

Assessing business strategies towards sustainable consumption

Maria Moreno, Dr Debra Lilley, Dr Vicky Lofthouse, Loughborough University, UK

Changing consumer demands, forthcoming legislation, and an increase in pressure from stakeholders has encouraged companies to integrate sustainability principles into their business and marketing strategies (Sarkis et al., 2010). As a result, many improvements have been achieved with respect to sustainable consumption and production; however, there still remains the need to address the social and environmental impacts associated with the purchasing, use, and end of life of a product or service (Mont and Bleischwits, 2007; UNEP, 2009; Princen, 1999; Sto, 2006).

Industry can play an important role in moving towards more sustainable consumption by motivating consumers to purchase, use, and dispose of their products more sustainably. However, the benefits afforded by influencing consumer behaviour must be clearly articulated and understood if companies are to engage in this matter (WBCSD, 2008). In order to positively influence sustainable consumption the umbrella of different complexities associated with consumption, including: issues related to human needs, habits, attitudes, behaviours, lifestyles, and the context in which goods and services are delivered must be considered (Seyfang, 2009; Mont and Plepys, 2008). As such, an in depth understanding of these factors is required.

Businesses are central to the creation of technology and innovation, which have an important role to play towards sustainable consumption (Málovics et al., 2008; Mont and Plepys, 2008; Michaelis, 2003). Innovation and research and development (R&D) have a strong link to design, as it is considered as a creative and innovative discipline responsible for delivering solutions (Verganti, 2009). Design has also been related to the ability to understand users through User Centered Design (UCD). UCD is increasingly being seen as a viable approach that can help businesses to enhance and influence more sustainable consumption. However, its influence will be dependant on variable factors, which a company is required to assess in relation to their business strategy.

A framework based on four factors -business model, consumer, design and sustainability -is presented. The framework aims to assist 'business to consumer' companies in engaging in a self-learning experience of where they are and where they want to go in relation to different criteria related to these four factors. The evaluation will help businesses to identify strengths and weaknesses, so that they can then select appropriate UCD strategies to assist them in setting new standards and communication strategies, sharing responsibility, enhancing collaboration, and supporting innovation, with an overall aim of enhancing sustainable consumption. The levels of sustainable consumption that can be achieved through implementing these strategies will be measured using a sustainability index.

The framework is built on findings from an extensive literature review, semi-structured interviews with experts and two workshops that aimed to identify UCD strategies related to the three approaches. Future work will see the framework developed as an open source web-based tool, which will be evaluated by companies.