CUSTOMERS' AWARENESS, PERCEPTION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF GREEN PRODUCTS IN PAHANG, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Consumers are increasingly better informed and more aware of the environmental impact of products, and may demand businesses improve their environmental performances. Their pressure has often been cited in the literature as one of the important factors contributing to business environmental commitment as they may exert pressure by boycotting the products of environmentally unfriendly businesses and or refusing buying such products. With increasing concerns on environmental issues including green consumerism since the early 1990s in developed countries, green products have increased significantly. Additionally, the emergence of green consumerism implies that some consumers are willing to pay a price premium. While the prospects look bright for green products in developed countries, little research has been done on the same phenomenon in developing countries including Malaysia. In contrast to developed countries, in general, developing countries' businesses are operating in business environments that rarely reward environmentally friendly products. Customers' low disposable incomes force them to fulfil their lower basic needs rather than demanding green products which are considered as in the higher hierarchical needs. Furthermore, consumers are often less able to make informed choices about products due to illiteracy, inadequate formal education, and a lack of necessary information about the products. However, those arguments are open to question, since the burgeoning middle class customers over several decades in developing countries has resulted in increased demand for more green products. Against the above background, the main purpose of this study is to investigate the prospects of green products in Malaysia, using 150 customers of a well-known supermarket in Kuantan, Pahang as a case. The data of the study were collected through close-ended questionnaires in March 2008. Overall, the majority of customers were not only aware of the existing green products in the market but at the same time had positive attitudes of the products. Furthermore, a majority of the respondents reacted positively to the prospects of green products in the country. The results of the study show a bright future for green products in the state of Pahang in specific and in Malaysia in general because of the commonality of the state with the rest of the country.

Key words: Green products; Malaysia; consumers attitudes and awareness.

INTRODUCTION

In the new millennium consumers are increasingly better informed and more aware of the environmental impact of products, and may demand businesses improve their environmental performances. Their pressure has often been cited in the literature as one of the important factors contributing to business environmental commitment because they may exert pressure by boycotting the products of environmentally unfriendly businesses and or refusing buying such products. With increasingly pressing environmental concerns weighing our planet, green consumerism nowadays carry more weight than before. As a result of increasing green consumerism green products have increased significantly, this is especially true in developed countries. Additionally, the emergence of green consumerism implies that some consumers are willing to pay a price premium. While the prospects look bright for green products in developed countries, little research has been done on the same phenomenon in developing countries. In contrast to developed countries, in general, developing countries' businesses are operating in business environments that rarely reward environmentally friendly products. By and large, customers' low disposable incomes in developing countries force them to fulfil their lower basic needs rather than demanding green products which are considered as in the higher

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hierarchical needs. Furthermore, consumers are often less able to make informed choices about products due to illiteracy and inadequate formal education, and a lack of necessary information about the products. However, those arguments are open to question, since the burgeoning middle class customers over several decades in developing countries has resulted in increased demand for more green products. Against the above background, the main purpose of this study is to investigate the prospects of green products in Malaysia, using 150 customers of a well-known supermarket in Kuantan Pahang, Malaysia as a case.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

    i.   To determine customer awareness about environmentally friendly products;

    ii.   To measure perceptions of consumers towards environmentally friendly products;

    iii.   To investigate whether demographic factors influence customers' awareness, perception, and buying behaviour of environmentally friendly products; and

    iv.   To gauge the potential market and the targeting prospective customers of environmentally friendly products.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The research hypotheses are as follows:

H1 – Respondents have a negative perception towards green products

H2 - Respondents have a negative attitude towards the future prospect of green products.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Green Products

A variety of green products are now offered to consumers, ranging from laundry detergents and household cleaning products to cosmetics and toiletries, and from energy saving appliances to compostable nappies. Various academic studies have examined green products and consumers' reactions: Fritzsche and Duehr (1982) examined the effects of concern for the environment on the choice of deodorant container; Kinnear and Taylor, (1973) examined the effects of ecological concern on attitudes towards phosphates in laundry detergents; Prothero and McDonagh (1992) investigated green cosmetics and toiletries; Mazis *et al.* (1973) and Henion (1972) studied laundry detergents; Kassarjian (1971) investigated unleaded petrol and Schwepker and Cornwell (1991) looked at products in recycled packaging.

There is a growing body of knowledge on green marketing focusing mainly on four issues. These issues are: first, relevance of green marketing; second, impact of green marketing on firms' competitiveness and performance; third, attributes considered by consumers while buying green products; and fourth, improving effectiveness of green marketing (Lalit and kanothip 1998).

