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**Article**

## The Sustainable Marketing Canvas - A New Decision-Making Tool

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# Marketing Review St. Gallen



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## Purpose-Driven Marketing



# The Sustainable Marketing Canvas

## A New Decision-Making Tool

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In many industries there is a growing interest for sustainable marketing strategies. The solutions available today are fragmented and not scalable. To remedy this, the Sustainable Marketing Canvas (SMC) is introduced as a comprehensive tool for developing sustainable strategies. The German outdoor brand VAUDE is presented as a best-practice case study.

**Dr. Nikolina Fuduric**

**M**entioning “marketing” and “sustainability” in the same sentence still has the tendency to awaken disbelief. These concepts are perceived to take opposite sides on a values spectrum. However, the marketing discipline is not inherently against being purpose-oriented and serving the tenets of sustainability. The current theories and practices simply do not fully recognize its potential for impact on different levels of society. This is because marketing decision-making incentives still emphasize business performance through increasing demand, quarterly growth and a narrow perspective of who the customer is. There is no doubt that such short-term goals ignore long-term sustainability.

Despite the historic insularity of marketing’s purpose, questions about sustainable consumption and business practices have become more insistent. The days of a few perfunctory, requisite sentences about corporate social responsibility (CSR) in an annual report are gone and have now evolved into serious strategic priorities for firms (Epstein, 2018). As Unilever’s group CEO, Patrick Cescau, recently said:

“We have come to a point now where this agenda of sustainability and corporate responsibility is not only central to business strategy, but will increasingly become a critical driver of business growth ... how well and how quickly businesses respond to this agenda will determine which companies succeed and which will fail in the next few decades” (Epstein, 2018, p. 23).

Similarly, BlackRock, the world’s largest investment management firm with \$7 trillion in assets, has announced that it will place the focus of its investment strategy on climate change (Fink, 2020). In his letter to CEOs, BlackRock CEO Larry Fink stated: “Awareness is rapidly changing, and I believe we are on the edge of a fundamental reshaping of finance” (Fink, 2020).

Soon after that letter, BlackRock joined Climate Action 100+, a group of more than 370 investment managers with a combined \$41 trillion in assets. Together, the campaign’s members are pressuring the world’s biggest emitters of greenhouse gases to reduce their environmental impact.

The outlook is more pessimistic with regard to consumers. Research shows that an attitude–behavior gap exists, with consumer beliefs about sustainable consumption not translating into sustainable purchases (Peattie, 2016). Therefore, the responsibility for sustainable impact presently seems to rest with governments and firms. On the corporate level, marketing, with its broad sphere of influence, is perfectly poised to engender positive change. The problem, though, is that there is still an either/or mentality. Either we create green/social/sustainable marketing strategies or we

create “normal” marketing strategies. What would happen if this illusory boundary were erased? Can we imagine a situation in which professional marketing offers value propositions for a range of stakeholders, simultaneously taking into account human dignity, environmental stewardship and long-term economic viability?

The present knowledge on sustainable marketing has some sticky issues. Existing theory is insufficient for breaking through knowledge silos. Scaling best practices has proven insignificant and an incompatibility between the logic of marketing and of sustainability still exists (Mohr, Price, & Rindfleisch, 2016). What remains is the stubborn fragmentation of green and social marketing, as well as an ever-elusive common understanding of sustainable marketing.

This article puts forth that the lack of a comprehensive framework acts as a barrier to developing sustainable marketing strategies. A practitioner’s approach is taken by integrating the key domains of marketing and sustainability into a practical decision-making tool. This tool is the Sustainable Marketing Canvas (SMC) that is based on the 7Ps of marketing (product, price, place, promotion, people, process, physical evidence) and the 3Ps of sustainability (people, planet and profitability). VAUDE Sport GmbH & Co. KG, a sustainable German outdoor brand, is presented as a best-practice case study.

The methodological approach of this paper is qualitative. It began with a literature review establishing the theoretical and practical fragmentation of the sustainable marketing field. Then, secondary research evaluated VAUDE company documents and external communiqués. Finally, an expert interview with VAUDE CEO Dr. Antje von Dewitz took place in September 2019.

