



Creating firm, customer, and societal value: Toward a theory of positive marketing[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This article makes three conceptual advances toward a theory of positive marketing. First, the article distinguishes *what* constitutes positive marketing in contrast to other pro-social marketing concepts: cause, green, and social marketing. Positive marketing is defined as any marketing activity that creates value for the firm, its customers, and society. Second, the article elaborates on *how* positive marketing works using contemporary examples and practice theory. Positive marketing is shown to have two dominant forms from a practice theory perspective: material-meaning innovations and practice innovations. Third, the article explains *why* positive marketing occurs. Augmenting the multilevel pressure theory of corporate social innovation, two additional antecedents of positive marketing are theorized: activist executives and networked customers. The concluding discussion identifies strategies for organizational success, limitations of positive marketing, and avenues for future research.

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1. Introduction

Positive marketing is any marketing activity that creates value for the firm, its customers, and society at large. In other words, positive marketing is marketing in its ideal form (Lerman and Shefrin, 2015–in this issue). To promote positive marketing in research and practice, the Center for Positive Marketing sponsors an annual conference on positive marketing, a quarterly index of consumer well-being, awards for positive marketing practitioners, and special sections of academic journals. The common goal of these diverse initiatives is to gradually elevate the marketing profession to a higher standard of service to society. Without such efforts, the marketing profession is likely to maintain its negative reputation (Stoeckl and Luedicke, 2015–in this issue), which is amply evidenced in anti-marketing memes such as ‘marketing manipulates people,’ ‘advertising creates false needs,’ and even ‘marketing is evil.’

While a special section of an academic journal cannot transform the marketing profession, a special section can stimulate a theoretical conversation. A preliminary step toward starting such a theoretical conversation is delineating the *what*, *how*, and *why* of the phenomenon (Whetten, 1989). Accordingly, this article (1) distinguishes *what* constitutes positive marketing in contrast to other pro-social marketing concepts, (2) elaborates on *how* positive marketing works

using contemporary examples and practice theory, and (3) explains *why* positive marketing occurs, extending the multilevel pressure theory of corporate social innovation. The concluding discussion identifies strategies for organizational success, limitations of positive marketing, and avenues for future research.

2. What positive marketing is

This section addresses the question: what is positive marketing and in what ways is it different from other pro-social marketing concepts? A marketing innovation is positive when it creates value for (1) the firm, (2) its customers, and (3) society (see Fig. 1). Amazon's *Frustration-Free Packaging* is a contemporary example of a positive marketing innovation. Many consumer-packaged goods from toys to toiletries are packaged in awkwardly-shaped, heat-sealed, plastic shells. These shells pose at least three problems. They must be further packaged in rectangular cardboard boxes for mailing, they are hard for customers to open, and they are not recyclable. To solve these problems, Amazon works with its suppliers to develop minimalist cardboard packaging that doubles as a shipping container. Such packaging reduces costs (firm value), unpacks easily (customer value), and recycles efficiently (societal value).

Business research is already rife with pro-social concepts. Therefore, this special section of the *Journal of Business Research* must not only define positive marketing but also distinguish it from other concepts with which it is likely to be confused, especially cause marketing, green marketing, and social marketing.

Cause marketing forges a link between consumer purchases and corporate philanthropy (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). For example, Yoplait's “Save Lids to Save Lives” campaign is a partnership with