Keller (1993) divides brand associations into attributes, benefits and attitudes; environmental associations can be considered firstly as attributes, in that the consumer uses these beliefs in the product's environmental performance to characterize the brand. These attributes can be considered as product-related (environmentally-friendly chemical composition) or non-product-related (beliefs in the possibility of packaging).

Channels of environmentally friendly products

Mohd Rafi et al. (2003a) in their study on educated consumers in Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang, the East Coast States of Peninsular Malaysia found newspaper/magazine and television as the main channels of information of green products in Malaysia. These two channels constituted almost 90 per cent of source of green products in the area. Their study overwhelmingly showed majority of the public relied on these mediums as source of information. On the other hand, the same research only showed 4 per cent of information on green products came from educational institutions and the same was also true for

supermarkets. Realising those mediums as source of information on green products, it is not exaggerated to say the public have shallow knowledge of green products as both medias only provide narrow and insufficient information. After all the channels pay more concentration on advertisements, political issues, as well as economic issues where more money is associated with them. The authors argued that: "Since the message from those media is mostly concentrated on 'recycling' so much so that most consumers are not that aware of the many aspects of the green or environmentally friendly products" (Mohd Rafi et al. 2003a, p. 46)

Awareness of Green products

Generally speaking awareness comprises a human's perception and cognitive reaction to a condition or event. Awareness does not necessarily imply understanding, just an ability to be conscious of, feel or perceive. To create more awareness for the consumers, many companies can be involved in programmes that support the environmentally friendly products. The media are playing a significant role in creating awareness and educating people about the benefits of environment conservation to the society (Lalit & Kanokthip, 1998). In developing awareness of a green product, companies attempt to augment consumer knowledge of the product and its environmental attributes in the hope of bringing about purchase behaviour. However, the exact nature of the relationship between environmental knowledge and environmentally sensitive behaviour is still to be established (Arbuthnott & Lingg, 1975). Consumer awareness might be useful when the manufacturers' objective is to overcome resistance to new environmentally safe packages. Advertising of the new advantages and benefits of such products helps its consumers become more aware of the damage to the environment and they tend to change their buying habits. Unless consumers are aware of the advantages of green products, manufacturers' effort to introduce this product to the market will be wasted efforts (Kassaye & Dharmeda 1992). In a study conducted by Mohd Rafi et al. (2003) on educated consumers in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia, they found respondents had not or little awareness of environmentally friendly products.

Environmental Attitudes

Robbins (1993) defined attitude as an evaluation statement either favourable or unfavourable concerning objects, people or events. James et. al (1995) defined attitude as simply an overall evaluation of what consumers like or dislike. When it comes to green products, consumer attitude on the products depend on their attributes. Environmental attitude is clearly defined by Nik Ramli (2009) as he puts it: "a learned predisposition to respond consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to the environment" (Nik Ramli, 2009, p.134). Usually, green product attributes may be environmentally sound production processes, responsible product uses, or product elimination, which consumers compare with those possessed by competing conventional products. The benefits searched for by buyers of green products should be, obviously, improvement of the environment in which they live. In some cases, direct personal benefits can be obtained, such as the perceived health advantages of organic food, the savings on domestic heating and lighting budgets, or the sometimes good returns on investment in environmental technologies. The marketer's best strategy will consequently be to deliver detailed information to consumers about the environmental credentials of a product or service, or the consequences of advocated forms of behaviour. Businesses that promote their products and/or services on green marketing typically emphasize the efficiency of cognitive persuasion strategies, assuming the consumer's high involvement regarding environmental issues to be a consequence of a growing environmental consciousness (Peattie, 1995). Thus, green brands can evoke positive emotions in certain target groups by simply offering information on environmentally sound product attributes. Knowing that a brand is green will always make some consumers feel better while using it (Patrick Hartmann and Ibanez, 2006).

Since the late 1990s many companies including construction firms, refrigerator manufacturers and processed food companies have also launched programmes to contain damages to the environment and project themselves as environmentally friendly companies.

Multinational corporations (MNCs), especially those who locate their businesses in developed countries have invested in pollution-control equipment and environment-friendly technologies. Several companies have launched advertising campaigns to project environmentally conscious corporate images and promote products that are less harmful to the environment (Lalit & Kanokthip, 1998). It is obvious that the main aim of the campaigns is to attract consumers to buy their products or to use their services.