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The goals of this article are:

- To establish a theoretical basis as to why sustainable marketing is not comprehensive and scalable with the present knowledge and tools.
- To introduce the logic of the Sustainable Marketing Canvas (SMC) and its components.
- To exemplify VAUDE as a case to present the coherency and the usefulness of the SMC.
- To provide readers with insights on how to use the SMC in their firms.

### **The Sustainable Marketing Canvas and its Components**

The benefit of a canvas for practitioners is in its visual and multi-level structure (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). It reduces complexity to something manageable by providing horizontal and vertical coherence. A sustainable version of Osterwalder & Pigneur's canvas already exists in the Triple-Layered Business Model Canvas (Joyce & Paquin, 2016). Here, the addition of social and environmental factors rounds out a sustainability framework on the business strategy level (Joyce & Paquin, 2016). On the functional level, however, a literature review reveals that a decision-making and planning tool for sustainable marketing is still missing. Before introducing the Sustainable Marketing Canvas, understanding sustainable marketing is the first step.

#### **Sustainable Marketing**

Talking about sustainable marketing is like the old joke of four blind men holding different parts of an elephant trying to describe the animal to each other and no one agreeing. Yet, no one is wrong. They are just describing different aspects of the same thing, and the same holds true for sustainable marketing.

Ecological marketing began in the early 1960's as a reaction to Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring* (Carson, 2002). After her book, more scrutiny was given to production's effects on the environment. In the 1970's, marketing thought leaders joined in and broadened the conversation toward social justice and de-marketing (Kotler & Levy, 1971; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). In the 1980s/90s the discussion moved to green marketing, a more product- and ecologically oriented sustainability which is still present today.

Social marketing, on the other hand, has a long history with campaigns attempting to change human behavior from stopping smoking to eating healthier foods (Kotler, 2011). Both types of marketing have their dark sides witnessed as

green-washing and psychological manipulation. Instead of gaining consumers' trust, these fake sustainability promises added to more confusion and cynicism.

In the literature, there are two streams of scrutiny with regard to sustainable marketing. The first stream considers the action of sustainable marketing strategy (Braungart, McDonough, & Bollinger, 2007; Sheth, Sethia, & Srinivas, 2011) and the second stream the context where that action takes place (Andreasen, 1994; Bhattacharya, 2010; Elkington, 1997; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971; Peattie & Belz, 2010). The action of sustainable marketing is found in the process of planning, implementing and controlling the design/development of products, their pricing, promotion and distribution in a manner that meets stakeholder needs (Fuller, 1999; Kotler & Armstrong, 2014; Kotler & Levy, 1971; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). Peattie and Belz (2010) offer the contextual aspect where sustainable marketing involves building and maintaining sustainable relationships with customers, the social environment and the natural environment. The core of their idea is reminiscent of the concept of planet, people and profit or the 3Ps of the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997).

#### **The Triple Bottom Line**

The United Nation's Brundtland Report (United Nations, 1987) first provided a context for explaining sustainability that was categorized into three Es – environment, equity and economics. Later, the three Es were transformed into the three Ps (people, planet, profit) or the triple bottom line by Elkington (Elkington, 1997). Since then, this concept has been widely used as a framework for understanding sustainability's reach and context.

### **Management Summary**

Marketing is suited to make an impact on sustainability issues because its domain of influence is so broad. Presently, there is a fragmentation between "normal" marketing strategy and "specialty" disciplines like green, social, and sustainable marketing. The Sustainable Marketing Canvas is introduced as a tool to remedy this fragmentation. It offers a coherent and comprehensive framework for marketing practitioners to generate sustainable marketing strategies and plans. The outdoor brand VAUDE is used as an example case.