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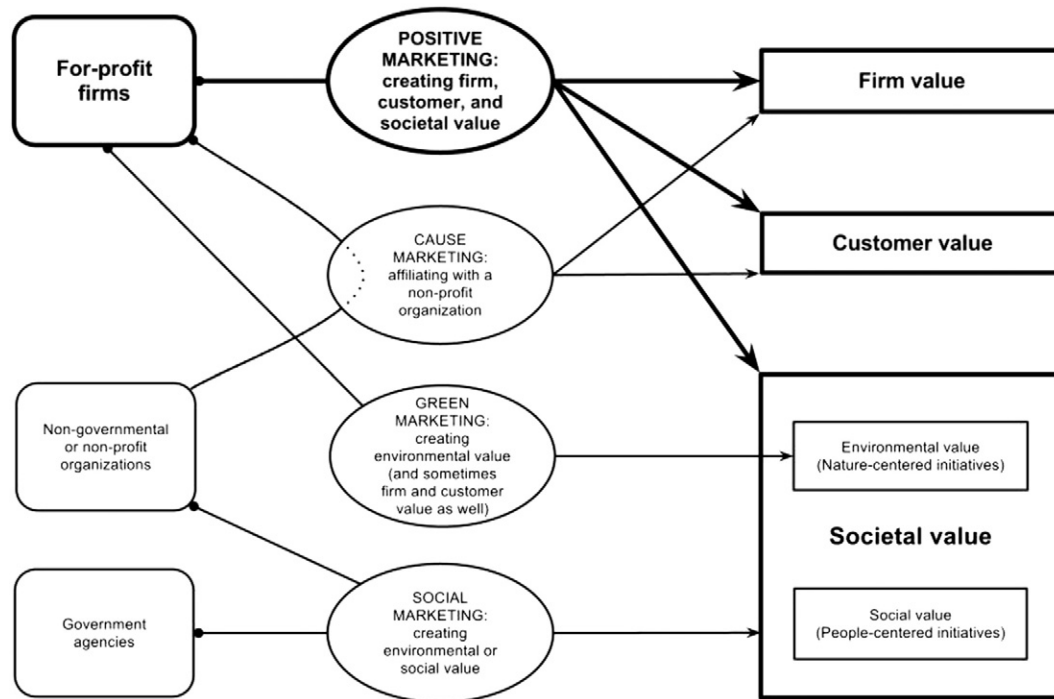


Fig. 1. Distinguishing positive marketing from cause, green, and social marketing.

Susan G. Komen for the Cure, a non-profit breast cancer organization. For every pink lid that consumers turn in, YoPlait donates 10 cents to the organization. Critics characterize cause marketing and corporate philanthropy as post-hoc compensation for environmental and human exploitation (e.g., Einstein, 2012). In contrast to cause marketing, positive marketing encourages managers to deliver societal value via core services, not peripheral donations (see also Porter & Kramer, 2006). In other words, positive marketing calls for a ‘give forward’ rather than ‘give back’ approach to corporate responsibility – building societal value into marketplace offerings from the outset.

To distinguish the concept of positive marketing from that of green marketing, it is necessary to draw a distinction between two types of societal value: environmental value and social value. Environmental value refers to nature-centered initiatives such as reducing electricity use and recycling industrial waste. Social value refers to people-centered initiatives such as improving labor conditions and employing stigmatized populations such as people with disabilities.

Green marketing is reconsidering every step of the marketing process to create environmental value (McDaniel & Rylander, 1993). For example, Unilever has initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and source palm oil sustainably for soap products (Unilever, 2013). The concepts of green marketing and positive marketing have an area of overlap. Green marketing activities are also ‘positive’ when they create not only environmental value, but also firm and customer value. Similarly, positive marketing activities are also ‘green’ when their societal component is an environmental innovation.

Social marketing is the use of marketing tools for the common good. Government agencies and non-government organizations often employ social marketing to promote public health and safety messages, for example, anti-drug, safe-sex, and anti-smoking messages (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). Social marketing and positive marketing are partly similar in that both concepts seek to create societal value. However, social marketing is a not-for-profit practice in the public sector while positive marketing is a for-profit practice in the private sector.

In sum, what distinguishes positive marketing from other pro-social marketing concepts can be summarized as follows: While cause marketing links customer purchases to corporate donations, positive marketing

builds societal value into the core service. Whereas green marketing entails environmental innovations that may or may not also yield firm and customer value, positive marketing denotes environmental and social innovations that yield firm and customer value as well. Finally, while social marketing is focused on a public interest, positive marketing unites a public interest with a profit motive.

As a field of research, positive marketing is nestled between macro-marketing research and transformative consumer research. At one end, macromarketing research tackles *macro-level* problems at the intersection of market systems and social systems (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Shultz, 2015–in this issue). At the other end, transformative consumer research tackles social problems at the *micro-level* of consumption (Mick, 2008). Nestled between macro- and micro-levels, positive marketing research focuses on the *meso-level* activities of pro-social firms and brands.