Since research on green consumerism in Malaysia is in its infancy, not many studies deal with this subject. A number of publications only measured relationship between attitude and behaviour. None has explained either Malaysia in general had positive or negative attitude towards the environment. This is why this study is vital to fill the gap in the literature. A study by Mohd Rafi and Azman Zakaria (2003a) in Malaysia showed business students in a public university in the state of Terengganu had a positive attitude towards the environment. Mohd Rafi (2010) revisited his study of environmental attitude of business students at the same institution. The author found as in his previous finding, a positive environmental attitude.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher used a structured - questionnaire as the instrument for this research. The questionnaire contains 3 sections. The first section seeks respondents' profiles, awareness, the extent of awareness and the importance of green products. Furthermore, they were also asked the sources of information of green products. The second section asks for respondents' perception of green products based on 10 given statements. The last part of the questionnaire measures future prospects of green products in the eyes of respondents. Altogether, 5 items where in this section. In both the second and third sections respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with 10 statements using a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

The population of the study consisted of customers of a well-known supermarket in Kuantan, Pahang. Since the actual number of population of the organisation is unknown, this research used non-probability sampling technique – convenient sampling. The research questionnaires were distributed to the available customers of the organisation during the time they visited the premise in mid March 2008. It took five week days for the purpose of data collection. In order to ensure representativeness of the population, respondents were approached in different time periods – morning, afternoon and evening. Altogether, 150 questionnaires were distributed but only 108 questionnaires (72 %) were completed.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows more than half of respondents, 65 are female (60.2%) and 43 are male (39.8%). In terms of age, the majority respondents, 47 (43.5 %) were aged between 21 to 30 years old. This is followed by 26 respondents (43.5%) were aged between 21-40 years old, 26 respondents (24.1%) and 19.4 per cent were 41 years old and older. Those aged between 15 to 20 years was the minority, with only 14 (13 per cent). Judging from the age of respondents, the majority of samples (more than 80 per cent) of the study consisted of those less than 40 years old.

In terms of educational level, 43 respondents had SPM (Malaysia Certificate of Education), which constitutes almost 40 per cent of total respondents. This is followed by 34 respondents those who had first degree qualification (31.5%), 23 with diploma (21.3%) and SRP/PMR(Lower Certificate Education) - 7.4%. There is almost an equal number of respondents who have high level (57) and low level of education (51). Table 1 also shows 41 (38%) from 108 respondents were working in the private sector, 27.8% work in the public sector, 19.4% have other occupations and only 14.8% were self employed. As far as the income of respondents is concerned, majority of respondents earned RM 1001-2000 (US$333-666). It constitutes about 45 per cent of the samples. Thirty four (34 %) respondents earned less than RM 1000 a month and 16 respondents earned RM 2001-3000 a month which constitutes almost 15 % of the total

population. On the other hand, a small proportion of respondents (5.6 %) earned more RM3001(US$1000).

Looking at the above demographic information, it can be concluded that respondents of this study is largely dominated by young female respondents. Their education is quite mixed with a balanced number of those with higher education and some with lower education. However, most of them worked either in private or government departments and they were in the medium income group.

As far as the awareness about green products is concerned, overwhelmingly more than 70 per cent of respondents claimed they were aware a lot of the products. Only a small proportion of respondents had a little awareness about the products – 15.7 per cent. On the other hand, 13 per cent of them admitted they had never heard about green products. The same scenario is also observed when the question of the importance of green products was raised. Close to 90 per cent of respondents were positive about it, only 10 per cent claimed green products were of no importance.

Table 3 shows channels of information of green products amongst the respondents. It shows that the main sources of information came from the electronic media and printed materials. Overwhelmingly, close to 90 per cent of respondents relied on these two channels of information. The rest comes from educational institutions (2.8 per cent), supermarket (1.9 per cent) and other medium of information (8.3 per cent).

Table 4 shows the mean each item of perception of respondents towards green products. If cut off point of three is chosen to differentiate between positive and negative perception towards green products, it is observed that most items (except for items green product does not require extra effort and high knowledge about green product) were positively perceived. It shows respondents agreed with most of the items of green products. Amongst positively rated items, green product for better future received the highest mean (4.10), followed by

benefits of buying green products (3.97), green product is not a waste of money (3.89), green product is not a fad (3.53) and green product uses good ingredients (3.50).   The means of other items ranged between 3.0 to 3.5. While all items were positively rated, the only negative mean was observed for high knowledge about green product. This shows that despite all other positive attitudes towards various values attached with green products, respondents' knowledge about such products in Kuantan is still limited.

