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## GREEN MARKETING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: AN INTEGRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

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**Abstract:** *Marketing communication for green brands and products should not be seen exclusively as a means to attract and impress consumers with the most beautiful and spectacular green messages. All messages communicated to the public must have a solid foundation, which most of the time can be represented by the attributes of the green product or by its benefits for the environment, community and for the current and future generations of consumers. In this regard, marketing communication, as part of the green marketing strategy, faces several challenges. On the one hand, green communication has the role of educating and informing the public about the specific benefits of green products in order to determine the public to adopt a pro-ecological behavior. On the other hand, the communication approaches must respond to the exigencies of the green field, in order to avoid the social and ecological criticisms, as well as the categorizing of the organization's actions as part of the greenwashing phenomenon. Therefore, the purpose of this theoretical paper is to identify the typology of green marketing communication strategies. The paper is based on secondary data sources, namely the literature on green marketing communication, focusing on specific communication strategies. This study reviews and synthesizes 39 relevant articles related to the researched subject, which have been identified in academic databases. In literature have been identified five defining criteria for communication strategies, along with specific strategic alternatives. We note the need to continue the research in this field, in order to develop other strategic alternatives that respond to the specific problems of this market and that offer the opportunity for green brands to position themselves effectively.*

**Keywords:** *green marketing communication; marketing communication strategies; green marketing; green product; green brand.*

**JEL Classification:** *M31; Q57; M10.*

### 1. Introduction

Green products have evolved from a narrow pursuit, focused on convincing a niche market to buy green for the sake of green, into a complex yet vibrant activity in which the functional benefits of green products are recognized and promoted to a broad audience (Dean and Pacheco, 2014). This expansion was based, among other things, on the intensification of communication efforts and on the attempt to make the green message easier to receive by the target audience.

The marketing communication activities carried out by an organization through messages related to ecological concerns, whether they are correct or not, have a significant effect on the green position that a brand wishes to have on the market and, certainly, on the financial results. Therefore, the choice of marketing communication options and media channels, as well as messages with a stronger or less strong green character, brought together in an integrated communication strategy, play a key role in influencing consumers' perception of the green brand.

In this regard, the challenge for companies is to develop communication campaigns suitable for different consumer profiles and for the diversity of green solutions developed. Without effective communication, it will be almost impossible for consumers to be aware of green offers and understand how they integrate with their lifestyles in order to meet their needs (Peattie and Belz, 2010).

## **2. The concept of green marketing communication**

As important as in the case of conventional marketing (Peattie and Belz, 2010), communication is one of the most sensitive topics when discussing the organization's attitude towards environmental protection, especially due to the impact it can have on a wide range of audiences.

Communication is considered one of the most controversial areas of green marketing, often being criticized for presenting green products as simplified solutions to complex environmental problems (Peattie and Charter, 2003). Also, marketing communication was often the focus of criticism, primarily because of its role in the promotion of unnecessary consumption and creation of a consumer society, but also because of the resources spent to send messages to consumers (Ham, 2011). Therefore, green communication is considered by Juwaheer, et al. (2012) a major area of weakness for green marketing specialists.

Green marketing communication "strongly stresses a dialogue with stakeholders, especially customers, aimed at informing and educating those customers, and seeking to establish the social and environmental credentials of the company and its products" (Peattie & Charter, 2003, p. 748). Also, green communication aims to create the company an image of an entity that undertakes green business and to provide consumers with ecological information about the product (Boztepe, 2012).

As we can see in the opinions presented above, the communication made for green products pursues a double objective: educating the various interest groups in an ecological way and creating an image of environmental responsibility.

In addition to the strong promotional character of communication in green marketing (Danciu, 2006), several ethical and legal directions need to be considered, including understanding and communicating the absolute and relative impact of green products on the environment (Wong, et al., 1996).

We must also not forget that the success of green communication depends on both the choice of an appropriate positioning for the brand and a rigorous analysis of the target audience to which the message will be directed, in order to adapt to its characteristics (Vicente, et al., 1999).

## **3. Particularities of green marketing communication**

In the case of communication for green products and brands, we can talk about a series of particularities, some of the most important being the following:

### *a. The strong informative character of green marketing communication*

Marketing communication in the field of green products aims to inform rather than impress (Peattie and Crane, 2005). Therefore, the primary purpose of communication is to transmit information about the company's commitments, efforts and results in the field of environmental protection and quality of life (Mera, 2003; Danciu, 2006). In terms of informing customers, these appreciate the efforts of retailers to provide them with the information they need to make informed purchasing decisions, as well as to use and dispose of products responsibly (Ottman, 2011). In addition, it is necessary to guarantee the performance of green products, given that a significant part of consumers has doubts about the performance of green products.

