



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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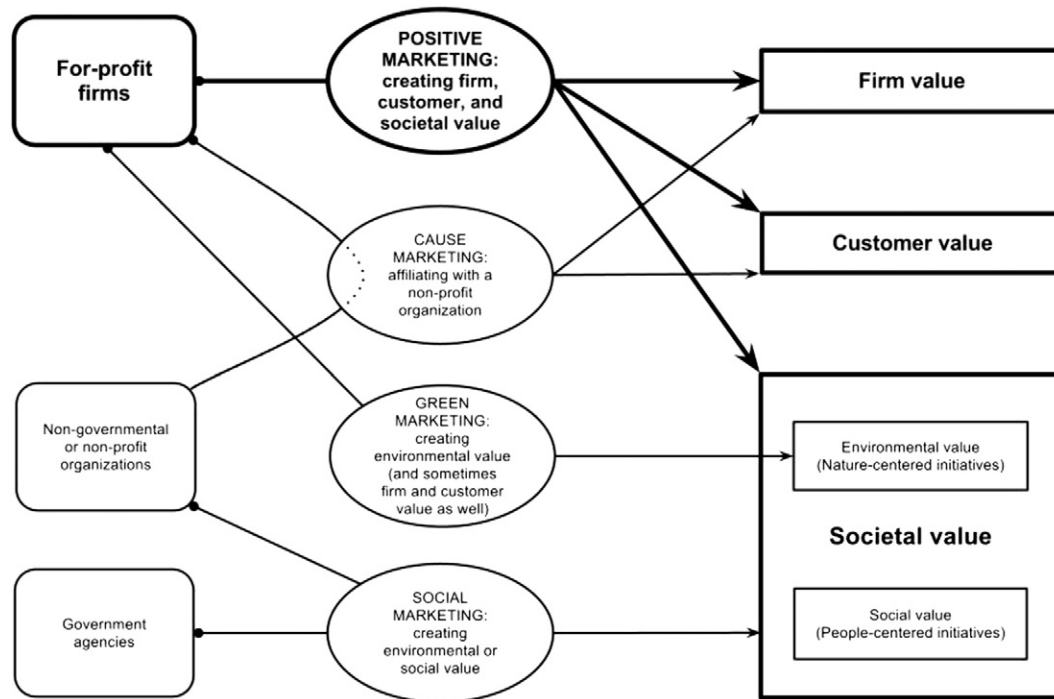


Fig. 1. Distinguishing positive marketing from cause, green, and social marketing.

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

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