

Four-Stage Model of Value Creation for Sustainability-Oriented Marketing: En Route to Participatory Marketing

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Abstract

Hitherto, the pure marketing concept has focused on creating value for firms and their customers in a manner consistent with the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP). Nevertheless, as the sustainability paradigm established stronger roots over the last few decades, the marketing discipline may benefit by creating value from a broader perspective to stimulate shared prosperity and wealth for society at large. This paper proposes a four-stage model of value creation that classifies sustainability-oriented marketing approaches guided by different economic paradigms and different levels of involvement. This commentary provides a framework for organizations to reframe their marketing approach. The goal is to gravitate from a firm-centric approach to a society-centric approach to enhance societal well-being.

Keywords

Sustainability marketing, functional marketing, second-hand marketing, access-based marketing, participatory marketing

Introduction

Today, business enterprises are on the cusp of an unprecedented transformation as the sustainability paradigm challenges them to reconfigure and reframe their existing marketing approaches based on emerging value-creation types. To date, conventional value creation in commercial marketing has primarily revolved around “engaging customers and managing profitable customer relationships” (Kotler and Armstrong 2018, p. 4). Traditional value creation efforts have commonly focused on value creation “within the firm and its customers” from a pure marketing standpoint as defined by the AMA’s definition of marketing in 1985 (Gundlach and Wilkie 2009). The sustainability marketing concept reflects multiple values, such as shared value, shared prosperity, and inclusive growth (Kelleci and Yıldız 2021) for “society at large,” which contradicts the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP) of the bygone industrial era.

Responding to new perspectives of value creation, an increasing number of companies, such as GE, IBM, Walmart, and Unilever have been rethinking their traditional approaches to value creation, as sustainability has become a megatrend in recent decades (Varey 2013). Previously, traditional mainstream marketing approaches (e.g., one-to-one marketing, relationship marketing, green marketing) of Command-and-Control Organizations (CCO) and High Involvement Organizations (HIO)¹ sought to offer customer-centric, profit-centric, and product-centric² solutions to maximize profit and create value for shareholders from a Friedmannian perspective³. In contrast, the value proposition of newly-emerging organizations, such as Sustainable Management Organizations (SMOs) or Open Value

Networks (OVNs)⁴, are established based on participatory culture and ecosystem strategies. Both SMOs and OVNs require the active involvement of partners and stakeholders to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth that stems from post-materialist values.

Kotler (2020) noted that “marketing is intrinsically a value-creating discipline” (p. 10), and that “marketers are value engineers by definition” (p. 11). In agreement with Kotler’s assertion related to the value-creation in marketing, and considering what has previously been discussed, this commentary offers a four-stage model of value creation that classifies sustainability-oriented marketing approaches. As seen in Table 1, the model encompasses four distinct economic paradigms characterized by different levels of involvement reflecting different levels of sustainability-oriented marketing approaches and different network structures. The proposed model offers a synthesizing approach, which is based on the value phenomenon from a holistic perspective, given that higher levels of abstraction in research and practice allows “a world map where we can see the continents and the seas and how they relate to each other” (Gummesson 2015, p. 343). In doing so, the four-stage model employs a taxonomy that

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Table 1. Four-Stage Model of Value Creation for Sustainability-Oriented Marketing.

Phase	Dominant Economic Paradigm	Sustainable Value Creation Type	Level of Involvement	Sustainability-Oriented Marketing Approaches	Network Structure
Phase 4: Introductory	Commons Economy	Value-in-Participation	++++ Participation	Participatory Marketing	Online multilateral decentralized participation
Phase 3: Growth	Sharing Economy	Value-in-Access	+++ High interaction	Access-Based Marketing	Online trilateral centralized interconnection
Phase 2: Growth	Reuse Economy	Value-in-Reuse	++ Moderate interaction	Second-Hand Marketing	Offline/online bilateral/trilateral centralized interconnection
Phase 1: Maturity	Functional Economy	Value-in-Utility	+ Limited interaction	Functional Marketing	Offline/online bilateral interconnection

“explains the fuzzy nature of many subjects by logically and causally combining different constructs into a coherent and explanatory set of types” (Cornelissen 2016, p. 3).