b. *The educational character of green marketing communication*

The first task of promoting green products is to educate consumers about the environmental issues to which the product contributes to resolve. In this situation, the consumer must be offered a solution or an idea of how he can, as an individual, contribute to the conservation of the environment, but also taking into account his personal interests (Ham, 2011). For companies that strive to educate the public, educational messages are special opportunities to stimulate purchasing power, improve corporate image and increase credibility (Ottman, 2011).

c. *Communication tools are gaining a different importance*

Carlson, et. al (1996) argued that the marketing of green products would seem to be a prime candidate for integrated marketing communication, due to the abundance of plausible tools to be used reasonably on the issue of environmental protection. However, their importance is different due, on the one hand, to the plurality of the target audience that the message can reach and, on the other hand, the different credibility given by these customer segments to the green messages transmitted through each communication tool (Mera, 2003).

Advertising through the media loses its importance because it is an environment that conveys little credibility to the recipient and, in many cases, does not provide the opportunity to communicate the specific explanations of a message regarding green products (Mera, 2003). Sales promotion can be an effective way of communication, as long as specific techniques are carefully selected, to ensure that there is synergy with the promoted product (Peattie and Charter, 2003).

Mera (2003) considers that public relations, as a whole, can be considered as the central tool of marketing communication in the field of green products. Also, a well-trained sales force can help educate consumers (Ginsberg and Bloom, 2004) and raise awareness of key issues such as energy conservation and efficiency, recycling, environmentally friendly product purchasing.

Direct marketing is configured as a less aggressive environmental alternative, although, evidently, it should take into account the resources consumed, the cost of packaging and individual delivery (Molina and Roqueñi, 2003).

d. *The importance of the credibility of the communication approach*

Credibility is the foundation of effective green marketing (Tiwari, et al., 2011), which is determined by the extent to which the public perceives that the statements made by the advertiser are true and credible. Therefore, communication is unlikely to be an effective strategic tool if it is not supported by other activities of the company. Thus, the communication of a real attribute of a product requires a change of the product or the production process (Polonsky & Rosenberger III, 2001). On the other hand, the beautification of reality is useless, because the customers of green products are among the most demanding and determined consumers. Once deceived, any subsequent message will no longer be trusted, as will the products and the company itself (Danciu, 2006). Therefore, green marketing can stimulate green consumption, as long as producers are truthfully environmentally responsible without exaggerating the properties of green products (Aceleanu, 2016). This goal can be achieved by promoting brand identity and increasing credibility, building a respectful and truthful relationship with the customers, always informing them regarding the products, and implementing a policy of transparency with each of the stakeholders (Caprita, 2015).

#### **4. Marketing communication strategies for green brands**

Efforts to position a green brand and develop environmentally efficient products may prove insufficient without their proper presentation to all stakeholders. Given that only in a strategic context marketing communication can acquire the necessary rigor and ability to ensure the

achievement of set objectives (Popescu, 2002), formulating communication strategies that respond to current environmental issues becomes imperative.

Table 1 presents the typology of communication strategies in the field of green brands, starting from a series of definition criteria.

**Table 1.** Typology of marketing communication strategies for green brands

Definition criteria	Strategic alternatives
A. Depending on the coordinates of the desired global image and the objectives to be achieved [1][2][3][4][5]	Commercial communication strategy Corporate communication strategy Combined communication strategy
B. Depending on the role that the organization assigns to the communication activity [6][7][8]	Defensive communication strategy Offensive communication strategy Offensive comparative communication strategy
C. By referring to the green product life-cycle [9]	Communication focused on the production phase Communication focused on the consumption/use phase Communication focused on the waste disposal phase Communication without reference to the life-cycle of the product
D. Depending on the desired change in consumer behavior [10][11][12]	Consumer education strategy Empowered consumer strategy Consumer persuasion strategy
E. Depending on the presentation of the message regarding the green attribute in a communication campaign [9][6] [13][14][15]	Direct communication strategy (impersonal) Communication strategy such as "the baby is sick" Communication strategy such as "the baby is well"

Source: [1] adapted from Popescu, 2002; [2] Iyer și Banerjee, 1993; [3] Banerjee, et. al., 1995, cited in Mera, 2003; [4] Bigne, et al., 2000; [5] Benoit-Moreau & Parguel, 2011; [6] Vicente, et al., 1999; [7] López, 1995; [8] Hopfenbeck, 1993, cited in Vicente, et al., 1999; [9] Mera, 2003; [10] Ottman, 2011; [11] Danciu, 2006; [12] Danciu, 2012; [13] Ellen, et al., 1991; [14] Obermiller, 1995; [15] Cox, 2008.

