

An Interaction and Networks Approach to Sustainable Marketing: Creating a Context for Connectivity, Dialogue and Learning

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Abstract:

In this paper we present an interactions and networks approach to sustainable marketing which incorporates interorganisational dyad, network and system levels of analysis. The proposed framework is a starting point to situate, and theorize sustainable marketing in a holistic context. By capturing the relationships between the system, business networks and the interorganisational dyad we proposed the systematization of dialogue as a method for generating relationship knowledge that communicates the value of sustainability. We propose that developing learning relationships with key stakeholders is a central mechanism to bringing about change. In building our arguments we build on lessons learned from the IMP perspectives on networks and living systems theory.

Keywords: sustainable marketing, interaction and networks, dialogue,

Introduction

The issue of environmental degradation has become of paramount importance, politically, economically and socially. To truly accept the environmental crisis in which we live is to acknowledge the unknowability emerging from the radical changes being experienced in our natural environment, where reassurances are rare and conflicts abound regarding the key issues such as climate change and global warming. Moreover, firms launching environmentally related strategies and campaigns risk ongoing media scrutiny (e.g. Wal-Mart's sustainability programme, <http://walmartwatch.com/>) and the potential of a green backlash (Cummings 2008). Moreover, despite increasing evidence of consumer acceptability of sustainability (UNEP/UNESCO, 2000¹, Cone Consumer Environmental Survey, 2007) we are still witnessing a gap between favourable attitudes, stated intentions and behavioural change in consumption patterns. Moreover, rewards for risks taken are by no means guaranteed (Kapelianis and Strachan 1996); coupled with the level complexity and increased speed/volume of environment related government regulations and guidelines means that many firms and consumers may feel paralysed into inaction, or become increasingly risk adverse. Moving towards a full integration of the principles of sustainable development within mainstream marketing theory and practice therefore poses many challenges. These challenges involve not only the search of environmentally benign technologies to replace industrial era technologies (Fisk 1994), but will also require marketers to develop strategies heretofore considered counter-intuitive, such as encouraging consumers to consume less, not more, of their product (e.g. KIA Motors Sedona ad supporting the Walking Bus initiative, and the AISE Washright campaign) or competitors collaborating to create changes in the system (i.e. WBSD Mobility project which sees Ford, Toyota, Shell, BP collaborate to create systemic mobility solutions).

In order to maintain its social legitimacy, Marketing, as a discipline, continues to respond to these challenges in many and sometimes diverging ways. Essentially however they amount to a range of proposed changes, some less incremental than others, to the definition and scope of marketing. Examples of these proposed adaptations can be identified to the following 'name changes' including 'greener marketing' (Charter and Polonsky 1999 p298; Kilbourne 1998; Peattie 1992), 'environmental marketing' (Coddington 1993; Peattie 1995), 'ecological marketing' (Fisk 1974), 'societal marketing' (Kotler 1994), and 'social marketing' (Kotler and Zaltman 1971) 'ecopreneurialism' (Menon and Menon 1997), 'sustainability marketing' (Belz 2006) and 'sustainable

¹ Is the Future Yours (UNEP/UNESCO, 2000)

marketing' (Fuller 1999; Kilbourne et al. 1997; Peattie 2007)². This crisis in identity points towards a struggle within the field to find a single, coherent yet rich, theoretical framework from which to develop theory and practice. Moreover, such a crisis creates a vacuum in marketing theory which can do much to hamper development of models of sustainable marketing practice. This is evidence in the reality that despite the identified positive relationships between sustainability and competitiveness (Porter and van der Linde 1995a; Porter and van der Linde 1995b), Sustainable Marketing continues to struggle with the problem of mainstreaming ecological practices amongst marketers and consumers.

It is well recognised that the transition towards sustainable development will require changes, incremental and transformational, in our concepts of production, consumption, and business success generally (Bruntland 1987; Hawken et al. 1999). The essential task is to encourage suppliers, manufacturers, consumers and other stakeholders to generate, adopt and advocate environmentally sound technologies and behavioural practices. Recent examples of industry network-level change suggest however, that this process can be protracted and political in nature (Hurst and Smith 2007). Moreover, while research does indicate that consumers have become more and more concerned with social and environmental issues of (food) production (Oosterveer 2006), consumers have also been found to be reticent and sceptical of environmentally related purchasing. Indeed fear and scepticism have been proposed as clear causal factors in the often cited intention-behaviour gap (e.g. Vermeier and Verbeke 2006). This gap between intention and behaviour is not limited to consumers however, where research indicates that a similar gap is also been found at a firm level with the recognition of varying levels of acceptability and resistibility of environmental issues amongst managers (Kajzer-Mitchell and Saren 2006). Fisk (1998) suggests three methods to overcome such resistance, that is, coercion, incentives or a mixture of both. In all three approaches Fisk (1998) places legislators in a central position to bring about the necessary changes. However, we are proposing a model, which suggests that developing learning relationships with key stakeholders as the central mechanism to bringing about change. Moreover, we present an embedded framework which aims to reconnect marketing to the natural environment, and producers with consumers. In essence we are calling for the systematisation of dialogue as a method for generating relationship knowledge that communicates the value of sustainability. The aim of which is the moving away from the ongoing fragmentation in our marketing discipline, which treats the natural environment as if it consisting of separate parts to be exploited by different interest groups (Capra 2002).