Vargo and Lusch (2008) stated that “Value creation is interactional” (p. 7), and consequently, the higher the level and scope of interaction, the higher the value creation from a sustainability marketing perspective, given that the ability to orchestrate “creation nets” is the only competitive advantage (Hagel and Brown 2005). Social ecosystems, networks, and institutions are not static, but interactive. Value is amassed from the integration of resources, the network of multiple actors, as well as network actors’ relationships through “many-to-many marketing.” In Table 1, the different levels of interaction and participation can be seen in the “level of involvement” column. Even though these two terms are often used interchangeably, there is a subtle difference between them. While interactivity facilitates the use of many-to-many communications through technological media, participation is defined by the individual’s power to make decisions that benefit a shared purpose, which is an inherent characteristic of participatory culture. To put it another way, whereas interactivity could be a passive event, such as watching a movie or talking on the phone, participation demands a shared willingness to act collectively to influence the course of events. So, when we interact with something, we participate in that something.

We are currently transitioning toward a third wave in sustainability, which can be characterized as a new paradigm, where interconnectedness is central and direction and momentum are achieved through business networks and alliances (Benn, Edwards and Williams 2018). In effect, while the focus of traditional value creation in marketing is the search for competitive advantage through product and market differentiation as well as customer engagement, the focus of value creation in sustainability marketing is the search for alignment and the collaboration of partners or networks through OVN. As Gummesson (2015, p. 346) clearly stated, “networks are the basis of life, society, and organizations, and consequently

also of management and marketing.” The collaborative flows among network players and the existence of multiple inter-organizational alliances should be considered in connection with the “shared value” concept of Porter and Kramer (2011), which is closely related to social sustainability.

The present paper explains the four-stage model of value creation for sustainability-oriented marketing, starting from Phase 1 to Phase 4. Participatory marketing in Phase 4 is the ultimate sustainability-oriented marketing approach, which has the potential to elevate marketing’s role in transforming consumer subjects to construer subjects or true citizen subjects in an incipient economic paradigm of a commons economy. In the following sections, each phase of the model will be explained and a conclusion drawn with implications for organizations as well as for the future of marketing.

Phase 1: Functional Marketing Based on “Value-in-Utility” Perspective

Functional marketing acts as a bridge from traditional value-creation to sustainable value-creation and is grounded in a functional economy, which aims to decouple economic value from material and energy consumption (White, Stoughton and Feng 1999). As Stahel (1997) stated, “The economic objective of the functional economy is to create the highest possible use value for the longest possible time while consuming as few material resources and energy as possible” (p. 91). In other words, functional marketing’s focus is to meet consumer needs through selling the use of goods instead of goods themselves. This can be seen in the case of Xerox, who in the 1990s switched from a product-oriented company to a service-oriented company, “providing a complete document service to companies including supply, maintenance, configuration, and user support” (Xerox 2021). Similarly, Philip’s Pay-per-lux B2B solution provides lighting as a service. Instead of owning equipment, customers rent it from Philips, and based on an agreed-upon amount of light which is measured in lux, they pay a flat rate. If the set energy usage is exceeded, Philips reimburses

customers for the coverage, and this, in turn, incentivizes Philips to develop the most energy-efficient service possible for customers. Furthermore, “at the end of the contract, products can be returned to the production process again, reusing the raw materials, optimizing recycling and reducing waste” (Atlas of the Future 2021), which is in line with the circular economy.

Taken together, there is a strong link between functional marketing and sustainability. Nevertheless, the focus of functional marketing is not on the shared or co-created value of networks, because interconnectedness is limited between the firm and its customers. Functional marketing, by and large, is based on one-to-one marketing, where there is a strong emphasis on bilateral interaction that aims to customize products and services to create tailored or personalized customer value. Thus, value occurs between the firm and its customers, and does not entail the coordination and alignment of other prospective external value-adding partners, hence ignoring the utilization of multiple network properties of sustainability marketing. So, functional marketing is considered an outdated approach to sustainability, as the interaction between the firm and its customers is constrained.

