



December 1–3, 2008
Olympic Park, Sydney
New South Wales, Australia

Australia and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference 2008

Marketing: Shifting the Focus from Mainstream to Offbeat

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ISBN 186308 144 5

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The nature and role of social relationships in social responsibility

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Abstract

The importance of socially responsible purchasing continues to grow. However there is limited work that considers high involvement purchasing and the importance of social relationships in building attitudes and guiding behavior in this context. This paper presents findings that consider these issues. Social relationships are found to be an important factor in responsible purchasing however these effects often are not consciously recognized by consumers. The paper concludes by considering the need for research methods to uncover the importance of social relations.

Introduction

There is increasing attention paid to socially responsible purchasing both within and beyond the marketing literature. What the attributes of it are, how companies do and should behave, how to communicate this to consumers and the ways in which consumers respond– both as result of companies' activities and other influences – have been widely considered in many forums. However within this burgeoning literature, there has been little consideration of the role of customers' personal, social network, i.e. their close relationships and the influence of this on their social responsibility. Sadly this neglect is not limited to the context of socially responsible purchasing. Surprisingly, the classic work of nearly 20 years ago that considered the role of social relationships in marketing (e.g. Brown and Reingan 1987) has not progressed much. This is surprising giving the quantity of word of mouth literature now in marketing which stems from the classic works of Arndt (1967), Day (1971) and Engel et al (1969). Important in that work were the social relationship components of word of mouth.

The little contemporary work that considers the impact of social relationships on purchasing is found in isolated studies of diffusion of opinion and application of influence within particular social groups such as children (e.g. Kunst and Kratzer 2007) and the aged (e.g. Livette 2007). While there has been substantial consideration of the influences of family in purchasing decisions (e.g. Pettersson et al 2004), this has tended to focus on FMCGs. A few works apply social relationships and their influence to the area of consumer attitude formation (Watts and Dodds 2007), consumer attitude change (Sznajd-Weron and Sznajd 2000) and socially responsible behaviour change (Athanadiadis and Mitkas 2005), but this has not extended to consideration of interpersonal social influence in socially responsible purchasing. While social relationships have been considered in conjunction with socially responsible purchasing, their role has not been considered. Instead social relationships have been seen as part of the ongoing context of the consumer (i.e. a key determinant of their values) (Letelier et al 2003), as one of many influences, in developing identity and identification with the product/service producer (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) and, in aggregate, as the extended set of stakeholders that companies must consider when attempting to reach customers (Maignan and Ferrell 2004).

This paper reports research from a program¹ addressing this gap, examining the influence of interrelated social relationships (i.e. social networks) in responsible purchasing.

Personal Relationships, Social Networks and Their Strength

While not widely studied in marketing, social networks have been the subject of both empirical and theoretical study in the social sciences for at least 50 years (Wasserman and Faust 2005, Watts 2004), partly because of inherent interest in the patterns of human interaction, but also because they have important implications for the spread of disease, behaviour and knowledge (Newman 2001) and because they provide a method to enable us to understand the structural properties of the connections that link us.

Social psychology has long recognized the value of social relationships - we are inherently social beings (Asch 1952) and personal connections and their influence are a central part of this (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). These connections are central in guiding and directing people's lives. There are a number of reasons for extending this to consider socially responsible purchasing. Trust is recognized as more readily emerging in close interpersonal relationships than otherwise (Young 2006) and this guides the extent that information received (including information about products) is perceived as credible and acted upon. This is particularly important in making high involvement decisions (Mohr, et al 2001, Andreasen 1995). Arguably, choosing to make socially responsible purchases is a high involvement decision as these are choices that involve the defining of oneself as contributing to the social well-being of a wider community. It also noted that these decisions are gradual (Mohr, et al 2001, Andreasen 1995). A network of continuing social relationships provides a suitable environment for the gradual evolution of beliefs. Furthermore, Watley and May (2004) highlight that the type and source of information are crucial to ethical attitude and behaviour change. In line with this we argue that information emulating from those to whom one is close is more significant in influencing consumers' decision making than other sources (in line with Athanadiadis and Mitkas 2005).

