

The Marketing Challenge of Anti-Consumerism

Introduction to Consumerism and Anti-Consumerism

In virtually every organization, the marketing team is expected to grow sales and profits over time. However, if you think about it, is this really possible indefinitely? Can every company continue to grow and expand their business year in and year out?

One way that companies have tried to ensure that sales will never plateau is by “*artificially*” driving consumer needs and communicating to customers that they “*need more*”. That is, they need a new smart phone every two years, they need to update and renovate their houses regularly, they need to be part of the latest fashion trend, or have the latest technology breakthrough product.

As you know from your marketing studies, marketing is about identifying consumer needs and meeting them more effectively than your competition. Marketing should be a win/win relationship between the firm and its customers.

However, when companies look beyond customer needs and try to manipulate the consumers’ thinking into believing that they “*need more*” – this is often referred to as “*consumerism*” and/or “*driving excessive and unnecessary consumption*”.

It is more than evident that we live in a world that cannot sustain current levels of consumption, given Earth’s limited resources. Therefore, over the last couple of decades (from around 2000 in particular) there has been a trend towards “*anti-consumption*” or “*anti-consumerism*”.

What is Anti-Consumerism?

Anti-consumerism is a behavior and lifestyle choice, underpinned by strong attitudes, for people who are against excessive and mindless consumption. It is the deliberate and intentional lifestyle of rejecting the drive to “*need more*”.

These consumers are conscious of minimizing their consumption, less influenced by brands and their marketing messages, less concerned with social comparison, and less concerned with acquisition and having “*lots of stuff*”.

How It Differs from Pro-Social Behavior

An anti-consumer is different to somebody who is socially and environmentally aware. There are many consumers, most likely people you know, who will be selective about their purchases and consumptions based upon the product’s environmental and social impact.

While this behavior may fall under the broad umbrella of anti-consumerism, it is not behavior that “*rejects*” consumption for its own sake – but is more focused upon sustainable and environmentally-friendly consumption.

Profiling an Anti-Consumer

Some of the lifestyle behaviors and purchase choices that an anti-consumer may exhibit may include:

- buying products that they are aware will last them a long time, rather than cheaper products that they need to replace regularly
- fixing old products that need repair, rather than throwing them out and buying something new
- keeping and wearing the same wardrobe of clothes for many years, regardless of changing fashion trends
- rejecting novelty or low value products that have no benefit to their lives
- adopting minimalist lifestyles
- avoiding unnecessary consumer debt
- being critical of conspicuous consumption
- do not equate their self-esteem or social status with products that they own
- a focus on reusing, repurposing, or gifting products they no longer need
- avoiding products that are overly packaged or wasteful
- avoiding products that are difficult to dispose of or cause environmental problems at disposal
- decreasing their level of product consumption overall
- deliberately reducing or avoiding consumption wherever possible

It is important to remember that this is a deliberate and intentional lifestyle choice based upon their negative attitudes towards consumption, especially excessive consumption. While it is partly driven by social and environmental factors as discussed, it is a broader attitude where they reject society's (and marketers') relentless drive for "needing more".

Student Discussion Questions

1. Review the list of behaviors above for anti-consumers. Are there any of these behavioral product choices that you (or your friends or family) engage in? If so, what is your (or their) motivation for adopting this behavior?
2. Based on your response to Q1 above, do you think that anti-consumerism will be a growing trend that will become more concerning for marketers in the future? Or do you think that this lifestyle choice will be limited to a small segment of the market and marketers can choose to ignore this potential threat?
3. Given that a key outcome of anti-consumerism is the reduction of consumption, do you think that many companies will embrace this in their values and strategy, or do you think that most companies will continue to be primarily focused on sales and profit growth?
4. As you may know from your own experience, the ownership of certain products and/or brands will give people self-esteem and social standing. For example, owning a prestigious car is one way of communicating your success in life. This means that the consumer buys a car for both functional and psychological value. But being an anti-consumer – and not owning a car at all – potentially communicates a lack of success in life??? Therefore, do you think that excessive consumption is a critical factor in today's society and one that will continue to dominate people's lives and purchase decisions?
5. Given the segment profile of the anti-consumer above, is it possible for a firm/brand to market to this segment and meet their needs? Note: while these consumers are actively seeking to reduce consumption, they cannot completely avoid it in all cases. Therefore, they remain a valid target consumer for some businesses – but is it possible to market to them, or should we simply ignore them?