13 CHOICE EDITING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT: MANAGING CORPORATE RISKS

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> This report is about the good life: the good life that is possible if people, business and government all share responsibility to open the way to new solutions (Sustainable Consumption Roundtable 2006, p. i).

Integral to shared responsibility for perpetuating and sustaining 'the good life' are corporations, and in this chapter we examine a particular sustainable development approach by a major international supermarket chain, Marks and Spencer Group (Marks and Spencer). We focus on this corporation because it has long been viewed as a role model for other supermarket chains, as exemplified by its early championship of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Among other activities, CSR has been used by retailers for over 20 years to reconfigure production and logistics processes so as to meet the constantly evolving expectations of stakeholders and investors. It has also added a moral authority missing from the routine economic exchange at the heart of retail capital accumulation. CSR is generally viewed as helping retailers to 'be better placed to provide long-term growth and financial security for [all] stakeholders and to maintain and enhance their market position' (Jones *et al.* 2005, p. 891).

CSR applies to an ever-expanding number of issues ranging from improving animal welfare and public health to fair labour practices. One of the earliest issues for attention was environmental sustainability. Marks and Spencer is among the top 10 UK retailers undertaking CSR, and concern for the environment is one of its five key pillars of sustainability. In common with other large firms, Marks and Spencer is attempting to reduce its ecological footprint by insisting that its producers change their environmental resource use practices and by reducing resource use in its stores and throughout its logistics systems. Marks and Spencer is also attempting something new – being seen to support 'green consumerism' beyond the obvious stocking of 'green' labelled products.

Within a context of dire predictions regarding planetary overload from human activity, the spotlight is focused on encouraging affluent consumers to use their consumption practices in socially and environmentally responsible ways. A cultural expectation is being fostered by social movements, ecologists, religious bodies and ethical investment firms for consumers to consciously consider the environment and future generations of people and animals when they use resources. Participants in a consumer forum sponsored by the UK's Sustainable Consumption Roundtable (SCR) cited a range of factors that they considered barriers to changing their resource use patterns. They claimed that:

- we are creatures of habit, reluctant to make changes that challenge our routines;
- we often lack access to facilities like doorstop recycling or good public transport;
- we perceive sustainable options to be expensive and niche (SCR 2006, p. 9).

One part of the multi-faceted research program supporting the Roundtable's work involved an examination of whether consumers will act unaided on their sustainability concerns. Analysis of the driving forces behind 19 product innovations showed that people were more likely to consume in a sustainable manner if led by business and/or government. It was concluded that:

> … choice editing for quality and sustainability by regulators, retailers and manufacturers has been the critical driver in the majority of cases. Providing information failed to get more than a minority of people buying [for example] the most energy-efficient dishwashers (SCR 2006, p. 21).

The report supported more theoretical analyses which suggest that both everyday and status-oriented forms of consumption are shaped by a variety of 'policies, campaigns and practices that enlist ordinary people into broader projects of social change' (Barnett *et al.* 2005, p. 23). They do not arise spontaneously but are enacted through the alignment of people's consumption practices with the socio-cultural, economic and physical imperatives of the day (Shove 2003; Shove *et al.* 2009; Gibson *et al.* 2011). This establishes the context for our consideration of corporate 'choice editing'.

Emanating from the UK, choice editing is being promoted as a constituent component of retailer-backed sustainability systems. It has been described as:

> … shifting the field of choice for mainstream consumers: cutting out unnecessarily damaging products and getting real sustainable choices on the shelves. In the context of high consumer concern, but low levels of action, the idea of integrating the most compelling issues of sustainable development through choice editing makes sense. Consumers benefit from the assurance that the issues they care about are considered, rather than facing the demand that they grapple with those complexities themselves (SCR 2006, p. 16).