A Programme of Research into Social Networks and Socially Responsible Purchasing

This paper reports a portion of the findings of four focus groups conducted in regional NSW and Sydney. The design of the groups is informed by two previous phases of research. Eighteen depth interviews with consumers were conducted to ascertain socially responsible attitudes and purchasing patterns and to allow us to experiment with various ways of enquiring about evolution of attitudes and behaviour and the role of social networks. A second stage of research examined the internal culture of Westpac with respect to the production of socially responsible products and the way that their organisation interacted with customers to build socially responsible behaviour. The third stage seeks to build further knowledge on the interaction of consumers with social responsible suppliers and continues to examine how to best uncover insights into the evolution of socially responsible attitudes and the role of social networks in this. This will be utilised in subsequent stages of research—a survey of consumers and follow-up depth interviews.

¹ This is funded by an Australia Research Council Linkage Grant with Westpac Banking Corporation.

Four groups were conducted. The design ensured the groups were contextually different. Two groups included informants 18-35 and 2 included those over 35. For each age range, a group was conducted for urban residents (Sydney) and for regional residents (Bathurst, NSW). They were run by an experienced moderator and were observed by members of the research group who took notes on general findings, social interaction and gaps. Groups ran for over an hour and a half and included a description of recent socially responsible purchasing, their views on social responsibility, how their views were formed and had changed and the way others had influenced their views and they had influenced others. The groups concluded with an exercise where participants drew their social networks and positioned themselves within it with respect to their roles as an influencer and as influenced. Recordings of the groups were transcribed verbatim and analysed by three different analysts using basic thematic analysis techniques (as described by Braun and Clark 2006). These analyses were then compared and augmented with observational insights.

Findings

Social responsibility differs according to with life cycle stage and community context. The older participants (in the two over 35 groups) were better informed about socially responsible purchasing in that they had a clearer sense of what constituted socially responsible purchasing and had or were interested in incorporating some types of socially responsible purchasing into their lives. This was most pronounced in the over 35 Sydney group. Interest in decreasing energy and water consumption and pollution were most frequently mentioned. There was no similar, clear pattern emerging from the under 35s. Here price appeared to be the dominant determinant. As one young Sydneysider said, *“Everybody wants a good bargain unless you’re like, filthy rich.”* However there was some concern amongst younger informants about global warming and what could be done by individuals about it. Further analysis showed that life cycle stage was better indicator than was age, as indicated by comments like, *“I’ve got two little kids around so I think it makes you think a bit more about long term.”* Attitudes of married, under 35s with children somewhat resembled those of older informants though the younger group perceived that their disposable income precluded them purchasing responsibly some of the time. The younger participants in the regional NSW groups were more likely to be undertaking or intending to undertake some socially responsible purchasing than were their Sydney counterparts. This was bound up in social (as distinct from the environmental) aspects of socially responsible purchasing – seen by these participants as supporting local business. It was very much associated with the greater sense of connection to their wider community that was observed in the regional focus groups. As one Bathurst participant said, *“It’s different (the local) businesses you’ll support because they support you.”*

Social awareness was facilitated by social relationships, though informants did not initially indicate this influence to be substantial. The level of trust in family members’ opinions is high. As one participant said when considering using close contacts instead of other sources, *“Yeah, just your network people. Tried and trusted.”* This is in line with the literature of the psychology of trust in that it indicates that both motivation and competence are necessary for trust in another’s credibility (Young 2006). However for many this needs to be combined with a belief in the other’s expertise and so is context-specific. For example, friends’ influence was reported to be weaker when the expertise needed was perceived to be higher, as was the case for complex financial services. However other sources were not always available. *“I actually found it quite*

difficult to get information unless you pay money to get on those select websites that let you know different qualities and brands that they've tested. So I went to friends."

While it was acknowledged friends' expertise might be greater than family's, friends' motivation was perceived to be fairly neutral and this was significant in the minds of some informants. As one young Sydney resident said in comparing friends to family, *"anything that affects me affects my mum, it's like my life's her life so she would never ever...give me any advice at all if it wasn't the right advice to give her daughter."* However in an apparent contradiction to this, expertise at point of sale was utilized by some participants for high involvement and big ticket items. A few older participants indicated they trusted in their own judgment, particularly with high involvement products, as one said, *"With my own finances I don't think I can trust other people. I just trust myself."* For this group of mostly older informants, the motivations of their information sources were not terribly important. This is in contrast to younger participants who tended to refer to their parents for advice because of their motives.