**Table 1: The Sustainable Marketing Canvas**

Triple Bottom Line	Product	Place	Price	Promotion	Physical Evidence	Processes	Employees
Planet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Product Design</li> <li>· Product Production</li> <li>· Disposal</li> <li>· Recovery</li> <li>· Reuse</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Transportation CO<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O Pollution</li> <li>· Warehousing/ Storage Issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· True Environmental Costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Materials Used</li> <li>· Green Promises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Buildings</li> <li>· Office Furniture</li> <li>· Office Supplies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Partnerships in Recycle, Share, Rent Economy</li> <li>· Certifications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Mobility</li> <li>· Services</li> </ul>
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Production Conditions</li> <li>· Exposures</li> <li>· Risks from Usage</li> <li>· Risks from Disposal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Transportation CO<sub>2</sub>/H<sub>2</sub>O Pollution Effects on People</li> <li>· Warehousing/ Storage Effects on People</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Fair Wages</li> <li>· Fair Benefits</li> <li>· Training</li> <li>· Health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Social Justice Promises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Work Conditions</li> <li>· Services at Work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Creating New Partnerships &amp; Communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Community Work</li> <li>· Charity Work</li> <li>· Employee Education</li> </ul>
Profit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Fair input Prices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· True Costs of Transportation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· True Cost Accounting to Reflect Fair Prices</li> <li>· Price Component Transparency</li> <li>· Value Pricing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Transparency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· True Costs</li> <li>· Usage/Waste</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· True Cost Accounting</li> <li>· Usage/Waste</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Profit Sharing</li> </ul>

Source: Own illustration.

The triple bottom line invites marketing strategy to see the social, ecological and long-term economic feasibility as factors equally important and in interaction with one another. The “people” variables refer to social dimensions of a community or region and may include measurements of education, equity and access to social resources, health and well-being, quality of life, and social capital. The “planet” factors represent the natural environment. They include air and water quality, energy consumption, natural resource use, and the presence of solid and toxic wastes. Finally, the “profit” aspect includes social and environmental dimensions to measure the true cost of doing business, for example, by pricing common pool resources (Elkington, 1997).

### The 7Ps and Sustainability

The 4Ps/7Ps have been criticized for being so conceptually flawed that as a paradigm they are deemed useless for sustainability challenges (Ahi & Searcy, 2013; Brindley & Oxborrow, 2014; Czinkota, Kaufmann, & Basile, 2014). On the other hand, there are a myriad of articles devoted to the nexus of sustainability and the individual Ps. A sampling includes: product topics having to do with design, recycling, upcycling (Braungart et al., 2007); pricing strategies used to regulate demand (Peattie, 2016) and true cost ac-

counting (Lovins et al., 1999); the discussion revolving around CO<sub>2</sub> reduction in the supply chain (Theißen & Spiller, 2014); promotions focusing on certification and label transparency (Borin, Cerf, & Krishnan, 2011), or promoting sustainable lifestyles (Gordon, Russell-Bennett, & Lefebvre, 2016). All this research is interesting and important but fragmented. Apart from this theoretical work-in-progress, practitioners need a tool for actionable, sustainable marketing strategies now.

### Introducing the Sustainable Marketing Canvas

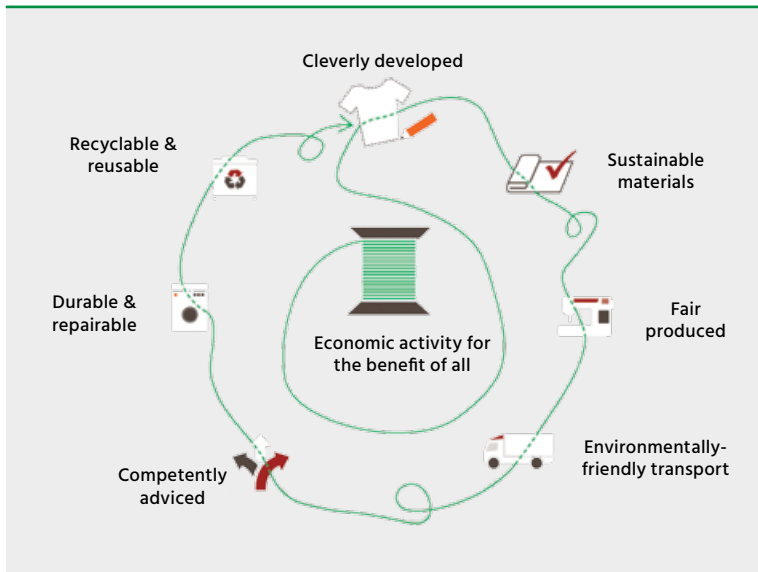
The solution to this fragmentation is to merge the 7P marketing strategy categories with the context of the triple bottom line to create the Sustainable Marketing Canvas (table 1).