In practical terms, retailers narrow product ranges by adopting particular quality standards regarding what is environmentally sustainable, healthy, animal-friendly, socially just and so forth. Through choice editing, institutional actors are attempting to make the sustainable product choice the easy and only choice. In the ideal world, there would be no need for moral decisions because all citizens could assume that their shopping decisions had minimal impact on the biosphere. The concept has the support of public health ecologists who are concerned about the population and environmental health problems which arise through unbridled choice. Lang *et al.* (2009) argued that a different approach to choice is needed in the pursuit of ecological public health and put forward a model to illustrate the spectrum of responses to choice by which consumers are governed. Figure 13.1 illustrates the gulf that they believe exists between current policy support for market-based commodity and services choice, and the directions in which societies need to move to deliver a healthy and sustainable food system. It also proposes that, through their capacity to choose, higher socio-economic groups have the highest ecological impact.

Figure 13.1 shows that the rich have further to move in the direction of sustainable behaviour, but they may also be more amenable to reducing their ecological footprint through buying

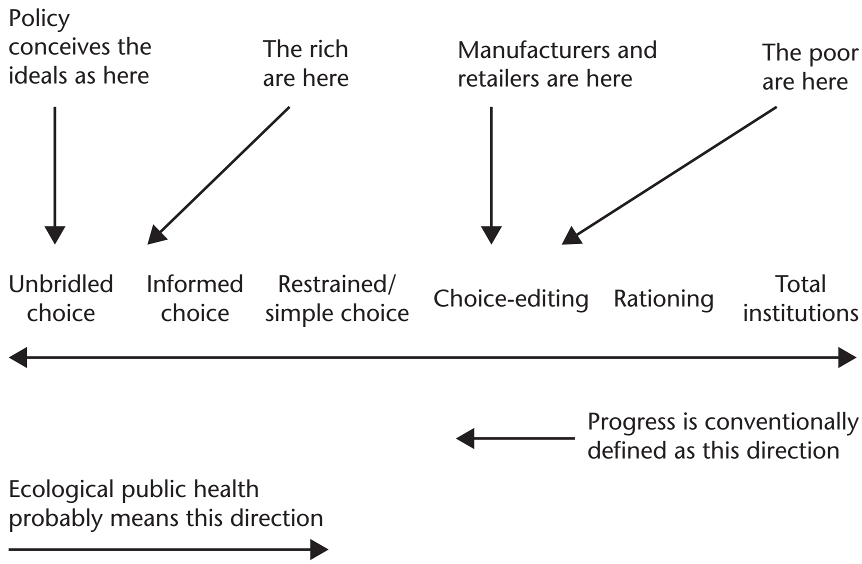

Figure 13.1: Current policy vs the need to move towards more sustainable behaviour.

higher-priced environmentally friendly goods from trusted supermarket chains. In our opinion, the best developed and most impressive example of choice editing with the middle-class consumer in mind is Marks and Spencer's Plan A, a hugely ambitious program to distinguish the chain from its competitors in the UK, European and US markets by becoming 'the world's most sustainable major retailer by 2015' (Marks and Spencer Group 2010).

Corporate response to sustainable food systems: Marks and Spencer Plan A

Plan A was launched in 2007, with Marks and Spencer announcing that it was 'committing to change 100 things over five years – because we've got only one world and time is running out' (Marks and Spencer Group 2010, p. 3). The plan includes three aims: to save the company money, to create brand loyalty among the firm's 21 million customers and to save the planet through acting on five pillars of sustainability – climate change, waste, natural resources, fair partnerships, and health and well-being. These areas of concern about sustainability reflect key concerns of the ecological public health community (Lang *et al.* 2009).

Plan A extends across all the company's production and retailing activities. Marks and Spencer aims to tackle all issues along the supply chain and to be a business that is carbon-positive, wastes nothing, restores the natural environment and improves lives. To this end, the corporation has committed to applying at least one of the five sustainability pillars to its 2.7 billion items by 2020, which will mean working with thousands of companies and tens of thousands of farms (Marks and Spencer Group 2010, p. 5). It will help to create 200 Plan A factories and will enrol 10 000 farmers in the company's Sustainable Agriculture Program. For example, the Marks and Spencer website describes eco-tile factories the corporation has built and is supporting in Sri Lanka.