The aim of this paper is to propose the potential for the Interaction and Networks approach as a conceptual foundation in the development of a theory of Sustainable Marketing. In taking this approach, this paper aims to extend the domain of the IMP beyond business-to-business or industrial marketing. The conceptual framework offered in the paper therefore is not novel in and of itself, but with novelty residing in the context to which it is brought to bear. We argue that extending the IMP framework to help address the problem of achieving a sustainable approach to marketing can support the radical change required in the marketing system. In doing so this paper will a) present an overview of the approach heretofore in explicating the relationship between marketing and the natural environment, b) propose that a predominance of a marketing-mix influenced firm centric orientation has limited the growth and success of sustainable marketing theory and practice, c) and outline the Interaction and Networks approach, not merely as a theory relating to the interactions between industrial partners, but as a potential theoretical framework of Sustainable Marketing. Building on this then, the paper goes on to tentatively propose an integrative framework of the sources and contexts of dyadic, network and systems level change necessary for the achievement of a sustainable approach to marketing. This paper acknowledges that manager/firm attitude and behaviour change are integral in adapting to environmentally related business challenges. However, attitude and behaviour are not the focus of this paper. The focus of this particular paper is to address the broader issue of the how and why a firm might decide to adopt an environmentally sound position in the first place. We therefore aim to explore the context of both

² Whilst each of these sub disciplines brings different nuances to the issue, they ultimately share a common purpose, that is, to improve our relationship to the natural environment. We sidestep potential debates on semantics (Peattie and Crane, 2005) by using what we feel is a more generally understood and comprehensive term, that is, sustainable marketing.

resistance and acceptance of change by acknowledging the precursory role of how the problem/issues are framed by marketing theory. The paper concludes by discussing implications for future research.

Emergence of relational discourse in Sustainable Marketing

The relationship between marketing theory and practice and the natural environment has been a tumultuous one. The ongoing degradation of the earth's natural resources, as well as the growing public awareness of the crisis has meant that the context in which the marketing system operates has fundamentally altered in recent years. Increasing legislation regarding waste, energy sources and use has posed both challenges and opportunities for marketers. A similar crisis hit marketing in the 1980's, where the oil crisis spawned a huge interest in alternative energy sources and widespread public campaigns to decrease the level of energy usage as well as offering opportunities for 'environmentally friendly products' (Smith 1998). The growing recognition of the depletion of the ozone layer, and the recognised relationship to that and the use of CFCs triggered a high profile consumer based campaign which resulted in the call for industry to search for alternative technology (Pujari and Wright 1999). This issue also allows us to recognise that environment issues are not easily decompartmentalised into b2c or b2b categories, where for example changes in consumer attitudes can have fundamental implications upstream.

Following such high profile campaigns the enthusiasm regarding the greening of marketing began to ebb however, with the growing awareness that the green consumer may be more allusive than first appeared (Peattie 2001) and with doubts emerging as to consumers willingness-to-pay the promised premium for environmentally sound products (Vlosky et al. 1999). Indeed with green marketing facing a wave of criticism for corporate opportunism and green washing (e.g. Kärnä et al. 2001), some protagonists have been suggesting that the green marketing project has been mere smoke and mirrors (Peattie and Crane 2005). Despite this however, over the past 5-10 years this issue has not only remained top of the agenda but has increasingly moved to the mainstream. Important metrics for this are the increasing legislation governing the environmental impact of production (for example, the WEEE directive – The Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive), the success of companies that made the environment central to their marketing strategies (e.g. BodyShop, Innocent Smoothies), as well as mainstream companies such as Shell and Walmart spending substantial monies in "greening up their act" (People, Planet and Profit, Shell Sustainability Report, 1998; Walmart Sustainability Progress Report, 2007).