3. How positive marketing works

This section addresses the question: how does positive marketing create firm, customer, and societal value? Beneficiaries determine the value of services in unique, experiential, and contextual ways (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), making value creation difficult to theorize. Nonetheless, a number of recent studies have succeeded at identifying patterns of value creation (e.g., Allen, 2002; Arsel & Bean, 2013; Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). The majority of these studies use practice theory as their conceptual framework. Thus, this section explores how practice theory might be useful for identifying patterns of positive marketing. To animate the conceptual discussion, diverse examples of positive marketing are drawn from lifestyle blogs such as ApartmentTherapy.com and TreeHugger.com, and corporate websites such as those of Patagonia and PepsiCo (see Table 1).

In brief, practice theory conceptualizes everyday life as a bundle of practices such as bathing, cooking, and driving (Reckwitz, 2002). In turn, practices are conceptualized as human assemblages of (1) *materials* or things, (2) *meanings* or schemas, and (3) *competencies* or doings (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012). For example, bathing is composed of materials such as water, soap, bathtub, and towel, meanings such as

Table 1
Sample efforts toward positive marketing across various industries.

Brand	Positive marketing innovation	Industry (SIC code)	Innovation category	Possible firm value	Possible customer value	Possible societal value
Patagonia	Numerous environmental innovations across the value chain	Apparel (5600)	Material-meaning and practice innovations	Exceptional support from customers, employees, and even activists	One-of-a-kind environmentalist brand community	Setting radical and unrelenting standards for what businesses can do
United Colors of Benetton	United Colors campaign featuring multi-ethnic models	Apparel (5600)	Material-meaning innovation	Pro-social brand image	Social inclusion of minority customers	Promotion of diversity, equality, and multiculturalism
ZipCar	Car access service	Auto rental (7510)	Practice innovation	Blue ocean (new market space)	Reduction in costs in contrast to owning or renting a car	Reduction in car production per capita
Aquafina (PepsiCo)	Thinner plastic bottles called Eco-Fina	Bottled drinks (2086)	Material-meaning innovation	Pro-social brand image	Individual contribution to waste reduction	Reduction in plastic waste
FLOR (Interface)	Modular carpeting service	Carpets and rugs (2273)	Practice innovation	Blue ocean (new market space)	Carpeting that is easier to customize, install, and clean	Recycling of carpet waste and reduction in natural resource use
Palette by Nature	Hair color products made from natural ingredients	Cosmetics (2844)	Material-meaning innovation	Product differentiation	Prevention of skin ailments	Reduction in environmental toxins
Redken Nature's Rescue (L'Oreal)	Hair care products made from natural ingredients	Cosmetics (2844)	Material-meaning innovation	Product differentiation	Prevention of skin ailments	Reduction in environmental toxins
Energy Smart (General Electric)	Energy efficient LED light bulbs	Electric lighting (3640)	Material-meaning innovation	Product differentiation	Reduction in energy costs	Reduction in energy use
MaxBack	Secondary market for used and damaged electronics	Electronic equipment (3600)	Practice innovation	Blue ocean (new market space)	Reduction of net costs	Reduction in electronic product waste
Soccket (Unchartered Play)	Soccer ball as portable power generator in poor villages	Electronic equipment (3600)	Practice innovation	Blue ocean (new market space)	Play-promoting source of electric power	Provision of energy to underserved populations
Volt (General Motors)	Hybrid gas-electric vehicles	Motor vehicles (3711)	Practice innovation	Blue ocean (new market space)	Identity value and reduction in fuel costs	Use of cleaner energy; reduction in net energy use per mile
Broom (Emeco)	Stackable chairs made of post-industrial waste	Office furniture (2520)	Material-meaning innovation	Product differentiation	Individual contribution to waste reduction	Repurposing of industrial waste
Staples	100% recycled paper	Office supplies (5112)	Material-meaning innovation	Product differentiation	Contribution to waste reduction	Reduction in paper waste
Toto	Dual-nozzle low-volume flushing system	Plumbing (3430)	Material-meaning innovation	Product differentiation	Reduction in water costs and enhanced flushing power	Reduction in water usage
Dove (Unilever)	Campaign celebrating age and body-type diversity	Soap (2840)	Material-meaning innovation	Pro-social brand image	Affirmative representation of plus-sized consumers	Expansion of notions of beauty

dirty versus clean, and competencies such as soaking and scrubbing (Shove, 2004).