The Sustainable Marketing Canvas follows this logic:

- 1) Map your present sustainable marketing strategies and actions.
- 2) Evaluate if these marketing strategies make sense in your industry, business & corporate strategy.
- 3) Create key performance indicators (KPIs) or consider if certifications exist to measure performance in each area.
- 4) Evaluate if new sustainable strategies should be included to harness new value propositions.



**Fig. 1: The VAUDE Value Chain**



Source: VAUDE, 2019.

- 5) Decide which sustainable marketing activities are “flagships” to be used to inform stakeholders through digital and analog content.
- 6) Regularly control and reevaluate.

The categories in each box of the canvas are suggestions for orientation and meant as prompts for reflection. Two examples of this process are:

- Promotion/people: What promises can we make about social justice in our value chain?
- Price/profit: Does our pricing strategy reflect true costs? Are all price components transparent?

The benefits of the SMC are manifold. It de-mystifies and reorders sustainable marketing by describing it more holistically. It reduces complexity. New value propositions are suddenly revealed because the marketing context has been broadened. Finally, it invites inter-disciplinary cooperation in mapping a sustainable way forward.

### **A Sustainable Marketing Canvas Case: VAUDE Sport GmbH & Co. KG**

Since 1974, VAUDE has been Europe’s premier sustainable outdoor brand. It employs 500 people at the company seat

in Obereisenbach, Germany. It is a family-run company and at its helm is CEO Dr. Antje von Dewitz. There is an extensive commitment not only to lower their impact on the planet, but also to take a visionary leadership role in the textile industry. Textile production is one of the worst ecological disasters in the world. It has huge resource needs, is chemical-intensive and engenders enormous waste. In terms of social justice, rarely is there good news about the wages, benefits and working conditions of textile workers.

The firm adheres to tenets of the “Economy for the Common Good” (Gemeinwohl-Ökonomie) where commercial success is measured not only in financial terms, but equally in social and ecological terms. Dr. von Dewitz stresses that the Economy for the Common Good is an excellent instrument to sensitize stakeholders to the true costs incurred by unsustainable business practices (von Dewitz, pers. comm.).

Dr. von Dewitz emphasizes that VAUDE’s sustainability strategies are not some random points of engagement for isolated topics, but instead are based on where “we, as a company, have significant influence and thus, responsibility” (von Dewitz, pers. comm.). It is important to VAUDE’s management that there are coherent and meaningful interlinkages in their sustainability activities. An example of an incoherent strategy would be VAUDE creating solutions for palm oil deforestation. Though important, it is not a sustainability strategy within their business focus.

Through this embeddedness in the textile industry and their coherent strategy, VAUDE has transformed their functional 7P marketing strategies into many value propositions

### **Main Propositions**

1. Think differently: Challenge the notion of siloizing sustainable marketing from “normal” marketing.
2. Re-structure: The comprehensive structure of the Sustainable Marketing Canvas (SMC) remedies siloization.
3. Simple adoption: The SMC is based on two well-known frameworks – the 7Ps and the triple bottom line.
4. Far-reaching: The SMC supports a sustainable marketing line of questioning across industries and firm sizes. It is suited for strategy as well as tactics.

for their stakeholders supporting 3P sustainability strategies (VAUDE, 2019). In our conversation in September 2019, I asked Dr. Antje von Dewitz how VAUDE's sustainability activities are managed along the value chain and translated into value propositions. She answered from the perspectives of the environmental, social and business impact (see figure 1).