Differing approaches to this issue exist, however, with two overarching camps emerging. First, to incrementally adapt existing transaction-based approaches to marketing, that is, greening the 4ps (see for example Charter and Polonsky 1999; Fisk 1998). Second, to call for a fundamental paradigm shift in business thinking in order to cope with the complexities offered by the environmental crises faced (McDonagh and Prothero 1997). These two camps remain at odds, with the former considered over-simplified with the latter seen as impractical. However, while this impasse remains ongoing, a new stream of research has emerged where inter-organisational relationships, alliances, and partnerships have emerged as a central mechanism for enterprises engaging in sustainable business (Pujari and Wright 1999). This is evidenced in the increase in mergers and acquisitions (M&A) in the green and organic market emphasises that many firms are utilising such methods as a way of greening their portfolios (e.g. Cadbury's and Green and Blacks Chocolate). Furthermore, firms engage in relations with external agencies such as local communities and NGOs, e.g. cause-related marketing and CSR (Crane 1998; Fuller 1994; Mendleson and Polonsky 1995; Milne et al. 1996; Polonsky et al. 2004; Ryan 2003; Stafford and Hartman 1996). Moreover, there is also an increasing recognition of developing relationships throughout the supply chain, including with customers, in order to realise the environmental value of sustainable enterprise offerings (van Hoek 1999). According to Zhu et al (2008) green supply chain management (GSCM) practices implementation range from green purchasing (GP) to integrated life-cycle management supply chains flowing from supplier, through to manufacturer, customer, and closing the loop with reverse logistics. In general terms the focus of this literature has been on the development of measurement tools to evaluate the environmental performance of suppliers' selection of third parties by measuring and evaluating partner environmental practices and

performance (Handfield et al 2002) in much the same way as firms already evaluate partners in terms of reliability, quality, and flexibility (Efendigil 2008).

This relational discourse is of course by no means new, where the engagement in long term, interactive, adaptive and mutual relationships with customers and other marketing agents has been fast becoming the received view within mainstream marketing (Grönroos 1994; Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995). An important milestone in this evolving discourse has been the emergence of Relationship Marketing (RM) as a sub discipline, or as some would suggest a paradigm shift, within mainstream marketing. The overall concept of RM lies in the realisation that long term mutually beneficial relationships with key stakeholders can bring greater benefits to an organisation compared with a strategy based on once off transactions (Berry 2000; Grönroos 1994; Gummesson 1997; Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995). Indeed, the practice of marketing has now been redefined to include an explicit focus on relationships (Berry 2000; Keefe 2004; Miles and Covin 2000). The emergence of a relational approach to marketing can be attributed to key changes in the business landscape, from an economic, social and technological perspective (Aijo 1996). For many firms, developing long term relationships with business partners acts as a stabilising mechanism in markets characterised by ongoing change, technological developments and intense competition (Berry 2000; Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995).

Indeed, it is being increasingly recognised that the success of organisations today is marked by their ability to both form and manage relationships with other organisations (Håkansson and Snehota 1995; Heida 1994). To cope with the increasing complexity of the business environment, many analysts have called on organisations to be both flexible and dynamic, in their structure, strategy and outlook, in order to continually innovate with the changing nature of the market (Doz and Hamel 1998). This changing economic context then, calls for a more interconnected and interdependent perspective not only to gain competitive advantage but for survival itself (Webster 1992).

The emergence of a relational approach to Sustainable Marketing is important for a number of reasons. Most notably it marks a tipping point in the positive convergence of the principles of sustainability and more mainstream business practice. This approach counters the more adversarial and transaction orientated framework that has dominated mainstream business practice to date. It privileges the development of relationships between stakeholders, and advocates the development of trust, reciprocity, commitment and learning. Driving forces for the recognition of importance of interaction, relationships and networks has been the realisation that firms cannot and do not operate in isolation (Håkansson 1982), but are interdependent and interconnected with other firms, consumers, governments and in more general terms with society and the natural environment itself. Relationships within a networked economy have been recognised as both a source and context of learning (Ryan and O'Malley 2007). Moreover they serve as a method for maintaining connectivity between the firm and their stakeholders thus enabling the firm to maintain and enhance their value added in social and environmental terms.

While the importance of relationships is recognised, there is increasing evidence that many are fraught with problems. For example evidence from research on relationships between firms and NGOs suggests that power differentials form barriers to 'true partnerships' (Hamman and Acutt 2003; Mohiddin 1998; Seitanidi and Ryan 2007). In green M&As, scepticism remains as to whether the environmental credentials of acquired brands will be diminished or swallowed up by the larger corporation. Moreover, while the language of alliances and partnerships has emerged within the sustainable marketing discourse, we suggest that this has occurred within a firm-centric perspective. For examples, when alliances, stakeholders and partners (i.e. suppliers) are discussed, this tends to be in relation to how the focal firm can bring about behaviour changes in the other, or influence them to accept the strategies of the focal firm. Polonsky (1995) proposes a 4 step stakeholder management tool which emphasizes a firm centric approach. In his model the focal firm is centrally located with a range of stakeholders dotted around the circle in a spoke of a wheel formation. Within the model, the author advises that firms should (1) identify the relevant stakeholder groups in relation to the issue being addressed. (2) Determine the stake and importance of each stakeholder group. (3) Determine how effectively the "needs" or "expectations" of each group is presently being met. (4) Modify corporate policies and priorities to take into consideration stakeholder interests (after