Phase 2: Second-Hand Marketing Based on “Value-in-Reuse” Perspective

Reusing items, from an ecological standpoint, reduces waste dramatically, as it does not exploit additional resources beyond transportation and consequently fewer materials are sent to landfills. Over the last few decades, there has been a paradigmatic change in marketing due to (a) rising awareness of mindful consumers and their desire to reduce negative impacts on the planet, (b) the disappearance of “the shame and stigma associated with second-hand consumption,” and (c) the perception of second-hand goods as cool and stylish (Franklin 2011). In response to consumers’ changing perception toward second-hand consumption, organizations have already started to adopt a second-hand marketing approach. Over the past decade or so, second-hand consumption has been on the rise, particularly for textile and electronics, and the resale industry has generated billions of dollars in the U.S. (Moss and Bapna 2021). Companies, such as Apple, have adopted a new strategy and embraced a second-hand marketing approach to sell refurbished iPhones. This not only increases revenue generation but also distinguishes them as an environmentally conscious company (Vaute 2021). However, even though Apple addresses ecological sustainability, it still neglects social sustainability as their value creation occurs through bilateral interaction and excludes external value-adding partners.

Second-hand marketing based on value-in-reuse also employs the use of networks through trilateral interactions, which is generally mediated by online platforms such as Uncle Herry’s, Craig’s List, or community-based Facebook swap pages. For example, Ruth’s Reusable Resources, located in Portland, Maine, is a good representation of the social value of reuse with multiple benefits (The University of

Maine 2021). Ruth’s Reusable Resources acts as an intermediary among donors, students, and even teachers “to ensure that all students, from pre-k through high school, have the basic supplies and creative tools for literacy, STEAM, and health education through the environmentally-conscious distribution of donated business supplies” (Ruth; Reusable Resources 2021). Similarly, research has demonstrated that German consumers have an increased tendency to derive value from second-hand consumption for predominantly nostalgic and social reasons (e.g., social interaction) instead of economic and ecological reasons (Steffen 2017).

Even though second-hand marketing based on value-in-reuse is a higher-level sustainability approach compared to functional marketing, it is still a limited approach to sustainability. This is because interactions do not embrace “active-collective-participatory” patterns that will be discussed in Phase 4. In other words, second-hand marketing is a piecemeal sustainability solution, as networks, relationships, and interactions are static, passive, and defined within a narrower context. Relationships focus on a linear, simple enterprise-customer dyad that is mediated by both offline and online intermediaries. Nevertheless, modern networks possess dynamic transformational aspects beyond bilateral or trilateral centralized interactions, and they require non-linearity. In essence, second-hand marketing based on value-in-reuse does not involve an ever-changing network of “creation nets,” which requires dynamic and immediate positioning of active user participation. Consequently, the traditional “value-in-exchange” view—which excludes prosumers, co-creators, and co-innovators out of the value chain-activity—still prevails.

Phase 3: Access-Based Marketing Based on “Value-in-Access” Perspective

Access-based marketing is initiated by the sharing economy or the “sharing paradigm,” which is fueled by advances in information and communication technology as well as changing consumer habits and preferences. Access-based marketing relies on a platform business strategy, or platforms which are “visualized as resource integrators, involving customers and business partners in the process of co-creation of value” (Muzellec, Ronteau and Lambkin 2015).

A platform business strategy requires coordination of tangible and intangible resources, such as relationships and interactions to maximize ecosystem value—unlike a pipeline business strategy where value is controlled by a linear series of activities along the classic value chain. Traditionally, the performance of pipeline enterprises has been measured based on conventional financial metrics, such as inventory turnover or return on investment (ROI) focus on past performance. However, the metrics of access-based marketing are quite different from those of traditional marketing. Though quantifiable results are important, currently, access-based marketing includes other measures to foster a spirit of cooperation and sharing as today’s businesses rely on interactions within a network to be competitive. By way

of illustration, Return on Networks (RON) is defined as “the long-term effect on profitability caused by the establishment and maintenance of an organization’s networks of relationships” (Gummesson 2004, p. 23).

In essence, the focus of access-based marketing should be to facilitate and expand external interactions rather than grow more sales and profitability contrary to product-centric marketing based on value-in-exchange. Just as Drucker stated, “The purpose of business is to create a customer” (Drucker 2020, p. 20), “the purpose of business is to create a network” in the age of sustainability as sales and profitability depend on the number of interactions and the strength of relationships within a network.