In terms of addressing sustainable food systems, Marks and Spencer has the following initiatives:

- palm oil standard and use – the company has developed a palm oil audit system and insists that only palm oil produced in a sustainable and responsible way will be used in its house-brand products;
- it will produce and promote functional foods, coupled with innovative convenient product solutions;
- it will offer energetic support for alternative foods, whether organically grown, locally specific niche items or artisanal speciality foods.

Assessing Plan A after three years of operation, the company announced success in the following terms. The strategy had:

- saved the firm £50 million in 2009–10;
- motivated 1 million customers to donate money to charity;
- saved 4 million items of clothing from going to landfill;
- improved store efficiency by 10%;
- reduced food packaging by 16%;
- improved fuel efficiency in transport and logistics by 20% (Marks and Spencer Group 2010, pp. 4–5).

In 2010, the company issued a revised strategy that took Plan A through to 2015 and added 80 new areas of focus. The rationale for the additions was that, ‘Customers are aware of their personal impact on the world and ready to take action but most expect us to take a lead and make it relevant to their everyday lives’ (p. 5). It claimed consumers still wanted to consume despite the global financial crisis of 2008, but they wanted business and government to do the ‘heavy lifting … by making it easy for them to get involved and to make a difference’ (p. 3). The pledge to incorporate at least one of the five pillars of sustainability into all Marks and Spencer products was included in the revised strategy, as was the aim to tailor a personal Plan A for 3 million of the company’s 21 million customers by 2015. The company announced that it wanted:

> … to involve all of our employees in Plan A and help them share the word with family, friends and Marks and Spencer customers, so that’s why we’re going to offer all eligible employees free home insulation and a home energy monitor, and give all employees a day leave every year to do volunteer work in the communities where they and customers live (p. 7).

For 15% of Marks and Spencer customers and for all staff, acting sustainably and participating in Plan A will become synonymous.

What risks is Plan A attempting to address?

It appears that Marks and Spencer is using Plan A to address two interrelated types of risk. The first concerns medium-term limits to economic growth in a context of global environmental change and resultant questioning of the current economic growth approach to global and national development. The New Economics Foundation (2009), for example, argued that global growth in greenhouse gases increased by an average of 3.5% between 2000 and 2007 (years of unprecedented economic activity in Asia and South America) but dropped during the ensuing global financial crisis. The foundation considered this proved that constant economic growth based on current energy and resource use technology is unsustainable. Publicly available material indicates that Marks and Spencer shows keen awareness that economic growth – whether by nations or companies – fuels greenhouse gas emissions. Like any major corporation, Marks and Spencer faces risks to the legitimacy of its approach to generating profit. By emphasising products that incorporate one of the five pillars of sustainability, the chain is attempting to decouple its money-making activities from global environmental change and to position itself as a socially and environmentally responsible actor.

As a major retailer, Marks and Spencer has traditionally been focused on another form of risk, namely, minimising short-term financial losses as it competes for market share and increased profits every quarter. To increase profits, retailers aim to increase the number of customers who choose to shop at their store and to encourage those customers to buy increasing volumes and types of products (Mitchell and Harris 2005). The firm constantly risks losing custom to competitors, resulting in financial outlays overwhelming profits, leading to overall losses. Reports of reduced profits increase the flow-on risks of loss on the stock exchange.

The heart of the traditional retail model involves attaching significant cultural value to product line and brand choice: companies compete on the size of their product portfolios, their floor space, their changing specials and being the first to introduce novel products. For decades, supermarket chains have made a virtue of the ever-increasing size of their product ranges. To accommodate multiplying food product lines plus new aisles devoted to furniture, clothing and technology, supermarkets established the hypermarket concept. This business model is based on offering a plethora of choices with a range of marketing strategies to encourage hyperconsumption: the here-and-now consumption of large volumes of novel products.

Operating a hyperproduction–consumption business strategy has created two immediate governance risks up and down the supply chain. First, it has meant establishing an ever-expanding number and type of supply chains. But managing the logistics of thousands of supply chains is expensive, particularly as retailers become ever more responsible for the safety, fairness, health and environmental credentials of each product they sell (Anon. 2010). Second, the constant supply of new products involves managing a cascade of consumer risk perceptions at a time when the expansion of hypermarkets has stalled in mature market economies due to growing consumer antipathy for unbridled choice.