Freeman, 1984). Such conceptualizations however do not acknowledge the intra-stakeholder interaction, as well as the dynamics of such relationships over time. Moreover, such alliances tend to be viewed as 'issue specific', which may limit their role and encourage opportunistic alliance formation to "solve" singular problems (McDonalds' packaging), while firms continue to insulate themselves from calls for more transformative level change (i.e. McDonalds perhaps going fair trade/organic). An example is Long and Arnold's (1995) definition of environmental alliances which describes such partnerships as "voluntary, jointly defined activities or agendas, focusing on a discreet, attainable and potentially measurable goal..." (as quoted by Pujari and Wright 1999: 117). The following quote from Polonsky serves to illustrate this firm centric view on stakeholder relationships as emphasised within the sustainable marketing discourse.

"If stakeholders can be "socialized" into the organization, they will be able to better understand organizational objectives and therefore may be less problematic"
Polonsky (1995:41)

The rhetoric of relationships is therefore acknowledged as not enough in order to bring about the required change. We suggest that for relationships between such diverse parties to succeed, a dialectic approach is required which allows for collaborative learning without harming environmental or social value. We must therefore examine the health of such relationships and understand more clearly the context in which such dialogue can occur. With their focus on the active role of both parties and the recognising of relationship dynamics, learning and change, we propose that the IMP perspective is particularly apposite in this regard.

An IMP perspective

The importance of relationships in today's business landscape has been recognised in a number of fields within the marketing discipline, namely, channel, services and industrial marketing and management (Möller and Halinen 2000). However, the differing contexts and nuances of each of these traditions have meant that the conceptual development of a relational approach to marketing has not been homogenous in nature (Easton 1994). Certain critical points of departure for the work of the IMP serve to differentiate this work from the mainstream Relationship Marketing discourse, of which it remains a part. Therefore while from an RM perspective organisations were being called to move away from transaction approach towards the building of relationships, the IMP took as their premise that all organisations engage in relationships and that our job was to understand just how this was done. Furthermore, it was recognised that these relationships involve a complex weave of interactions involving differing personnel from differing departments, where the management of the relationship goes beyond the transaction itself, to where the social bonds between the two organisations become important and, where the links between the parties may, for good or for bad, become institutionalised (Håkansson 1982).

The work of the IMP forms a vital contribution to our understanding of a relationships and networks approach to sustainable marketing. One of the key reasons why this is so is that inherent in this approach is the concept of dynamism, which includes the notion that both organisations are changed in some way through interactions, therefore they both affect and are being affected by the relationship (Hallén et al. 1991). Another central component in this approach is an understanding that both parties are seen as active participants in the relationship and so neither party takes a passive role per se. This is in contrast then to the generally held view on consumer markets, and alludes to a level of power symmetry in the relationship, where depending on the circumstances, either buyer and seller can both initiate relations and exert power within the relationship (Håkansson 1982).

Early criticisms of the Interaction Approach, however, suggested that the work over-emphasised co-operation over competition (Ford 1990; Ford 1998), and that the singular dyad as the unit of analysis did not capture the complex networked environment in which industrial relations were initiated and developed (Easton 1992; Ford 1990; Håkansson and Snehota 1995). The former limitation to the Interaction Approach was particularly addressed by Håkansson and Snehota (1998), who suggest that both managers and researchers need to be accepting of the 'burden' of relationships in order to both understand and manage them more effectively. This foregrounds then

that each organisation has to give something up, in order to achieve the best results; results which themselves emerge through interaction over time. The authors also refer to what they term the 'stickiness' of relationships, which refers to the situation in developing close relationships with key counterparts, where one also becomes connected to a wider network of organisations, in both a direct and indirect way. Therefore, the focal firm becomes subject to third party relations, which they do not control directly.

"What the industrial network approach adds to the interaction approach is the knowledge that the focal relationship a) cannot be managed in isolation from the other relationships a firm has and b) represents a conduit to other relationships through which resources may be accessed" (Easton 1992: 25).