However there is reason to believe that informants' stated beliefs about the influence of their social networks on them may be under-acknowledged. While they did not directly report this, the pattern of responses of informants throughout the focus group indicated that the process of developing socially responsible attitudes is generally one of slow evolution and that similarly the influencing process is gradual one. An illustration of this is a Bathurst participant's recollection of a story of Samsung helping a family in trouble who went on to say *"(it) goes into that memory bank of things. You don't specifically remember, 'oh, yeah, I remember Samsung did this.' You just automatically go, 'Samsung, they're a pretty good company.'"*

In other words, it is not a specific occasion or piece of advice that leads to social responsibility and associated purchasing but it is rather a continuing process. As another Bathurst informant said when referring to the need for repetition of messages, *"(it's got to be) not just once either, it's got to be over a period of time."* This leads to a suspicion that informants' immediate reflections have selective perception bias. They both focus on their own autonomy (hence increasing their own sense of control) and recall only events of the immediate past. Hence their reflections do not include recognition of the influence of others, particularly in the longer term. This is supported by discourse of a number of informants who, towards the end of their focus groups, started to indicate the greater influence upon them of family, friends and co-workers as well as their own influence on others. This was not elicited by earlier questioning. Furthermore during the final exercise of positioning oneself in network, informants indicated (as a result of the group) that they now realized that influencing in the social network was greater than they had thought earlier. Indicative is what one Sydney over-35 said at this point, *"Another reason why I changed my car because I was told (by my co-workers) my carbon footprint was far too big."*

Also, there were interaction effects that were not always recognized by informants. The informants recounted stories that strongly indicated that contact with an issue of interest was coupled with social network influence to produce changes to attitudes or behaviour. For example one informant recognized that, *"Everyone just sort of knows what's good and what's bad these days from word of mouth and people knowing and research."* However their insights about cumulative knowledge did not always extend to seeing these connections between and their social relationships that played a critical role in providing the initial information and assisted in building it. Nor were the synergies arising from these couplings recognized by informants. When pressed

informants sometimes recounted a trigger or critical event that had changed their attitudes or behaviour. However despite these being experienced with and as a result of others with whom they had strong social relationships, the contribution of the others was not consciously recognised. Sometimes changes emerged due to the cumulative effect of a number of inputs - each with of little obvious effect but with an eventual tipping point. As one informant said to indicate this, *“I look at newspapers and often you can see that it’s all hearsay. But if it’s going continuously on news on television then you know, something’s got to be right.”* This process was a slow one that occurred over a substantial period. While this was sometimes recognized, the fact that these processes occurred within the context of social relationships was not.

Discussion and Conclusions

These findings indicate the effects of social networks are not recognised by informants as significant in forming socially responsible attitudes and behaviour. However this runs counter to theories of social psychology that indicate that social relationships are central to identity construction, attitude formation and behaviour change (Asch 1952). Also, the value of social relationships in linking market participants to wider bases of knowledge is recognised (stemming from Granovetter 1973 and others). This leads us to look past simple reporting by informants as to the nature and role of their social relationships in responsible purchasing to the more embedded information contained in their discourses.

The issues raised by these findings highlight the bigger issue of the extent to which simple noting of what informants believe to be true is (or is not) a valid approach in qualitative analysis. Techniques that analyse only what has been said are suitable in many cases, but this is not universally so. In this instance there is also the need to undertake temporal analysis (consideration of the extent to which and the way that reporting evolves as there is continued discussion) and gap analysis which considers what has not been said and why. As is the case with all qualitative research, the data generation techniques that elicit informants’ responses also require scrutiny. In this work we note that there is a marked change in the information collected when we go past general questioning and probing to more innovative styles of data generation. To get at the generalised influence of important others on informants decision making in this context required a detailed consideration and articulation by informants as to their roles as influencer and influenced in their networks.

The reported research has made considerable progress towards developing methods to acquire the information we seek, but further work on questioning method is needed. The information that is generated from this needs innovative new methods of analysing and reporting – as is the case with our network positioning exercises. Ways of effectively analysing these will be the focus of future work. Further focus groups are also planned with a two-fold purpose. The techniques of generating information about networks of social relationships will be further developed, a portfolio of social networks of diverse informants will be developed and patterns emerging from these will be explored. Thus we hope to make both methodological contributions to the study of social networks and garner insight into their nature and role in this important context. It is also hoped that this work will assist customers who seek to make better, more informed and responsible decisions about their purchases as we highlight what value there may be in consulting those that surround us. Also this work may assist managers that seek to better inform their customers as to efforts to provide products that do not degrade the environment or society.

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