From a practice-theoretic view, marketers can partially or wholly transform consumption practices by introducing new materials, new meanings, new competencies, or any combination thereof (Shove et al., 2012). For example, the historical shift in personal hygiene from 'taking a bath' to 'taking a shower' entailed some changes in materials (e.g., bathtub to shower), meanings (e.g., leisure to convenience), and competencies (e.g., soaking to lathering) (Shove, 2004). An exploration of positive marketing examples suggests two dominant patterns of innovation: *material-meaning innovation* and *practice innovation*. Table 1 explicates the firm, customer, and societal benefits of each example.

3.1. Material-meaning innovation

By far, the most visible pattern of positive marketing is *material-meaning innovation* – a reconfiguration of a product or service with (1) fewer materials or less material, (2) more environment-friendly materials, or (3) more humanitarian materials, each of which also lends the practice new pro-social meanings. A simple example of a material-meaning innovation is the Eco-Fina bottle. Aquafina's thin plastic bottle uses 50% less plastic than most other brands. This incremental innovation cuts production costs (firm value), appeases light green consumers (customer value), and reduces plastic waste (societal value).

Environment-friendly materials include renewable, natural, organic, recycled, refurbished, repurposed, and biodegradable materials. Different types of green materials have different environmental functions. More renewable materials are preferred over less renewable materials to slow the depletion of natural resources and ensure the sustainability of industries dependent on those resources. Natural and organic materials are preferred over non-organic and synthetic materials to protect laborers and customers from the toxicity of certain synthetics. Recycling, refurbishing, and repurposing materials give fresh lives to previously used materials. By contrast, the use of biodegradable or compostable materials makes the disposition of products less harmful to the environment. Environment-friendly materials can give products meanings such as "caring," "progressive," "clean," and "pure" (Kozinets, 2008; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Thompson, 2004).

Humanitarian materials include product ingredients that are more ethically sourced (e.g., fair-trade cocoa and coffee). Humanitarian materials also include brand images that are more politically progressive or socially inclusive than other concurrent brand images. For example, the United Colors of Benetton brand is known for its provocative images at the cutting edge of identity politics. Classic Benetton advertisements included multi-ethnic models to celebrate racial diversity. More recent advertisements include images of almost identical hearts labeled "black," "white," and "yellow" and images of world leaders locking lips (e.g., American President Barack Obama kissing Chinese President Hu Jintao) (PhotoGuides, 2013). Each of these images tacitly champions a political ideology (e.g., multiculturalism).

Material-meaning innovations do not require new customer competencies. For example, natural hair care and hair coloring brands such as Nature's Rescue by Redken and Palette by Nature replace synthetic ingredients with natural ones but do not require new customer competencies. Customers acquire, use, and dispose of natural hair products just as they do synthetic hair products. Similarly, Toto's dual-nozzle toilets, which use less water than competing products, appear and function like other toilets, requiring no new customer competencies. Nonetheless, even without a change in what customers do, a material-meaning innovation can create firm, customer, and societal value. For example, replacing synthetic make-up ingredients with natural ones can differentiate a brand in a competitive category (firm value), prevent skin ailments (customer value), and keep toxins from entering ecosystems (societal value) (Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, 2012).

3.2. Practice innovation

The other recurring pattern of positive marketing is a *practice innovation* — an original assemblage of existing and new materials, meanings, and competencies. Unlike material-meaning innovations, practice innovations entail not only new materials and meanings, but also new competencies or doings. Consider the case of Interface's FLOR (2012) carpet tiles. American customers have historically had two choices for carpeting their homes: wall-to-wall carpeting and area rugs. Furthermore, the carpeting industry has historically had an especially negative impact on the environment because of high petroleum usage, low recycling rates, and toxic by-products. Following its success with carpet tiles in the commercial market, Interface launched a residential line of carpet tiles, delineating a blue ocean — a new market space without competitors (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005).

FLOR carpet tiles are approximately 20 by 20 inch carpet squares. The squares can be bound to one another using adhesive pads that are approximately 2 by 2 inches. The adhesive pads bind to the carpet squares only, not to the floor. FLOR benefits customers in a number of ways. Customers can easily assemble a carpet of any shape and size, even for narrow, square, and L-shaped rooms, which are hard to outfit with area rugs. The modular system also allows customers to mix colors and patterns to match their décor. Carpet stains are easier to remove; one can take the stained carpet tile to a sink without moving the rest of the carpet. In a similar vein, customers need not replace an entire carpet if one spot is damaged; they only need to replace the damaged tile.