Table 5 shows the mean of each future prospect item of environmentally friendly products. Using a cut off point of 3 to differentiate those who have positive and negative perception of future prospects of green products, overwhelmingly the result show all items were rated positively.   These means indicate all respondents had a positive outlook on the future prospects of environmentally friendly products. The highest mean is support green products through buying items (4.00). This is followed by item eco-label should be introduced by the government (3.86), encourage others to buy green products (3.84) and particularly aware of contents to support green products (3.81). The lowest mean is observed for the item respondents will spend 25 per cent extra for green products.

Table 6 shows   total means of perception towards green products (3.42)   and future prospects of such products (3.80) on a scale of 1 to 5 (strongly disagree and strongly agree). These means indicate most of the respondents had a positive perception on environmentally friendly products and their future prospects.

 Table 7 shows one-sample statistics and one sample T-test of respondents' perception of green products. It is observed that the difference between mean perception (3.42) and mean difference of test value of 3 is 0.42, with the t value 13.448. Since the significant level of the test is less than 0.05, The null hypothesis (H_0) of the statement is rejected and the   alternative hypothesis (H_a) is accepted.   It shows respondents in the study have a positive attitude towards green products.

Table 8 shows one-sample statistics and one sample T-test of future prospects of green products. It is observed that the difference between mean perception (3.82) and mean difference of test value of 3 is 0.80, with the t value 15.25. Since the significant level of the test is less than 0.05, so the null hypothesis (H_0) of the statement is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_a) is accepted. As with the perception of green products, it shows a positive prospect of green products in the state in particular and in the country in general.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research has generated some interesting findings. First, overwhelmingly, the majority of the respondents have high awareness about green products. This is an encouraging result because previous research conducted by Rafi et al. (2003) found a majority of those with education (educated) consumers in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia had a little awareness of green products. Judging from the various educational background of respondents in this study, it shows an increasing awareness of green products over the last 5 years in the country. If this result is accepted at the face value, this is a positive development of green consumerism and green products in the area and in the country.

Second, as far as the medium of green products is concerned, Television and Newspaper/magazines are the two most popular channels of information of green products.   Other   sources   including supermarkets as well as higher institutions are still ineffective as mediums of dissemination information of green products. This finding is consistent with the previous study by Rafi et al (2003b) who found both channels disseminated environmentally friendly products amongst customers in the East Coast states. Judging from these findings, it is true to say television and newspapers   are   reliable   sources   of environmentally friendly products. There are a number of possible reasons why both mediums are   able   to   inculcate   awareness   of environmentally friendly products: First, the coverage of television and newspaper is huge – nationwide and covers various walks of life. As a result, these two channels are able to convey

information about environmentally friendly products, albeit they seldom cover the said products in considerable details. Second, is related to the nature of the said media. Both television and newspapers are in the same nature of industry, providing information to customers to gain profits. This can be explained in terms of by-directional effects of news coverage   and   increasing   awareness   of environmentally friendly products. In short, one strengthens the other. Since the public are more educated and aware of the importance of the environment both media could not but air or print information about environmental issues as a   result   of   human   interference   on   the environment. Furthermore, big businesses that jump into the green bandwagon prefer to use both channels to promote their products and project their images as environmentally friendly organisations.   Green advertising in the both media directly or indirectly increases the awareness of customers about green products. On the contrary, other mediums such as universities and supermarkets are not popular sources of green products, let alone they able to increase awareness of the public of the products. In Malaysia, all faculties (with the exception of the   science   faculty   –   environmental management study) including business schools do not have environmental subject on its own. If it is taught, it is only at the minimum, barely touching the relationship of production of products   or   products   themselves   with environmental crises (Mohd Rafi et al, 2003b, Mohd Rafi, 2010). As a result universities fail to inculcate environmentalism amongst their students.   It is also observed for supermarkets. At present, not much effort is being conducted by   supermarkets   and   other   business organisations to disseminate green products amongst the public. Even though at present a small number of hypermarkets have started introducing green bags but such a practice, however is only limited to a few international companies.   Since   the   management   of supermarkets are preoccupied with business activities, inculcating green awareness are secondary to them.

Third, it is also observed that respondents in this study have a positive attitude towards green products. All items (except the item related to

high knowledge of green products) show high level of agreement with the statements. This finding is consistent with the previous study by Mohd Rafi et al. (2003b). Respondents not only show high agreement with the benefits of green products but at the same time confident that usage of environmentally friendly products contribute to the environment. The same is also observed for ingredients of green products. However, respondents claim they do not have much information about the products. Perhaps this is related to the main source of information of the products – newspaper and television. Arguably, newspaper and television are only able to create awareness of the products, but not much information is attached with them. This is especially true because news pertaining to environmentally friendly products or green issues in both media are relatively small compared to politics, entertainment and sports (Mohd Rafi, 2008). Since both media receive disproportionate income from advertisements (mostly ordinary products and not environmentally friendly ones) as well as are instruments to disseminate news to toe the government's line, hardly any environmentally friendly products are successfully given coverage.