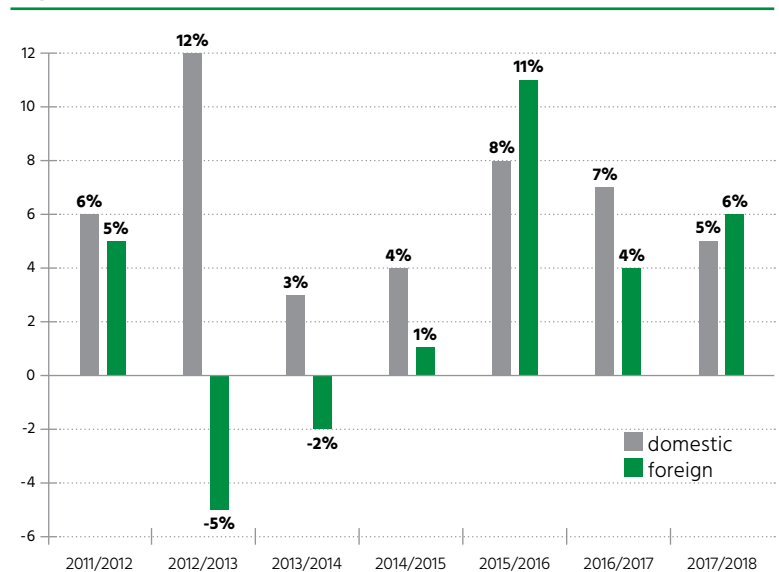
VAUDE manages its environmental impact with activities on different levels. The first step is to pay attention to sustainable product design, followed by a sustainable value chain. Their overseas suppliers get training in sustainable factory management. Logistics are optimized to reduce CO2 emissions. Solutions are created to give new life to what remains of their products or to dispose of them responsibly. There are explicit strategies for waste, wastewater, water usage, biodiversity, emissions, energy, material consumption, and transport (VAUDE, 2019).

VAUDE's social impact on their suppliers is managed through various policies, including: no forced labor, fair wages, equal opportunity, humane working hours and conditions. Their overseas production managers get people management training. They are members of FairWear, one of the strictest oversights in the textile industry. Their employees in Germany show high satisfaction rates and low turnover. VAUDE encourages women to step into leadership positions not by decree or quotas, but by creating an enabling culture. They provide on-site childcare, flexible hours, and home office possibilities. There is a commitment to support mobility through public transportation, car sharing, or biking to work. The physical buildings and office spaces are thoughtfully designed to increase well-being

## Lessons Learned

1. Only address sustainability topics relating to the firm's business or industry processes.
2. Map all present activities on the Sustainable Marketing Canvas for an overview.
3. Envision where the future of the firm should be and start strategizing next steps with KPIs.
4. Look for new sustainability value propositions that might be meaningful for target customers and stakeholders.
5. Feed your new value proposition stories into your content marketing strategy.

**Fig. 2: VAUDE Sales Growth 2011–2018**



Source: VAUDE, 2019.

based on sustainable and natural building materials. To support the employees' eating habits, there is an on-site "Bio-Kantine" (von Dewitz, pers. comm., September 2019). There is even an outreach program called the Sustainable Business Academy where VAUDE employees share their knowledge and experiences with firms and institutions through different educational programs.

Beyond environmental and social good works, a healthy profitability ensures that VAUDE has an economic future. Indicators show that sustainability is a profitable act of value creation. In comparison with the previous year, sales in 2018 increased by 5.3% to a total of 105 million Euros (figure 2). International sales have surpassed domestic sales for four years in a row.

VAUDE's particular form of business transparency engenders trust among their stakeholders. This, in turn, acts as a powerful market differentiator (von Dewitz, personal communication, September 2019). A benefit from their corporate and employer branding message is the ability to attract partners and employees who are aligned with their purpose (VAUDE, 2019). On the operative marketing level, this purpose seeking and living serves as a resource for riveting content. They use their value chain experiences to create meaningful, believable content for their analog and digital marketing.