A. *Depending on the coordinates of the desired global image and the objectives to be achieved* (adapted from Popescu, 2002), companies operating on the market of green products can choose one of the following strategic alternatives (Iyer and Banerjee, 1993; Banerjee, et. Al., 1995, cited in Mera, 2003; Bigne, et al., 2000; Benoit-Moreau & Parguel, 2011):

- Commercial communication strategy - all communication efforts are centered around green products or the green brand, which have the ability to support the overall image of the organization. Communication approaches include information on product specifications, in particular those regarding the green attributes of the product or packaging. Thus, the messages may focus on the chemical content of the product, regardless of whether it can be recycled or not, on its emissions or its impact on certain environmental factors, on the type of raw material used and other attributes that affect the environment (Sarkar, 2012). Furthermore, the green brand contributes to the enhancement of products and, in this way, plays a special role in increasing the preference for green products (Danciu, 2006).

- Corporate communication strategy - this strategic alternative involves defining a global image that coincides with the corporate image. In this situation, the messages sent do not refer to the product or brand, but to the company as a whole, whose global image is associated with a cause or activity that has the broad support of the public (Segev, et al., 2016). This alternative involves transmitting information about the company's commitment and effort to improve its environmental performance. Also, messages that reveal the

environmental policy or even the company's philosophy, communicated through the specific mission and values, are part of this strategy.

Among the many reasons that determine the communication of environmental information is the fact that such behavior demonstrates the social responsibility of the company, contributes to creating a corporate culture and strengthening the green image at a corporate level (Pellé-Culpin, 1998, cited in Mikol, 2003). Therefore, companies invest in protecting the environment not only to avoid a series of sanctions or problems due to pressure from certain groups, but also because this attitude allows them to improve their corporate image (Chen, 2008). In the same direction, Ko, et al. (2013) consider that green marketing can be one of the effective tools for strengthening the corporate image, because it portrays an image of a company that is receptive to the needs of society.

Creating an image of a corporation that respects the environment is very valuable not only for potential consumers, but also for other groups interested in the company's activity (such as employees, public bodies, potential investors, financial institutions and insurers) (Mera, 2003). Thus, customers usually want to partner with organizations that have declared their environmental responsibility, which leads companies to launch communication campaigns, widely publishing sustainability reports and cooperating with external sources to transparently communicate their efforts on an internal plan (Ottman, 2011).

- Combined communication strategy - this strategic alternative involves building the global image, acting simultaneously on a commercial and corporate level. To the extent that all brands and products in the portfolio are environmentally friendly, then shaping a corporate image with environmental implications supports the position of brands in the market and gives confidence in the green benefits guaranteed by the products. Conversely, green brands and products express a natural extension of green philosophy, assumed at an organizational level.

In this regard, some experts (D'Souza, et al., 2006) consider that consumers' perception of corporate strategies related to environmental issues is expected to contribute to the formation of the general perception on green products. Thus, the corporate social responsibility reputation, which responds to environmental concerns, can influence consumers' intention to buy green products. The results are confirmed by Chang and Fong (2010), who found that corporate image is an important criterion for assessing the quality of an unknown product.

B. *Depending on the role that the organization assigns to the communication activity*, the strategic alternatives may be the following (Hopfenbeck, 1993, cited in Vicente, et al., 1999; López, 1995; Vicente, et al., 1999):

- Defensive communication strategy - an alternative indicated when the organization tries to restore its damaged image as a result of an environmental incident or to build an image associated with social responsibility (in sectors of activity where production processes or products have a negative impact on the environment and there is no short-term technical possibility to avoid such effects). This is a strategic alternative specific to sectors of activity with a high-risk for the environment, the main objective being to create a climate of trust and improve relations with different categories of public.

- Offensive communication strategy - a suitable strategic alternative for companies trying to make environmental concerns an opportunity to create a long-term potential in order to ensure market success, but without directly opposing competitors. This strategy is specific to small or medium-sized companies that are trying to provide an appropriate response to those segments of consumers who want green products. It is also recommended for companies that are market leaders in the field of environmental protection, but not in terms of market share. Continuous improvement of the corporate and green image normally allows the company to maintain or improve its competitive position in the market without directly attacking competition, targeting unoccupied niche markets.

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▪ Offensive comparative communication strategy - is recommended to leading companies both in terms of environmental involvement and market share. The comparative communication highlights the superiority of the company's products in relation to the offer of the competing companies. The favorable position of the company towards its competitors will allow it to exploit the advantages offered by the choice of a green brand positioning.

C. *By referring to the green product life-cycle*, the following strategic alternatives are noted (Mera, 2003; Lewandowska et al., 2017):

▪ Communication focused on the production phase - this strategic alternative involves information on a green aspect/attribute/ benefit that is added to the product during the production process (for example, non-OMG).

▪ Communication focused on the consumption/use phase - is based on the communication of a green benefit that the consumer benefits during the consumption/use of the product.