Traditionally, consumers have accepted numerous risks when making purchases: physical risks associated with safety, financial risks related to costs, psychosocial risks of feeling unrewarded by the shopping experience, the opportunity cost risks imposed by slow and cumbersome retail formats (Mitchell and Kiral 1999). Most marketing strategies have aimed to reduce these risks by introducing new product lines, designed on the basis of retailers' detailed knowledge of consumer aspirations and problem perceptions. However, countering problems with new products gradually has become less successful as consumers signal an overwhelming desire for convenience, physically and emotionally (Humphery 1998; Dixon 2002). Consumers are now resisting what they see as excessive choice out of concern for environmental sustainability (Humphery 2010; SCR 2006). This threat to corporate profitability actually offers opportunities to corporations which can use their new-found legitimacy from decoupling of profit and environmental change with the in-store recoupling strategy of choice editing.

Choice editing has several merits. It reinforces the strategy of corporate social responsibility, provides a rationale for the more efficient management of supply chains and helps address consumption fatigue brought on by endless decisions over products. It becomes both a corporate promotional tool and a logistics response to managing the risk of losing consumers who desire a simpler approach to shopping and a more ethically fulfilling approach to consuming.

The appeal of Marks and Spencer recoupling sustainability through consumption was indicated by a survey of University of Plymouth students. While not representative of the general population, we can assume that the students were relatively typical of future middle-class consumers. Over 90% of the students surveyed were positive about sustainability. In response to questions about what individuals could do to live a sustainable life-style most nominated behaviour associated with consumer change such as choosing products that were fair-trade, locally produced and/or healthy, and recycling. Some intended to purchase products from companies which are environmentally or socially ethical. Furthermore, while most agreed with radical statements regarding social changes to support sustainability they proffered only minor personal changes focused on their behaviour as consumers (Kagawa 2007). If such views are widespread among university students in the UK, it becomes clear that the Marks and Spencer approach is tapping into consumers' aspirations. Just as some stores are cheap or well managed (Mitchell and Harris 2005), Marks and Spencer is sustainable – it can offer consumers a comfortable way of mitigating their future risk of not being able to live the good life. It is thus plausible that Plan A is integral to the Marks and Spencer strategy to recover its financial and societal reputation, that was undermined when it pulled back from global expansion during the 1990s (Burt *et al.* 2002).

Is sustainable consumption possible in a consumptogenic environment?

Plan A contributes to the profit margins of Marks and Spencer and meets some consumers' need to act for the environment. What are its other potential benefits? We are not going to address the potential of the production-side activities. Much has been written and remains unresolved about commercially driven supply chain responses to environmental degradation. We are more interested in Plan A's attempt to foster sustainable consumption, and whether this can take place at a scale sufficient to affect the environment positively. Conceiving an ethos of sustainable consumption is an interesting exercise given that ideas of restraint, going without, voluntary simplicity or doing more with less, run counter to half a century of celebrating excess, abundance, having it all and living the good life by doing more with more. The latter set of qualities characterises what we term a 'consumptogenic era' – an era when consumption moved from simply fulfilling the basic needs of shelter, food, clothing and mobility and acquired nationalistic, social and moral overtones.

We see three limitations to Marks and Spencer's support for green consumerism, given that it is being fostered in a consumptogenic era. First, Plan A does not caution against unnecessary consumption of the Earth's resources. It is not aimed at limiting the volumes of products traded, or surplus goods at the consumer end. While the strategy of individualised plans approximates informed choice on the spectrum described in Figure 13.1, the company still encourages a sense of unbridled choice when it boasts that it sells 2.7 billion items, all of which will incorporate at least one sustainability pillar. In practice, Plan A becomes a brand-switching platform: move away from unsustainably produced goods and towards Plan A sustainably produced alternatives. It does not challenge the retail business model that profitability lies in competing for brand-loyal, high-volume customers. It does not challenge the individual 'customer is king' orthodoxy.