Lastly, it is observed that respondents have high prospects of environmentally friendly products. This is a good hope for the interface between business and the environment. A bright prospect of environmentally friendly products will have its own consequences such as more and more businesses will jump into the green bandwagon. Pressure from stakeholders against conventional products that are not environmentally friendly will undoubtedly force businesses to produce environmentally friendly products. When this is acceptable as a norm rather than isolated cases nationwide, a new era of interface between business and the environment will be established. However, one must be cautioned because those who are irresponsible will take advantage of green consumerism to gain profits even though their products are not as they claimed to be. This phenomenon is known as greenwashing. Usage of green label is one of the options to cope with this problem. Such a label needs to be certified by a third party or government agency to bring confidence amongst consumers. Even though at present Malaysia has it own green label, businesses are too slow to respond, as its inception only one company has used the Malaysian green label (Nik Ramli, personal communication on 25 October 2009). It is not hard to understand why it did so mainly because it was the requirements of the said company's buyers who are from developed countries.

In conclusion, the findings from this study provide insight into green products in terms of channels, perception and their prospects in Pahang in specific and the country in general. Overall, respondents in the study are aware of the products and have a positive attitude towards the products. They are also confident about the future prospects of the products. Newspapers and television were the main sources of information of the said products.

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Table 1: Demographic Profiles of Respondents

	Frequency(N)	Percentage(%)
Gender		
Male	43	39.8
Female	65	60.2
Age (years)		
15-20	14	13
21-30	47	43.5
31-40	26	24.1
41 and above	21	19.4
Education		
SRP	8	7.4
SPM	43	39.8
Diploma	23	21.3
Degree	34	31.5
Occupation		
Public sector	30	27.8
Private sector	41	38
Self-employed	16	14.8
Others	21	19.4
Monthly Income(RM)		
Less 1,000	37	34.3
1001-2000	49	45.4
2001-3000	16	14.8
3001 above	6	5.6

Table 2: Awareness about and the importance of green product

	Frequency(N)	Percentage(%)
Awareness about green Product		
Have never heard	14	13
A lot	77	71.3
A little	17	15.7
The Importance of green product		
Yes	97	89.8
No	11	10.2

Table 3: Channels of Information of Green Products

	Frequency(N)	Percentage(%)
Channel/source of information of Green Products		
Television	55	50.9
Newspaper/magazine	39	36.1
School/College/University	3	2.8
Supermarket	2	1.9
Others	9	8.3

Table 4: Means of the Items of Perception of Respondents on Green Products

Perceptions	Mean	SD
Benefits of buying green products	3.97	0.76
Green product is not a fad	3.53	0.68
Green product for better future	4.10	0.90
Green product does not require extra efforts	2.98	1.17
Green product is not a waste of money	3.89	1.10
High knowledge about green product	2.12	1.00
Effect of buying green product to the environment	3.36	1.21
Green product is not tested on animals	3.45	1.00
Green product has good value for money	3.29	0.94
Green product uses good ingredients	3.50	0.93

Table 5: Means of the items of future prospect of green products

Prospect of green products	Mean	SD
Support green products through buying items	4.00	0.80
Encourage others to buy green products	3.84	0.84
Eco-label should be introduced by government and related parties	3.86	0.75
Spend 25 per cent extra for green products	3.49	1.00
Particularly aware of contents to support green products	3.81	0.88

Table 6: Means of perception and future prospect of green products

Perception and Prospect of green products	No. Items	Mean	SD
Perception of green products	10	3.42	0.96
Future prospects of green products	5	3.80	0.54

Table 7: One-sample statistics and T-test of Perception of Green Products

One Sample Statistics				
Perception of green products	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std. Error
	108	3.42	0.33	0.03

One Sample Test				
Test Value = 3				
Perception of green products	t value	Df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
	13.45	107	0.001	0.42

Table 8: One-sample Statistics and T-test of Prospects of Green Products

One Sample Statistics				
Prospects of green products	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std. Error
	108	3.80	0.54	0.05

One Sample Test				
Test Value = 3				
Prospects of green products	t value	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
	15.25	107	0.001	0.80