▪ Communication focused on the waste disposal phase - communication focuses on informing consumers about the possibilities of recycling, reuse, composting or disposal of waste generated by the consumption of the product.

▪ Communication without reference to the life-cycle of the product - involves highlighting the general green aspects of the company, which have no direct connection with the green quality of any stage of the life cycle of the product.

Lewandowska et al. (2017) considers that life cycle assessment for a green product is a good foundation for marketing campaigns.

D. *Depending on the desired change in consumer behavior*, communication strategies can be (Danciu, 2006, 2012; Ottman, 2011):

▪ Consumer education strategy - involves the company to make educational efforts in terms of environmental issues and the impact of individual behavior on the quality of the environment. Consumer education can be achieved through marketing messages that connect the attributes of green products with desired consumer value (Tiwari, et al., 2011). Educating consumers since early childhood is a good way to make them aware of the importance of product features and how they affect their health. Providing information from an early age determines consumers' diet and behavior towards the present and future environment (Popa and Dabija, 2019). Organizing competitions and visits of preschool and school children can be very useful in this regard (Atănaşoiaie, 2011).

▪ Empowered consumer strategy - involves demonstrating to consumers that certain ecologically healthy products can help them protect their lives and preserve the environment for future generations. Thus, this communication strategy supports the sustainable nature of green marketing (Danciu, 2012). Therefore, the consumer can make a difference, in this case, in terms of environmental protection, by purchasing and using that product. Thus, if consumers do not feel that they can make a difference by using a greener product, then they are likely not to make the purchase (Ottman, 2011).

▪ Consumer persuasion strategy - can be achieved in at least two directions. The first part of the communication strategy involves reassuring the performance of green products, in order to convince consumers that these products are good or even better than those with which society is familiar. This lack of confidence in new, environmentally friendly solutions can be a potential barrier to the purchasing process. The second strategic direction appeals to the personal interest of consumers by communicating the benefits of green products to both current and potential consumers. Consumers of green products are easier to convince and decide faster when they can make the connection between the environment and personal well-being. Those who buy such products must be rewarded for their altruism, showing them how environmentally healthy products help them protect their health, save money or keep their homes and communities safe and healthy (Danciu, 2006, 2012).

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E. *Depending on the presentation of the message regarding the green attribute in a communication campaign*, we distinguish three strategic alternatives (Chamorro, 2003, Vicente, et al., 1999; Ellen, et al., 1991; Obermiller, 1995; Cox, 2008):

- Direct communication strategy (impersonal) - the advertiser is limited to indicating the green attribute of the product or company, so that each receiver interprets the green value of that attribute according to his knowledge and perceptions;
- Communication strategy such as "the baby is sick" - is the most common communication strategy in connection with social issues, such as environmental protection. It is a persuasion strategy that emphasizes the seriousness and severity of the environmental issue to which the message refers. This approach can increase attention and memorability on that environmental issue. The "the baby is sick" strategy works when the problem under consideration is not very serious or worrisome, while a boomerang effect can be produced if it is used when the level of concern is high.
- Communication strategy such as "the baby is well" - is a strategic alternative to the previous one, because while messages like "the baby is sick" act by increasing the level of concern for the environmental problem, messages like "the baby is well" lead to increasing the level of confidence that someone can do something to solve the problem. In the case of this alternative, the advertiser positively points out that the environmental problem to which it refers can be solved by consumer action. This approach is considered to be more compatible with communication in the field of green products, as the association between individual empowerment and the purchase of the green product is easy to achieve.

Communication strategies have the role of supporting the social, ecological and financial performance of the company (Elkington, 1997, cited in Royne, et al., 2016), also representing an important element in building a green position for a brand (Carlson, et al., 1996). Also, the development of effective communication strategies can stimulate and accelerate the process of behavior change, allowing consumers to move their concerns and attitudes more quickly towards making purchasing decisions oriented towards green products (Vicente, et al., 1999).

## 5. Conclusions

The variety of marketing communication options and media channels, but also their particularities in the context of green marketing, determines the complexity of the process of developing a communication strategy for a green product, brand or organization.

In literature, the following criteria were identified, based on which a series of strategic alternatives were grouped, namely: the coordinates of the desired global image and the objectives to be achieved, the role that the organization assigns to the communication activity, the specific stage of the green product life-cycle, the desired change in consumer behavior, and the way of presenting the message regarding the green attribute of the product. We note that the strategic alternatives presented emphasize the need to inform, involve, educate and convince the consumer about the arguments for choosing green products or the consequences of reduced orientation towards green consumption. Therefore, creative communication approaches, with a strong commercial character, have less importance for this product category.

The study and development of strategic alternatives for green communication is another necessary and essential step because they are marked by the current dimensions of the green product market in many national markets. Communication approaches have a central role in attracting consumers to green products and brands, therefore the elaboration of effective communication strategies contributes to market development.

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