Our second concern focuses on the implications for the exercise of citizenship. Plan A does not question the way increasing levels of consumerism have become valorised. The conflation of citizenship and consumerism reached new heights during the global financial crisis of 2008–09, when OECD governments used stimulus packages including tax cuts and one-off payments so that citizens could spend more money to resurrect national economic progress. 'Hyperconsumption' is an apt description for the emotional intensity that accompanied consumption as a patriotic duty.

Citizen-oriented hyperconsumption can comfortably sit alongside sustainable consumption when all these practices are ill-defined. In common with most institutions which invoke the word 'sustainable' or 'sustainability', Marks and Spencer does not qualify or enumerate what it means by the term. Rather, it deploys the word as 'a higher-order social goal akin to other such goals like democracy, justice or the rule of law', without acknowledging that it is also 'a complex, contestable challenge spanning generations' (Dovers *et al.* 2008, p. 246). By making 'sustainable choices, easy choices' supermarkets are renegotiating how consumers can imagine and practise their relationships with governments and one another. Complexity is erased.

A Plan A customer can continue to consume at unprecedented levels and believe that if they buy goods labelled 'sustainably produced' they are acting not only to save the economy but to improve the environment. In stocking food products certified organic or ethically or sustainably produced, supermarkets are offering consumers a role in resolving their guilt about the deepening ecological crisis in the food system. Retailer-labelled choices purport to remove the uncertainty or risk about the ecological sustainability of a product and therefore the risk about the future in general. Very few sustainability analyses contain estimates of cumulative impacts, irreversibility (tipping points), complexity and connectivity between problems, or risk and uncertainty (Dovers *et al.* 2008). There is little environmental impact assessment data on the implications of supermarket dominance of global supply chains although this dynamic may be of utmost importance to food system resilience (Erickson *et al.* 2010). Influenced by Campbell's work (2009), we note that corporate leadership to protect the environment and promote sustainability has a troubling limitation: the environmental, health and community feedbacks which arise from ecoconsumption are largely unknown to consumers.

The environmental impact of consumer demands for alternative goods produced in distant locales or fragile ecosystems and supplied through supermarkets is not yet clear. Supermarkets are increasingly involved in the organics sector, but Johnston *et al.* (2009) concluded that corporate organics are riddled with contradictions, based on the fact that commodity fetishisation is maintained. In a context of corporate supply chains with no consumer involvement, externally verified labels and certifications attached to alternative foods 'become a cheap substitute for intimate knowledge of the commodity and producers' (Freidberg 2003, p. 229). In contrast, backyard production maximises this intimate knowledge. It is also present in what may be more environmentally sustainable (due to resource use efficiencies) organic cooperative ventures in which producers and consumers share risks. In corporate supply chains, risk is privatised on behalf of producers and consumers. Financial as well as environmental sustainability risk-sharing is exemplified in the box-scheme approach, when consumers pay up-front (often based on a price that internalises the environmental costs) in anticipation that the farmer will be able to deliver produce of highly accountable provenance (Seyfang 2006). We are not arguing that such schemes can address environmental sustainability on a grand scale, but in such scenarios the 'customer is king' philosophy gives way to a producer–consumer partnership with fewer contradictions. Unbridled choice is not an option, and although global sourcing of sustainable choices may be present in box schemes the very few supplier participants are relatively easy to know and feedbacks are easier to detect.

With the label as the major empowering device the retailer has most of the influence, risking food system resilience. This is our third area of concern. Marks and Spencer has invested an enormous amount of capital in the Plan A portfolio and modus operandi. Staking its corporate reputation on the Plan A brand, the firm micromanages all along the supply chains to ensure nothing goes wrong with the product (e.g. a food safety problem). Its demands, in terms of volume and quality of supply, ensures that only larger suppliers can comply, and the constant push for greater efficiencies can mean that 'communities of producers are pushed to the edge of economic survival' (Sustainability Institute 2003, p. 2). The contraction in suppliers and non-supermarket retailers, largely due to supermarket dominance of supply chains and local food retailing environments, undermines a future food system comprising diverse economic models and producer–consumer engagements which, alongside the protection of biodiversity, is considered by some to be the hallmark of a sustainable food system (Larsen *et al.* 2008).