The potential environment benefits of FLOR carpet tiles are also manifold. Interface continually innovates its technology to reduce the use of toxins in its carpet tiles. Carpet tiles are made of varying percentages of recycled content; many tiles use 100% recycled face fibers. Finally, customers return used, damaged, and retired carpet tiles in their original shipping boxes so the company can recycle the tiles to make new tiles. Interface aims to make all its carpet tiles of 100% recycled materials by 2020. In sum, the FLOR carpet tile system transforms the practice of home carpeting with a number of novel materials (e.g., recycled fibers, carpet tiles, adhesive pads), novel meanings (e.g., convenience, personality, responsibility), and novel competencies (e.g., assembling, patterning, returning).

Other practice innovations include: MaxBack, a post-consumer service of buying used and damaged electronics and refurbishing them for resale in poorer markets; the Soccer (Unchartered Play), a soccer ball that doubles as a portable energy generator; the Volt (General Motors), a gas-electric vehicle that offers industry leading mileage and recharges at any electric outlet; and ZipCar, an access-based car service that costs less than renting or owning cars. Each of these practice innovations creates value for the firm, its customers, and society (see Table 1).

4. Why positive marketing occurs

This section addresses the question: why does positive marketing occur? In other words, what factors motivate innovations that create

value for the firm, its customers, and society? A good place to start this discussion is the extensive literature on the antecedents of corporate social innovation (e.g., Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Bansal & Roth, 2000; Logsdon & Wood, 2004). To date, Aguilera et al.'s (2007) multilevel pressure theory is the most comprehensive summary of this literature. In brief, pressure theory argues that corporate social innovations arise in response to pressures upon the firm from 4 types of actors (individual, organizational, national, and transnational). Different actors use different mechanisms (e.g., dialogues, boycotts, and laws) to pressure companies to produce social innovations (Gopaldas, 2014), but all actors have 3 types of motives (instrumental, relational, and moral). For example, employees view pro-social organizations as more safe, admirable, and meaningful places to work. Thus, employees call for social innovations out of an instrumental need for control, a relational need for esteem, and a moral need for purpose (Aguilera et al., 2007). At a different level of analysis, transnational NGOs tend to work on securing vulnerable resources, aligning private and public interests, and promoting human needs over profit maximization. Thus, NGOs call for social innovations out of an instrumental need for effectiveness, a relational need for collaboration, and a moral need for altruism (Aguilera et al., 2007). Pressure theory helps explain social innovations in all areas of a company including accounting, finance, management, operations, and of course marketing. However, an exploration of positive marketing examples suggests at least two important factors that are overlooked by pressure theory: activist executives and networked customers.

4.1. Activist executives

Some corporate executives seem to promote positive marketing more to express personal convictions than to satisfy external pressures. These actors may be described as *activist executives* because they evince many of the characteristics of activists: proactive rather than reactive efforts, personal and passionate convictions, and high identifications with their political objectives (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Exemplars in this category include Patagonia's founder and CEO Yvon Chouinard, Interface's founder and former CEO Ray Anderson (recently deceased), and to a lesser extent, PepsiCo's CEO Indra Nooyi. Positive marketing efforts at Patagonia, Interface, and PepsiCo cannot be wholly attributed to external pressures upon the firm, but at least partially attributed to activist executives for at least two reasons.

First, although all of these CEOs face the usual pressures (e.g., from governments and NGOs), none of them face unusually high pressures that would explain their exceptional efforts. Each of these CEOs has set a standard of service to society that far exceeds the norms in the apparel, carpeting, and processed food and beverage industries. For example, Chouinard has an outstanding record of continually greening every aspect of Patagonia's value chain, earning him and his company numerous accolades (Schneider, 2009). Yet, rather than being content with these accolades, Chouinard frequently and publicly bemoans the inability of businesses such as Patagonia to become truly sustainable (i.e., have no environmental impact) (Chouinard, 2005; Youtube, 2012). Chouinard is currently working toward a self-directed goal of zero impact by 2020 (Napa Green, 2008).