In access-based marketing, three participants create a trilateral interaction: service facilitators (e.g., Uber, Airbnb), service providers (e.g., driver, host), and customers (e.g., rider, guest). This trilateral interaction is a more sustainable-oriented approach to marketing in comparison with functional marketing, given that more partakers (e.g., service facilitators, service providers, and customers) are involved in the network. Secondly, access-based marketing depends on the temporary use of services in lieu of ownership. Consequently, this reduces resource consumption and maximizes the utilization of idle assets as most assets are not fully utilized. According to one PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) study (2015), 76% of U.S. adults agree that the sharing economy is better for the environment and 78% agree that it builds a stronger community, while considering inclusive and integrative aspects of sustainability through networks.

Although access-based marketing is considered a sustainability-oriented approach as previously discussed, it cannot be considered a fully sustainable approach, given that access to these platforms is controlled by tech monopolies such as Uber and Airbnb. In other words, these digital multinational corporations control centralized platforms within a single authority by fixing prices, changing the algorithms of product searches, and manipulating users’ purchase preferences via product recommendations. Furthermore, although platform companies are often referred to as “sharing economy” companies, this is an inaccurate definition. As an example, Uber drivers provide their time and the temporary use of their vehicles, but Uber itself charges a high fee for every transaction on its platform; thus, it does not fully participate in the sharing economy. Given that private entities control these platforms, both economic as well as political power are not equally distributed between platform owners and digital workers, resulting in the corporate colonization” of platforms (Fuchs 2017). The outcome is the concentration of the “digital means of production” and the resulting wealth in the hands of tech monopolies, causing serious societal problems such as extreme inequalities (contrary to the “reduced inequality” goal [SDG 10] of the United Nations). In addition, platform owners have the power to disconnect users or to power down entire networks (Fuchs 2017). Thus, users in these platforms “feel powerless because they are unable to participate in the determination of market practices or control events within the marketplace” (Saravade,

Felix and Fuat Firat 2021, p. 290). Lastly, even though these platforms enable interactivity through an ecosystem strategy, they are not truly participatory in nature as participation requires individuals to make decisions and produce results for a shared purpose or experience. Interactions, per se, do not result in a transformed society; consequently, access-based marketing has a constrained approach to sustainability given that it seeks to stratify tech monopolies through unfettered capitalism.

In access-based marketing, networks have been exploited and have become the basis of capitalism. As Marx (1867) attested, “A large number of workers working together, at the same time, in one place in order to produce the same sort of commodity under the command of the same capitalist, constitutes the starting point of capitalist production” (p. 439). Thus, it can be inferred that access-based marketing represents the interests of the dominant or ruling class as the interests of all and companies in the sharing economy do not differ from traditional companies that seek to achieve monopolistic power (Smicek 2017).

Phase 4: Participatory Marketing Based on “Value-in-Participation” Perspective

Today’s fundamental systems failures, as a result of drastic income inequalities and growing social unrest, might be akin to the social and political developments that led to the social upheavals and extinction of long-lasting central institutions in Europe at the end of the eighteenth-century. Similar to the social developments at the end of the eighteenth-century, we have witnessed the growing unrest of the masses, such as the Arab Spring, the Yellow Vest Movement in France, and the Occupy Movement in New York. According to Institutional Theory (Hoffman and Jennings 2015), institutional changes only occur (or rather prove successful) when operational conditions are favorable—such as the rising awareness of the masses in the wake of drastic income inequalities, ecological boundaries as well as the introduction of novel technologies such as blockchain-based technologies. In line with Institutional Theory, the age of sustainability heralds an alteration in both the market and the strategy of organizations through new social arrangements (e.g., OVN), as well as new perspectives such as participatory marketing. This requires collaborative participation in a vibrant and ever-changing network of relationships working towards a shared purpose.

Participatory marketing based on “value-in-participation” is rooted in the commons economy, which aims to create distributed or inclusive value for society at large, reinforced by OVN. This is in contrast to the traditional downstream marketing approaches of the industrial era’s long-standing economic institutions. Participatory marketing takes a different approach to the value phenomenon as its value is derived from “making society.” In participatory marketing, value materializes through social practices and value, which is a paradoxical contrast to a capitalist-value regime. In other words, participatory

marketing seeks to promote “active-collective-participatory” macro-level consumption patterns rather than “passive-individual-private-alienated” patterns of functional, second-hand, and sharing economies (Saravade, Felix and Fuat Firat 2021).