The recognition of the importance of indirect relationships, was a key turning point in the transition from the singular dyadic focus of the Interaction Approach, towards a more networked view of industrial marketing relationships within the work of the IMP (Axelsson and Easton 1992). Each organisation's 'network' therefore is made up of organisations that it relates to both directly and indirectly. Direct relationships include: suppliers; customers; financial institutions; research houses etc (Ford 1998). While indirect relationships include: both vertical (e.g. firm to customer's customer); and horizontal (e.g. firm to competitor through mutual customer) relationships (Easton 1992). This shift in focus is concurrent with a broader movement within marketing/management strategy (c.f. Andersen and Soderlund 1988; c.f. Johanson and Mattsson 1994; Miles and Snow 1986; Mintzberg et al. 1998) which calls into question the heretofore perception that the firm operates within an atomistic external environment, which is wholly economic and competitive in nature (Håkansson and Snehota 1990). The concept of the network is itself heterogeneous, with two overarching conceptualisations prevailing, that is, the network as a set of connected firms, or the network as a set of connected relationships between firms (Anderson et al. 1994). It is this latter conceptualisation in particular that fundamentally alters the notion of both the 'marketplace' as well as the 'external environment' within which a firm operates. Key network characteristics, as identified in the extant literature include: dynamism, emergence over time, and the co-existence of continuity and change within the system (Dubois et al. 2003; Easton 1992; Håkansson and Snehota 1990; Thorelli 1986).

The accumulative work of the IMP is therefore unique in that it has offered insights not only regarding the nature dyadic interaction and networks, but in offering a way to consider the interconnections between these levels of analysis. Central to this is the IMP perspective on the co-existence of stability and change, whereby networks are constantly being constructed by the interactions between organisations (Håkansson and Snehota 1995). Firms therefore are in a position to both create change, and create stability in response to change, both internally and externally generated. This therefore forms a constructivist view on change that allows for actor level agency while recognising the impact of the system itself, where individual action will be subject to other actors in the network, and where changes initiated in part of the network will go onto involve other parts of the system. This constructivist view of network change has important implications for sustainable marketing theory as it allows for the concept that organisations, relationships and networks are changeable by the actions of the parties involved, both internally generated or in response to external triggers. In deed Easton and Araujo (1994) explain that dyadic exchanges contribute to the reformation of the network via the internalisation and the strategic monitoring of the rules involved in the dyadic exchange. This is important when we concede that change is a prerequisite in moving towards sustainable marketing, where even when organisations are already changing, the depleting environment will pose constant and complex challenges that will require leadership, innovation and risk taking to solve. Therefore, any changes emerging from the dynamics of the depleting environment would sensitise the entire network as each dyadic exchange bares effect on the network.

An Integrative framework of sources and contexts of change in sustainable marketing

Traditionally the principles of business success, (e.g. profit maximising, self interest) have been at odds with the environmental sustainability. However, we suggest that taking an interaction and

networks perspective to sustainable marketing can help forge an alignment between these often opposing camps; thus serving to integrate approaches used to understand the health of the natural environment (e.g. living systems theory) and how understanding of how business networks emerge, develop, dissolve and re-emerge over time. To this end, we propose an integrative framework that captures the relationships between the system (including the natural environment), business network and the interorganisational dyad. Moreover, the population of the business network is also an important consideration, where it is proposed that the network be made up, not only of direct market actors, such as suppliers and customers, but also non-direct actors including NGO and 3rd sector organisations, and government agencies.

In this regard we incorporate a recent theoretical frame being brought to bear on understanding business networks, that is, living systems thinking (Easton et al. 1997; Wilkinson and Young 2003), which can be seen as particularly apposite for network research and has long been influential within the IMP in terms of the language used and the axioms embraced. Recently, a number of authors have explicitly incorporated this approach in their work, for example, Wilkinson (2001) introduces the potential role of complexity theory to help explain complex marketing phenomena. Furthermore Easton et al (1997) examine the recognised self-organising behaviour in network evolution using computer simulations based on NK models, developed by Kaufmann (1992, as cited by Easton et al 1997). Wilkinson and Young (2002) develop further the managerial implications of conceptualising networks as DOCAS and suggest that the role of management moves from command and control to that of participation and adaptation.

