anti-corruption. A second trend of import is the fact that marketers are increasingly adopting sustainable business practices, as the evidence mounts linking sustainability with market share and long run profitability (Mendoca & Oppenheim, 2007). Sustainability's link to profit, or as an end goal for business, is becoming a commonly discussed topic around the world in a wide range of industries and situations (e.g., Fischer, 2007; Senge et al., 2008).

While business coursework is following practice in some disciplines, attention to sustainability issues in marketing curricula is limited, for the most part, to discussions of "green" customers, environmental considerations in product development and packaging, and social/non-profit marketing (Demoss & Nicholson, 2005). Thus, there appears to be an increasing discrepancy between the importance placed on sustainable marketing by practitioners and its importance to marketing educators. This places our students at a competitive disadvantage in the marketplace, and also fails to give them the knowledge and skills they need to be sustainability advocates in their place of employment. Students (and educators) will only be effective advocates if they "walk their talk" by changing their values, beliefs and behaviors to be consistent with a sustainable lifestyle. While marketing educators can not force their students to adopt sustainable lifestyles, exposing students to sustainability-related material

may be enough to trigger behavioral changes such as product choice.

The present study focuses on the issue of how marketing education for sustainability influences purchasing behavior when making a product choice. Students completed a survey that assessed their current level of comprehension and knowledge about key sustainability concepts (e.g., triple bottom line, cradle-to-cradle design, reverse logistics). This survey included a conjoint experiment to determine if those students who are more knowledgeable about sustainability concepts (regardless of information source) do make more sustainable product choices. Findings reveal that students generally possess very little sustainability-related knowledge. However, there is a positive relationship between sustainability knowledge and product choice; students with more knowledge are more likely to choose the more sustainable product, particularly if there is no difference in price or performance between the two products.

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