Participatory marketing is a new marketing paradigm that partly developed in response to the dark side of access-based marketing of the sharing economy, in which digital tech monopolies hold control of the digital means of production via centralized platforms or market-mediated access. Today, users and consumers are exploited by these centralized platforms, which are a continuum of an industrial era mentality. For example, while users create content for Facebook, they are not paid for their efforts. Thus, Facebook, by outsourcing content creation to users, reduces its labor costs, destroys job creation, and exploits consumers who work without payment. The exploitation is masked or legitimized under users’ desire for social and cultural worth, no matter what the hour or location. As Fuchs (2017) attested, “The factory is not limited to your room and your wage workplace – the factory and workplace surveillance are also in all in-between spaces” (p. 118). Participatory marketing also implies a disintegration and deviation from the “soul-draining practices of positive marketing” (Kelleci and Yildiz 2021) with the aim of “overthrowing all conditions in which a man is degraded, enslaved, neglected” (Marx 1997, p. 257). Modern business strategies gravitate toward broader value creation for the whole society than for just the firm and its customers. For example, WikiHouse, Open-Source Ecology, and Open Bionics are all embracing the emerging collaborative marketing approach via digital three-sided decentralized platforms under the influence of the commons-based peer production (CBPP) movement, which combines accessible designs with distributed production capabilities. These newly emerging companies, which are designated as OVN, seek to combine designers, local producers, and consumers via the design-global/manufacture-local (DGML) approach that is based on the idea of cosmo-localism (Ramos 2017). To illustrate this, WikiHouse is an open-source, digital construction platform that enables lay people to build a house without any special skills or training in construction, thanks to the contributions of a global community of professionals such as architects, engineers, and builders. Those professionals can contribute to the development of tools and technologies by improving existing designs and technologies and even developing new ones (WikiHouse 2021). Eventually, technology is the driving force behind OVN and consequently participatory marketing. OVN, which have been evolving rapidly over the last decade due to breakthrough technological leaps in information and internet technologies, are a more sophisticated form of multi-sided platforms (MSP) due to the fact that they transcend the traditional centralized network structures of the industrial era to reduce inequalities (SDG 10). They also create shared value, inclusive growth, and societal well-being for all members of the society, even though they could be still considered in the introductory phase. In the meantime, on the road to a human-centered future, the supremacy of marketing based on traditional

forms of value creation has come under attack by consumers referred to as “flawed consumers,”⁵ or new consumption communities. An example is the Hockerton Housing Project (HHP) in Nottinghamshire (the UK) that “resist the pre-packaged, off-the-shelf, brand-and-product meanings of marketers” (Cova, Kozinets and Shankar 2011). These communities have broader value streams; they challenge the dominant paradigm of twentieth-century marketing and opt for “positive choice” alternatives, such as “buying bulk non-branded and Fairtrade goods, using farmers markets and credit unions” (Szmigin, Carrigan and Bekin 2011).

The sustainability era reflects a transition from an industrial society to a sustainable society. This refers to breaking down traditional concepts of economic and social institutions, a new social meaning (or new “social contract”), and self-consciousness through the collaboration of dynamic hybrid organizations with a blurring of hierarchies. Today, “Sustainability requires organizations to develop a sense of place, to become rooted in communities” (Gladwin et al. 1995, p. 898) or to develop decentralized collaboration of social ecosystems and networks. As is the case with OVN, these emerging institutions have the most influential form of participation—participation for a shared goal or purpose outside of market-mediated access.