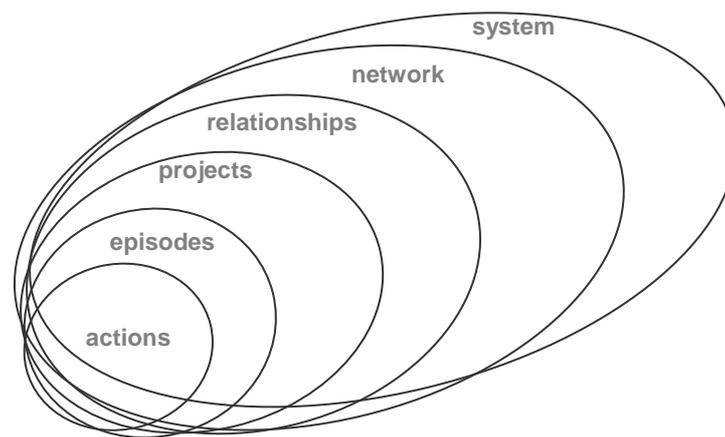


Figure One: An Integrative Framework of sources and contexts of change in

While taking a systems view, we concur with Halinen et al's (1999) suggestion that the key mechanism for network change remains the interorganisational dyad. In our model dyadic relations are seen as a source and context for learning (Ryan 2006; Ryan and O'Malley 2007), as well as playing a formative role as generators, recipients, and transmitters of change in networks (Halinen et al. 1999). The framework builds on that offered by Holmlund (2004), which emphasises the emergent nature of relationships and networks. Holmlund's (2004) model proposes five-layers of aggregation within the inter-organisational relationship, which include, (1) actions, (2) episodes, (3) sequences, (4) relationships, and (5) partner base/network. We add to this however, to acknowledge the overall system which sustains all business networks, and which includes the natural environment itself. Actions refer to the lowest level in this hierarchical system and incorporate individual initiatives by focal organisations. Interrelated actions can then be grouped into episodes, which can be seen as processes made up of actions, an example of which could be a negotiation process. Interrelated episodes can be grouped into a sequence, for example a project, which would be an interconnected, but coherent group of episodes and actions between the parties. The fourth level is the relationship between the two organisations, and is therefore seen as an aggregation of the previous levels. Beyond the relationship itself is the partner base layer, which incorporates the more network based factors, and the impact that existing relationships, with their interconnected actions, episodes and sequences, has on other relationships within the focal organisations' partner base. These then form differing layers within the unit of analysis, which can

be used to delineate differing aspects of processes and outcomes within these layers, and the impact these have on the overall relationship and network levels. We use this framework to delineate the different levels at which change can be generated and transmitted between network actors within the system. According to McLaughlin and Horan (2000) network relationships develop as participants make investments, adaptations, cooperate and interact. Young, Gilbert and McIntyre (1996, p. 142) recommend that “the performance outcomes (of the network) depend upon the individual goals of the exchange partners”. Therefore we propose that the goal of network partners should be environmental sustainability.

Sustainability can therefore be seen as the ideology or mission of network partners and the harmonious operation of the network mechanism can ensure the appropriate application of sustainability. Thus the question is not whether it is worth pursuing sustainability, but rather how it is applied. The network approach offers us a methodology for this. Specifically the network approach teaches us:

- About the nature of the exchange: Mattson (1997) explains that exchange is all interaction that comprise of episodic transactions that extend the relationship in time. In networks the benefits are exchanges via these episodes of interaction (McLoughlin & Horan, 2000).
- Exchanges lead to adaptation which create bonds and mutual knowledge development (Johanson and Mattson, 1987)
- The elements of network relationships are: cooperation (Ford, Hakansson and Johanson, 1986); interaction (Gadde and Snehote, 2000); exchange (McLoughlin & Horan, 2000); and bonds (Wilson & Mummalaneni, 1986).

Part One: Making connections between the business network and the ‘system’

The disconnect that has continued to widen between the natural environment and business systems has been recognised as a key contributing factor to the degree of natural environment resource depletion we are currently experiencing (Capra 2002; Gladwin et al. 1995). A central task for researchers and practitioners therefore is to search for solutions that help to bridge this gap in a way that makes environmental, social and economic sense. Central to the integrative model being presented here is the concept of reconnecting business and living systems. Key to this is the concept of co-evolution, and the recognition that organisations and the networks within which they are embedded are themselves interconnected and interdependent on the living systems that sustains us all. Natural resources are consumed and disposed of throughout the value chain, the implications of which have direct and indirect effect on all network actors, albeit in different ways.

Fundamental to the conceptualisation of the relationship between the system, network, and dyadic relations are the principles of *holism* and *system thinking*. *Holism* implies that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Barrow 1992). *System thinking* implies that we cannot explore or seek to understand a phenomenon like sustainable marketing as an independent process, but as a dynamic, interrelated complex system. A “system” can be described as a group of interacting and interdependent parts linked together by the exchange of energy, matter and information (Constanza et al. 1993). The behaviour of the system as a whole emerges from the manner in which the various parts interact. In adopting systems thinking, what we refer to as “a part” is only a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships (Capra 2002). Relationships become primary, and individual market actors, or networks are unable to exist except as parts of a greater system. The individual market actor is sustained by its relatedness to others, and its internal ability to adapt to continuously evolving circumstances. Individual organisational actions cannot be viewed in isolation from their impact on the whole system.

By their nature, ecosystems are highly complex and unpredictable structures (Miller 1991). According to the law of thermodynamics, which argues that as energy dissipates, system tends to develop towards a reduced state of organisation, and ultimately to chaos and entropy. Living systems, as opposed to most of our contemporary industrial systems, are not closed but open systems. This means that organisms have to maintain a continuous exchange of energy and matter

with their environment to remain alive (Capra, 1996). Ecosystems carry out transformational activities without increasing the overall entropy on earth (Stanley and Weiss 1995).