Second, the evolution of these organizations' efforts seems to mirror the evolution of their CEO's personal convictions. For example, Ray Anderson founded Interface in 1973 and both he and the company have been leaders in sustainability efforts only since Anderson's epiphany in 1994, when he read *The Ecology of Commerce* by Hawken (1994). Finally, although PepsiCo has dabbled in social innovations for decades, the corporation has only recently emerged as a positive marketing leader in the processed food and beverage industry since Nooyi's appointment (Nguyen & Slater, 2010; Stanford, 2012). Following mixed results for short-term investors, Nooyi has defended positive marketing innovations such as Good for You snacks and the Pepsi Refresh Project on humanistic criteria and long-term projections (YouTube, 2011).

4.2. Networked customers

Like other actors in pressure theory, customers also have instrumental, relational, and moral motives to pressure firms to make positive marketing efforts. For example, customer preferences for organic produce as opposed to pesticide-laden or genetically-modified produce can be attributed to personal safety concerns (instrumental motives), social class identities (relational motives), and religious or spiritual beliefs (moral motives) (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). However, pressure theory does not explain the forces that have systematically raised customer expectations to include societal criteria such as how the products impact other stakeholders. In other words, why do a growing number of customers expect corporations to engage in positive marketing?

The internet, specifically Web 2.0, plays a vital role in the construction of positive marketing expectations (Gopaldas, 2014). In a less networked world, customers engaged in rather atomized interactions with firms. Customers were seldom aware of the experiences of other customers and other stakeholders such as activists, laborers, and policymakers (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kozinets, 1999). If a customer wanted to learn about a firm's impact on other stakeholders, the customer could scan the newspapers. Web 1.0 simplified the research process by making multiple sources of information available to the average customer (e.g., using Google search) (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). Nonetheless, customers had to be motivated to learn about the experiences of other stakeholders. Web 2.0, which encompasses individual customer and employee blogs, product reviews by experts and customers, and various other forums for multi-stakeholder discussion (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube), goes one step further.

Web 2.0 technologies tend to expose customers to multiple perspectives on a brand during the search and selection process (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008; Hanna et al., 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). For example, subscribing to the Twitter feed of a beloved brand is likely to expose one to the 'tweets' of activists, laborers, and policymakers. Consumer-generated product reviews on Amazon often warn other prospective buyers of hidden product attributes and false advertising claims. In contrast to lifestyle programming on television, mommy-blogs are more likely to expose new mothers to the environmental impact of disposable diapers, the social failings of different brands, and alternative consumption practices such as cloth diapers (Lopez, 2009). In essence, new media tend to expose users to more aspects of their consumption decisions than do traditional media. Thus, networked customers are more likely to expect companies to deliver benefits not only to individual customers but also to other stakeholders. As successful consumer activism on social media such as Change.org, Facebook, and Reddit suggest, networked customers may also be more effective at pressuring firms to change their behavior (Einstein, 2012).

5. Discussion

This article makes three conceptual advances toward a theory of positive marketing. First, the article distinguishes *what* constitutes positive marketing in contrast to other pro-social marketing concepts: cause, green, and social marketing. Positive marketing is defined as any marketing activity that creates value for the firm, its customers, and society at large. Second, the article identifies *how* positive marketing works using contemporary examples and practice theory. Positive marketing has two dominant forms from a practice-theoretic view: material-meaning innovations and practice innovations. The list of examples in Table 1 suggests that a material-meaning innovation is likely to establish competitive advantage in the form of a differentiated product while a practice innovation is likely to establish competitive advantage in the form of a new market space. Third, the article explores *why* positive marketing occurs. Augmenting the multilevel pressure theory

of corporate social innovations, two additional antecedents of positive marketing are theorized: activist executives and networked customers.

5.1. Strategies for organizational success

A caution for practitioners is that following textbook models or mimicking competitors cannot achieve positive marketing. Most marketing textbooks relegate societal interests to a final chapter (e.g., Kotler & Armstrong, 2012), as if society were an afterthought. Additionally, what constitutes societal value in the marketplace is continuously evolving. For example, 5–10% recycled paper constituted environment-friendly paper a decade ago, but now office suppliers are increasingly offering 50–100% recycled paper (Staples, 2012). Before long, some mass-market paper will be made from bamboo instead of wood because bamboo is a more easily renewable natural resource (Bamboo Grove, 2012).