Diverse producer–consumer subsystems have become truncated as more people enter the workforce from a young age. In describing consumer choice as a mode of governance, Kjaernes *et al.* (2009, p. 3) invoked Giddens' argument that modern societies are characterised by the fact that 'people have no choice but to choose'. The point to add here is that most citizens have no choice but to choose from among the industrialised diversity of the marketplace rather than to choose between home and communally produced goods and market-based goods. This is partly due to a sense that self-reliance or do-it-yourself is not realistic when there are many other pressures – people take account of the fact that they would forgo too much income if they made their own clothes, cooked meals from scratch or constructed leisure opportunities without technological aids. In this context, choice editing provides 'a menu of new, guilt-free shopping options for affluent consumers' (Johnston *et al.* 2009, p. 526).

One way of framing the supermarket role is as an 'eco-moderniser'. Eco-modernisation promises 'environmental protection and resource conservation through means of eco-efficiency and stakeholder engagement' (Milne *et al.* 2009, p. 1241). In reporting on New Zealand business incorporation of sustainability discourse, Milne *et al.* noted a tendency 'to adopt a narrow economic language, standard of judgment, and world view in approaching and utilizing the Earth' (2009, p. 1241). They contrasted this business approach, which privileges the efficiency of resource use, with an ecosystems approach where the focus is on the sustainability gap that opens up whenever resources are used. Marks and Spencer is clearly an eco-moderniser as it uses sustainability discourse to drive an environmental agenda while masking ecological limits.

Despite the contradictions, it is clear that consumers will expect supermarkets to remain major players in the realm of environmental governance and risk management. Their financial and symbolic power in modern food systems ensures that they play a key role in influencing the roles of governments and consumer-citizens. In a context of animal welfare, Kjaernes *et al.* (2008) typified market–consumer–state relations according to three models: the welfare state, *terroir* and quality. They plotted different European countries according to the models. The Scandinavian countries came closest to the first model, because government regulations fostered protected and mass generic markets, and a sense of trust between producers and consumers was brokered through strong regulatory oversight. With their distrust of institutions and the high value placed on familiarity and social control based on small networks, Italy and France aligned with the *terroir* approach. Due to the strong presence of supermarkets, the UK and Netherlands emphasised market solutions and consumer choice; the government's role was to support differentiated or multiple forms of quality. Consumer choice was strongest in the quality model and weakest in the welfare state approach. It is possible that none of these three approaches to food system governance may enhance food system resilience, although the *terroir* approach with its emphasis on bioregional ecosystems, social diversity and consumer choice limited by seasonality, place and tradition rather than novelty, may be revealed as offering the physical environment its greatest chance of protection.

Conclusion

Lang *et al.* (2009) argued that sustainable food systems can emerge only from the symbiotic efforts of commerce, governments and civil society. Marks and Spencer promotes Plan A as a strategy to address the limits to ecosystem services, but we propose in this chapter that it is a strategy fraught with contradictions. At its core is a form of governance called choice editing, the corporate endorsement of relatively environmentally safe products and the rigorous policing of supply chains. In practice, Plan A encourages brand swapping for the environment but does not address the inexorable promotion of market place consumption. It fosters a consumption ethos where the retailer brand and labelling offer peace of mind rather than empowering consumers through full disclosure of environmental costs and benefits, which in turn leaves even more power with the retailer to manage risks. Such dominance of supply chains puts food system resilience at risk. We argue that Plan A is not a corporate-citizen co-sustainability strategy but a corporate brand promotion strategy to minimise financial risks in the near term and to secure a future for corporate wealth creation in the mid term if environmental change escalates.

Without conditions being specified, environmental sustainability strategies can be vague and unaccountable whether practised by governments, firms or households. A lack of clarity within the general population allows the concept of sustainability to be used to suit a range of purposes; we suggest that fluid discursive practices arguably pose the biggest risk to environmental sustainability. Ironically, if households spent less time agonising over how to become more individually sustainable (Gibson *et al.* 2011) and more time being politically active and pressing for major environmental changes by social institutions and corporations, then we might achieve global environmental change rather than a myriad of minor adaptive responses.

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