

Beyond stereotype to the invisible conscious consumer

Issued by [IMC Conference](#)

30 Jun 2021

As conscious consumerism rapidly takes hold around the globe, companies are developing new and innovative ways to meet a growing demand for fairer, safer and greener products. But before companies begin a round of high-fives in the boardroom, we need to put a collective ear to the ground. In the race towards winning over the conscious consumer, some critical considerations are being overlooked. So says Dale Hefer, CEO of the annual Nedbank IMC Marketing is Business integrated marketing conference.

The groundswell of conscious consumerism has been well documented over the last few years, as consumers look to products and brands that reflect their own ethical and social standpoints. Last year an [Accenture survey](#) of almost 9,000 consumers in 20 markets around the world, found that 61% of respondents had been making more environmentally friendly, sustainable or ethical purchases since the start of the pandemic. Nine out of 10 claimed that they would continue doing so. As information becomes more accessible and as the impact of industry on natural resources is more keenly felt, the once far-off global concerns around issues such as air pollution, harmful food additives and even unfair labour practices have moved into the personal domain.

In swift response, companies are embarking on innovative strategies to retain and attract their conscious consumers. The evidence is everywhere: Unilever has announced plans to develop carbon labelling; both L'Oreal and Evian have committed to move towards carbon neutrality; H&M's technological innovations have enabled the production of clothing from recycled and recyclable materials; Ikea has launched a buyback and recycling scheme; and retailers everywhere are discontinuing single use plastic bags.



Source: Warren Kenneth de Souza on Unsplash

Alongside these innovations, marketers are working hard to win over the conscious consumer; not only in heralding their own sustainability efforts, but by aligning with wider social, environmental and even political causes. However, [a recent report](#) on conscious consumption (by creative international agency Cult) cautions that in the urgency to align and adapt to the perception of the conscious consumer, there is the risk that marketers and agencies could fall into “flawed patterns of thinking that might be based on unchallenged stereotypes and unconscious bias.” This underscores commentary by United States-based Pew Research Centre – which states that while brands may be going to great lengths to attract what they believe to be the profile of the conscious consumer, significant numbers of potential buyers are ignored due to a “prevailing, narrow interpretation of the audience.”



Gender-neutral marketing

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To interrogate this further, Cult in partnership with a British-based organisation [Diversity Standards Collective](#), gathered a focus group of twenty people who fell outside the common stereotype of the conscious consumer, yet who all practiced

conscious consumer behaviours. Discussions amongst the group revealed a belief that conscious consumption brands catered to the (largely white) 'tree hugger' or 'hippy' stereotype. Veganism was raised as an example, where certain group members who were from traditionally vegan cultures and part of the 'working class or racialised communities' felt invisible or ignored by conscious companies whose target markets appeared to be 'white western vegans'. Interestingly, this mirrored previous work by the Pew Research Centre, which in 2016 found that Black Americans were almost three times as likely to be vegan and vegetarian than other Americans.

Kantar, a leading data, insights and consulting company, gathered consumers into 'eco segments' in its [2020 research on sustainable living and waste reduction](#). (The survey included more than 80,000 respondents in 19 countries; although no countries in Africa were included.) Respondents were placed into one of three eco segments depending on their sustainability-focused behaviours (such as recycling). The segments were termed eco actives, eco considerers and eco dismissers.

Most of the respondents fell within the eco dismissers segment, accounting for 43% of all respondents. This was followed by eco considerers at 39% and eco actives at 20%. Eco dismissers are deemed to have little or no interest in environmental challenges in the world around them or in behavioural changes. This segment consisted largely of over-35s from lower social classes and large households. The segment had a combined potential spending power of around \$759bn compared to \$699bn of eco considerers and \$382bn of eco actives.

Kantar's conclusion regarding the eco-segmentation section of the report chose to focus primarily on the significant opportunity that existed within the eco considerers and eco actives segments, where "many opportunities lie with those who are most engaged". What the conclusion did not consider, at least in the report, was what might account for the poor response by eco dismissers to the issues of sustainability. Why do they have little to no interest in environmental challenges? Could one of the reasons be a disconnect between the messaging and calls to action of conscious companies and the needs and drivers of eco dismissers?

It is important to be clear that the discussion around conscious consumers is not based on the economic disparities between population groups; evidence indicates that price point still remains central to the purchase decisions of conscious consumers. For marketers, the discussion must be one of definition and whether there has been a full interrogation – devoid of unintentional bias or stereotype – of who their conscious consumer really is. In the absence of this critical undertaking, not only could sustainability strategies be rendered less effective, but swathes of people could be left out of our collective drive towards a sustainable future.

Dale Hefer is CEO of the Nedbank IMC, Africa's foremost integrated marketing conference aimed at local and African marketers, and a consecutively sold-out event in 2019 and 2020 (lauded as the 'virtual benchmark'). This year's event will be held on 29 July: One day. One stream. 18 top local and international speakers. No sales pitches – just hard-hitting and practical insights for anyone involved in any discipline of marketing. At any level. Marketing is Business™.

Hefer is a former Businesswoman of the Year, award-winning entrepreneur and the bestselling author of the marketing book From Witblits to Vuvuzelas. Her second book entitled Hustling, Happiness, and a Blow-Up Doll Named Percy was launched on 20 May 2021. Hefer is the founder of top advertising agency Chillibush, which she started in 1998 and sold in 2014. By then it was billing more than R100m per year.



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