Conclusions and Implications

Business enterprises who are stuck using conventional commercial marketing approaches will soon be unable to gain recognition and acceptance. It is also likely that they will be forced out of business due to new policies and regulations, new mindsets, norms, and values, the growing unrest of the masses, as well as an increasing shift toward sustainable investing. Platform companies with access-based marketing approaches, such as Uber, Didi, and Ola (ride-hailing firms), have already transformed the entire transportation industry across the globe by tapping into network effects. Most importantly, however, these companies are having a positive environmental impact by decreasing the number of kilometers traveled, thereby reducing the resources required (Mi and Coffman 2019). Consequently, this leads to fewer total resources consumed. Nevertheless, this is not a far-reaching sustainability approach because of the drawbacks of access-based marketing, which has been discussed above. The recent developments in both value creation and marketing imply that twentieth-century marketing has gravitated from a firm-centric approach to a society-centric or purpose-driven approach. This shift has worked to increase societal well-being, promote inclusive growth, and manage shared wealth and assets reflecting the tenants of participatory culture. Thus, organizations need to reframe and re-systematize their marketing approaches based on value-in-participation as consumers with post-materialistic values may also take activist positions, which could be detrimental to the existence of market entities in the era of sustainability.

In line with the above-mentioned transformations, the sustainability era also heralds an uncertain future for marketing

firms and even other business enterprises as “transactions costs are more-or-less eliminated, technology for monitoring every keystroke and contribution is ubiquitous, and innovation depends as much on prosocial and intrinsic motivations as on extrinsic motivations” (Benkler 2017, p. 269). We are currently in the midst of a socioeconomic revolution in conjuncture with the emergence of participatory culture, in which construer subjects would freely and equally participate in all domains of life by creating and producing choices themselves (Firat and Dholakia 2017). This is in contrast to consumer subjects who are pacified and alienated from production. However, for participatory marketing to firmly establish itself, a non-corporate Internet might be needed. If a non-corporate Internet is realized, an emancipatory process toward the demise of “marketing as usual” is possible. Consequently, an inevitable incarnation of enlightened participatory marketing is likely to occur. This has the potential to transform the consumer subject into a construer or true citizen subject (Firat and Dholakia 2017), who will exercise their free will to reach their maximum potential through self-organizational collaborative organizations.

The author contends that participatory marketing through OVN has the capability to move the marketing discipline forward and prevent economic exploitation and cultural alienation by turning consumer subjects into true citizen subjects via changing the Structure of Available Alternatives (SAAC) to a higher level of consumption mode. As it has been discussed in Phase 4, history has shown us that human-made institutions have never remained the same, and it is unlikely that the predominant marketing approaches of the neoliberal institutions will remain invariant.

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Notes

1. The industrial revolution, which represented an era of unprecedented economic growth, triggered the rise of CCOs. The goal of these organizations has been to meet excess demand via scalable technology while making as much profit as possible. Thus, there is little concern for quality, employee satisfaction, and latent customer needs. In the early 1980s, business and societal changes led to the development of a new type of organization called HIOs. In contrast to CCOs, HIOs consider people to be important

sources of creativity and innovation, and as such they significantly invest in human capital to achieve a long-term competitive advantage. Both types of organizations create jobs and increase GDP and economic welfare; however, they struggle to solve profound problems due to environmental degradation and increased social unrest.

2. Customer-centricity is the primary focus of marketing. Nevertheless, a heightened customer focus that does not consider multiple stakeholders is a widespread marketing bias, which is viewed as “new marketing myopia.” As such, marketers generally pay far more attention to sales-driven product-centricity with the aim of increasing short-term profits as employees are often rewarded for short-term performance rather than long-term sustainability. Today, commercial marketing has become fixated on short-term profit to the detriment of societal and ecological well-being.
3. Milton Friedman was an American economist who advocated for a shareholder primacy approach in business. As such, starting from the 1970s, material gains and profit maximization have been prioritized over both environmental and social well-being.
4. As the sustainability paradigm has become more established, we have witnessed the emergence of SMOs, which are much more flexible and adaptable than CCOs as well as far more innovative than HIOs. SMOs create value that transcends profit to include social and ecological value in alignment with multiple interests of various stakeholders. However, they are still a continuation of the traditional growth-oriented system. OVN, on the other hand, are more transformational, and they have very few formal mechanisms. They are generally built on blockchain-based digital infrastructures, which enable construer subjects to act as active contributors, not passive consumers, in the context of an emerging paradigm of commons economy.
5. Flawed consumer is a term coined by Zygmunt Baumann. It refers to consumption-defective people or inadequate consumers, who are not active and effective buyers of traditional market-mediated goods and services.

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