Within the concept of co-evolution, both entities in an inter-organisational relationship dyad are considered active agents (Mitleton-Kelly 2003), operating within an enacted and shared networked environment, of which they are also co-creators. According to Kauffman and Johnsen (1991: 467) "co-evolution is thought of, at the lowest level, as a coupling of landscapes such that the adaptive moves by one player deform the landscapes of its immediate partners", where the impact of one entity on another will be dependent on the nature of interconnections between them. According to Mitleton-Kelly (2003) the concept of co-evolution places emphasis on the relationship between entities, where it is the interactions between social entities, and therefore the behaviour that co-evolves. Mitleton-Kelly (2003) also offers an important delineation of co-evolution which is central to our understanding of this concept at the level of an inter-organisational relationship, and that is endogenous and exogenous evolution. This concept allows us to explore the concept at differing, but highly interrelated levels, that is intra-organisational and inter-organisational (both endogenous) and between both the organisations, the relationship and the enacted shared environment; with the proviso being that the external environment does not lie external or discreet from the relationship, but is being co-created by it, a concept consistent with the IMP approach (Anderson et al. 1994).

Part two: Understanding the nature of change within and between networks

Ongoing theoretical developments within the IMP, and the interaction and networks approach have contributed greatly to our understanding of network change; be it adaptive, incremental, generative, catastrophic or transformative. The concept of network change is fundamental to the development of an interaction and networks perspective to sustainable marketing. One concomitant area to gain insights into systemic change, or understanding systems in transition is the area of technological change in networks. Indeed, in many respects the challenges presented by the ongoing depletion of the natural environment could be treated similarly to other network level crises, such as a major technological change.

By way of illustration, in the following quotes, the term technology was substituted for 'environment'. Even at this most simplistic level of comparison we can see the similarities in approach as well as the possibilities for further insights to be gained.

"[Environmental] change will come forth through routine as well as through innovative behaviour. Changes in one part or dimension of the network will call for responses in others, producing sequences of changes each working on the other in complicated and unforeseen ways. Small, everyday events can thus produce surprising outcomes, where no single firm can control the process, while large purposeful actions to develop a specific [environmental] solution can prove to be totally futile. The efforts to develop [environmental solutions] can be directed but the outcome can never be fully controlled".(p297) "To benefit from a [environmental] solution, it is often necessary to induce changes in other parts of the network, and occasionally some problems cannot be resolved unless the developments in nearby fields have resolved critical problems" (Möller and Wilson 1995 p298)

We argue therefore that viewing the environmental sustainability, and the understood necessary behaviour changes, could be advanced by deploying the body of knowledge generated to understand technology changes in networks. However, there remain some important particularities to the environmental 'problem' that suggest that it remains unique; i.e. the moral aspect, the complexity and unknowability of the issues.

An important theoretical tool brought to bear to understanding business network change is living systems theory. Insights from this perspective tells us that due to the degree of connectedness between elements in the system, complex behaviour ensues, which means that change in one part of the system will give rise to unpredictable changes throughout the system (Capra 2002; Eisenhardt and Galunic 2000). This is based on the concept of distributed control, non-linearity, or the self-organising principle of complex systems (Capra 2002; Holbrook 2003; Lisa Pike 2003; Mitleton-Kelly 2003). This open system context, which denotes constant dialogue both within the

focal system itself and between the focal system and other nested systems of which it is a part. This suggests that triggers of change can emerge from any element within and between systems. The nature of response to change however will be contingent on the nature of the trigger itself, as well as the history of the system up to that point. The latter here refers to the path dependency characteristic of systems, which suggests the present and future behaviour of the system, is dependent on its history (Progogine and Strengers 1984). Therefore, systems are said to respond to change in different ways, most commonly understood as negative or positive feedback loops. The former promoting the search for stability, while the latter denoting the search for transformative change or new order; both of which, i.e. both stability and change, will be important for the survival of the system in the long-term. Moreover, diversity in the system is considered vital for the sustainability or fitness of the systems, and denotes the development of specialities within elements of the system (Kaufmann 1993), which then openly communicate and interact with each other as the system develops and evolves.

In this context therefore, change can never be wholly successful if treated in some top-down manner, or merely through incentives or sanctions. Moreover, change can be internally generated as well as externally triggered. Many different types of organisations can emerge as members of the network, where incremental and radical innovation emerges as an outcome of stakeholder co-creation. Incremental changes, at the system level, could include the development of environmentally benign alternative technologies, such as the energy saving light bulb. More radical changes, at the systems level, however, could involve the re-imagining and realisation of whole new markets and business models in line with environmental sustainability.