**Table 2: VAUDE's Sustainable Marketing Canvas**

Triple Bottom Line	Product	Place	Price	Promotion	Physical Evidence	Processes	Employees
<b>Planet</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Green Shape: Own certification</li> <li>Blue Sign: Strictest, independent textile certification</li> <li>Certified natural, recycled &amp; biobased materials</li> <li>Packaging policy</li> <li>Quality management: Avoiding hazardous substances</li> <li>Avoidance of questionable technology (Gen-tech, nanotech)</li> <li>Recycle/Reuse strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduction of logistics footprint: Production in Germany and in EU</li> <li>Asia production: Clean &amp; transparent</li> <li>Transportation analysis to reduce CO2</li> <li>Green logistics policy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pay premium prices for environmentally sustainable supplies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recycled paper</li> <li>Minimize resources for promotions</li> <li>Environmentally friendly travel policy for sales team/ (all personnel)</li> <li>Forever Yours campaign promoting "Long term use, good care, maintenance, repair when necessary. Resell, donate or pass it on. Just don't discard."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Electricity &amp; Heating 100% renewable energy</li> <li>Biodiversity in Obereisenbach through green roofs, parking transformed into natural areas</li> <li>CO2 neutral headquarters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced business travel</li> <li>Environmental stewardship program for suppliers</li> <li>Product repair options</li> <li>VAUDE rental service – iRentit</li> <li>International nature protection projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mobility through the establishment of new bus lines in &amp; around Obereisenbach</li> <li>Car sharing scheme</li> <li>Bike-to-Work initiative</li> <li>Recycling/ composting at work</li> </ul>
<b>People</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supplier empowerment program</li> <li>No hazardous materials for customers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No hazards in warehousing VAUDE products and inputs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fair wage for production</li> <li>Training benefits for production</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promises upheld through visits, programs, and extra initiatives "Biomass ovens in China"</li> <li>Transparent and fact-based sustainability report</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clean, healthy work conditions in Asia.</li> <li>Attractive, lightfilled offices in Germany.</li> <li>Climbing wall</li> <li>Bike racks close to building</li> <li>Sustainable/ natural building materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asian worker training, humane work conditions (Fairwear)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Made in Germany" local jobs</li> <li>Childcare</li> <li>Bio-Cafeteria</li> <li>Trust culture</li> <li>Education</li> <li>Work/private life balance</li> <li>Active development of women in management</li> </ul>
<b>Profit</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Product prices reflect fair input prices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transportation is minimized through green logistics as a cost saver</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Management price/cost transparency for employees and suppliers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Management of promotions campaigns with focus on less waste and cutting costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cost cutting through renewable sources of energy</li> <li>Reduced energy bills due to green roofs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All processes are assessed for resource maximization and reduction of waste</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fair wage</li> </ul>

Source: VAUDE, 2019.

The interview with Dr. von Dewitz revealed a variety of VAUDE's sustainable strategies. A clear picture of how they fit into one holistic sustainable marketing strategy is shown in VAUDE's SMC in Table 2.

In VAUDE's pursuit of transparency, each aspect of the SMC has a KPI or an external certification as a benchmark of how they are doing. As a result, VAUDE has a litany of international and German awards and certifications. They


include, but are not limited to, the 2017 European Business Award for Environmental & Corporate Sustainability, the German Sustainability Award, FAIRWEAR and, last but not least, their own label, GREENSHAPE (for more detailed VAUDE KPI & certification information, see <https://csr-report.vaude.com>).

What can firms learn from VAUDE's Sustainable Marketing Canvas? First, the simple act of mapping activities

supports big picture thinking and helps avoid amputated sustainable actions. Second, complexity is reduced to simplicity, which aids inter-disciplinary planning. Third, filling out a canvas is not a sustainable action in itself. Sustainability results from the actions that are inspired by the canvas and from how they are carried out and measured.

## Conclusion

As much as marketing has had a role in hindering sustainability, it also has solutions because its domain of influence is so broad. So far, the disciplines of green, social, and sustainable marketing have made a difference, but they have not

scaled. Scaling can happen if there is a systematic, integrated and comprehensive framework bringing sustainable marketing concepts into one strategic and operative whole. The Sustainable Marketing Canvas is an attempt at explicitly linking the functions of marketing to its effects on the environment, on social justice and on long-term profitability. It is also a call for action. McDonagh and Prothero (2014) ask: “Can marketing and marketers be trusted with the topic of sustainability?” According to Antje von Dewitz, her team and this author, not only should marketing be trusted with sustainability, it should have a leading role at transforming why and how we do business. 

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