

WORLD EXPORT DEVELOPMENT FORUM – W·E·D·F 2008

BREAKOUT SERIES 1:

TAPPING INTO CONSUMER CONSCIENCE: IS IT ALL ABOUT ETHICAL MARKETING AND BRANDING?

The Issue:

Ethical marketing and branding play important roles in fuelling the boom of conscientious consumerism, but simply marketing the idea of “individual choice” may not be a talisman for tapping into the consumer conscience.

Two reasons support this. Firstly, consumers who advocate the purchase of ethical and environmentally friendly products still want value for money. They may be influenced by perceptions, but ultimately the purchasing decision may be based on price and quality.

Secondly, a decision to buy ethical goods and services may be shaped by both personal and public commitments. According to researchers, consumers do not always exercise “individual choice” in their purchasing decisions; instead, their purchasing decisions are sometimes based on external obligations.¹ Among other things, consumers are parents, friends, employees, and family members, and their purchasing decisions are done as background to these activities.² Because of this, consumers may only make ethical purchases when it fits within the context of their external obligations.

The Proposition:

Tapping into the consumer conscience is not as straightforward as “individual choice.” To succeed, marketers should recognize that most consumers make their purchasing decisions partly upon external factors. Within the context of consumer goods and food, it seems unlikely that consumers will follow their conscience if doing so would be unpractical.

Still, producers can charge a premium for ethical goods if they can find a way to provide ethical products in a way that does not require consumers to fundamentally change the way they live. Tapping into the consumer conscience therefore requires a balance of practicality, convenience, and value.

Focus of the Debate:

The debate will address the following questions:

1. To what extent is the purchasing decision made on ethical considerations?
2. To what extent are conscientious consumers influenced by perceptions?
3. How can exporters in developing countries provide a healthy balance of value whilst creating the right image?

¹ Press Release, Economic and Social Research Council, “Ethical Consumption: Consumer Driven Or Political Phenomenon?”, Aug. 8, 2007.

² *Id.*