Part three: creating a context for dyadic learning and dialogue

In our framework the principle of learning is essential, focusing as it does on the importance of self-transcendence, which is understood as the ability of the system to 'reach out creatively beyond physical and mental boundaries in the process of learning, development, and evolution (Capra, 1983: 289-290). While knowledge creation is an individual process, its amplification and expansion are social processes that take place between individuals and organisations (Capra, 2002) The concept of learning at the inter-organisational dyadic level has received much attention within the extant literature. Parties both affect and are affected by ongoing interaction, and their learning is evidenced in changes at the intra and inter-organisational levels (Håkansson 1982; Hallén *et al.* 1991). Furthermore, learning at a relationship specific level (RSL) has been highlighted as being particularly apposite in the context of developing effective interaction between parties in the dyad (Pine *et al.* 1995; Selnes and Sallis 2003). This RSL concerns the ability of both parties to adapt to the changing needs of the relationship, undertaking intra-organizational level adaptations in the process (Brennan and Turnbull 1998; Brennan and Turnbull 1999). Another form of interorganisational learning deemed important in interorganisational relationships is the development of resources and competences through interaction (e.g. Barringer and Harrison 2000; e.g. Cohen and Levinthal 1990; Knight 2000; Möller and Wilson 1995). From a network perspective, Easton and Araujo (1994) explain that the interaction occurring in the exchanges that take place between network partners, generate experiential learning in view of their past and present interactions. Moreover Ballantyne (2004) suggests that relational knowledge is based on past experience and is constantly co-created by interacting parties. Therefore, we propose that as the environment changes /becomes depleted the network can rely on the process of relational knowledge to motivate network actors to collectively improve the environmental situation. This kind of learning can aid network actors to create value for all by contributing to the sustainability of the environment

However, it is acknowledged in the literature that engaging in learning relationships with a counterpart leaves the firm open to the loss of proprietary information or knowledge (Larsson *et al.* 1998). Concern over the loss of proprietary knowledge is founded on an objectified notion of knowledge (Allee 1997). Such knowledge is considered finite, in that once it is shared with another it is lost. However, more contemporary theories suggest that sharing knowledge increases the potential pool of resources, and creates the context in which new knowledge can be generated (Allee 1997). Within the interorganisational relationship literature, particularly from a RM perspective, sharing sometimes sensitive information is a key factor in developing trust between

parties (Anderson and Narus 1990; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Mohr and Spekman 1996; Doz and Hamel 1998; Spekman et al. 1998). Trust, in turn, establishes an environment where further possibilities can be realized. The sharing of information and resources, therefore, is not only important for facilitating effective and efficient interaction, but also a necessary condition for the creation of new knowledge; a necessary requirement in our shift towards a sustainable approach to marketing.

We propose therefore that the establishment and development of learning relationships, built on the premise of dialogue, as a central mechanism for network level change, and overall system health. While outside the scope of this paper, we do recognise that the realisation of such relationships is not without its challenges. These challenges can be cultural, historic or economic, where for example rewards from such relationships may not be immediate and sometimes hard won, where for instance, the organisational cultural diversity between stakeholders creates challenges for smooth interaction. Encouraging the generation, development and adoption of sometimes radical solutions to problems posed by environmental degradation will therefore require trust, respect and understanding. This cannot be achieved through arms length transactions or through coercion or corporate opportunism.

Conclusions and call for future research

The paper presents a framework which proposes the systematization of dialogue as a method for generating relationship knowledge that communicates the value of sustainability. The framework benefits from lessons emerging from the IMP perspectives on networks. It suggests a systemic approach which moves away from fragmentation in our marketing discipline, treating the natural environment as if it consisted of separate parts to be exploited by different interest groups (Capra, 1983). This systemic thinking, which is based on the mechanism of dialogue, is crucial for a successful development of a theory on sustainable marketing, which has heretofore taken a firm-centric perspective. It is clear that the nature of the environmental issue requires firms to take a more holistic perspective and to be able to picture their network as involving upstream (suppliers) and downstream (customers) actors as well as other non-market actors such as NGOs, civil society, the government etc. The suggested framework of network change presupposes that learning, an outcome of dialogue and interaction, is embedded in all levels of development, from simple actions to the broad system. Thus, the application of our framework would suggest that the value of sustainability transcends all levels of the development.

Future areas of inquiry that might usefully be undertaken to develop this work would include investigating more closely the change dynamics of upstream and downstream behaviour and the consequences on actors' attitudes, behaviour and cognition. Transition towards sustainable development will require both incremental and transformational change, which necessitates what Argyris (1993) refers to as 'double-loop learning' – learning that requires change in underlying assumptions which in turn lead to change in behaviour. Secondly, building on this, we have little insight into how actors recognise, capture and capitalize on the collective learning embedded in the relationships in the dyad, the business network and the system. Further scholarly attention in these areas can further our appreciation of how an interaction and networks approach to sustainable marketing can assist us in building more sustainable futures.

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