A positive innovation can be a source of competitive advantage for a firm as long as the innovation is unique to the firm and not adopted by its competitors. Once a firm's innovation becomes an industry standard, the innovation ceases to be a competitive advantage. For example, Benetton's multi-ethnic imagery no longer has the political punch it once did in America as many apparel brands now routinely feature models of African, Asian, and South American origins. To be progressive and provocative now, apparel brands must participate in the more contentious identity politics of the times such as disability, fat acceptance, and LGBTQ politics. For example, a recent Gap advertisement features two men sharing one shirt, reflecting and promoting a wider acceptance of same-sex couples (Out, 2012).

Developing a positive innovation could yield financial benefits for a quarter or two. However, firms will derive greater benefits from fostering a positive marketing culture. To foster such a culture, firms may need activist executives such as Patagonia's Yvon Chouinard and Interface's Ray Anderson. Orienting a firm around positive marketing requires at least a small leap of faith because serving society does not tend to yield immediate profits. Pre-requisites for a positive marketing culture include a desire to fulfill human needs and a passion for alleviating societal problems. These pro-social desires will not arise from corporate entities that have a legal mandate to generate profits for investors (Friedman, 1970/2007). Rather, these pro-social desires must come from the human actors who work at corporations, especially from the people in top management teams (Hambrick & Mason, 1984).

A positive marketing culture may become a necessity as new media connect organizational stakeholders. When customers are meaningfully connected to activists, laborers, policymakers, and other customers, they are more likely to learn about the societal costs of marketing and expect more positive marketing efforts from their favored brands (Gopaldas, 2014). Just as the brand community literature recommends that firms continually monitor customer discourse (Schau et al., 2009), so too this article suggests that firms listen in on inter-stakeholder conversations to foresee communal expectations.

5.2. Limitations of positive marketing

The objective of this article has been to start a theoretical conversation on positive marketing. The objective has not been to celebrate or critique positive marketing. Nonetheless, this article would be incomplete without at least some evaluative commentary on positive marketing. Positive innovations seem to call for celebration when contrasted with conventional innovations that serve the short-term wants of customers but harm society in the long run. However, positive marketing is not without limitations. First, positive innovations can backfire when they increase net consumption. For example, Amazon's Frustration-Free Packaging can incur greater environmental costs if the greener packaging gives customers a 'moral license' to buy resource-intensive products (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010).

Second, positive marketing innovations are positive only insofar as they serve target stakeholders. A brand that participates in a cultural, political, or legal debate (e.g., abortion choices, fat acceptance, or genetic engineering) will make both allies and enemies. Benetton's messages of diversity please some market segments but displease other segments (Barela, 2003). Similarly, Dove's older and plus-sized models have not been well-received in some markets (Tolstikova, 2011). In other words, one stakeholder's "positive" marketing can be another stakeholder's "negative" marketing.

Third, and most importantly, positive marketing innovations are unlikely to address the structural roots of societal problems because they can contradict the profit motives of corporations. For example, PepsiCo's Eco-Fina bottles reduce plastic use but do not address the fundamental problem of plastic bottles. PepsiCo is unlikely to inform the public that drinking tap water is as good as bottled water and a whole lot better for the planet. Although these limitations are severe, positive marketing is a necessary step in the right direction until societies develop new kinds of economies (e.g., steady-state economies), institutions (e.g., benefit corporations), and markets (e.g., sharing networks [Krush et al., 2015—in this issue]) that diminish or eliminate profit motives.

5.3. Avenues for future research

Positive marketing examples in this article are drawn from the contemporary American marketplace. Thus, one avenue for future research is exploring whether approaches to positive marketing vary across national boundaries (e.g., Cova, Pace, & Park, 2007). Another avenue for future research is to confirm the antecedents of positive marketing. Does an activism orientation in the top management team predict a firm's commitment to positive marketing? Can firms consistently lead industries in sustainability efforts, as Patagonia and Interface do, without activist executives at their helm? Do highly networked customers appreciate positive marketing innovations more than less networked customers? Does participation in Web 2.0 technocultures such as Reddit and Twitter increase customer awareness of multi-stakeholder perspectives and in turn increase customer expectations of positive innovations? Much too often, marketing researchers theorize what has already occurred. Thus, a final avenue of research is to use big data, futures analysis, and creative thinking to imagine positive marketing innovations that have yet to emerge.

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