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THE DIFFICULTY OF ETHICAL APPLICATION IN SMALL BUSINESS MARKETING AS REGARDS THE DIGITAL CUSTOMER

Sergio Sánchez Díaz

Abstract: Marketing has evolved since the 1960s from a product perspective to a consumer perspective, with companies now using marketing to be more sociable, credible, and trustworthy. The academic study and application of ethics in marketing processes has been the subject of study since the very beginnings of marketing itself. But most theories of ethics in marketing have focused on large companies or business corporations. Small companies have mostly tried to adopt the marketing processes and actions of large companies, and this has made it impossible for them to apply their own ethical processes in the marketing of their companies. And even more so when these processes are characterised by the search for the common good, social marketing, environmental or corporate social responsibility. We should add to this the fact that communication between large companies and their customers is largely digital. Small companies do not seek ethical processes in their digital communication, but they rather copy the big companies. In this sense, it is crucial to propose an answer to how we can generate ethical marketing in small companies and how it can generate increased sales.

Keywords: *ethics and marketing, marketing and society, marketing philosophy, small business.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing has evolved in four stages that P. Kotler has developed throughout his bibliography up to the present day and which he summarises schematically in his book (Marketing 5.0, 2021). It begins with a production stage based on manufacturing capacity thanks to industrialisation, which led to lower costs in operating processes (in this context, Taylorist and Fordist theories were developed in the field of marketing). This was followed by a sales-orientation and then a market-orientation, in which the theories of marketing and the study of society really emerged. We are now in the fourth stage: it is characterised by a social orientation. And while it is true that, in parallel, predictive processes are being implemented in marketing through artificial intelligence (Ramar, 2023), these are digital tools that are used to achieve objectives, but they do not generate business missions. Today, large companies focus their strategic missions on being more sociable, seeking corporate, environmental and social responsibility; strategies and actions that they develop to be credible and have the trust of consumers, who are not only looking for a company that provides them with a product, but one that contributes to a better world.

These formulas fall under the umbrella of what is considered social marketing, which may or may not be ethical per se. Social marketing is not a new concept — it was developed by Kotler and Zaltman, and this first definition is based on the design, implementation and control of programmes aimed at influencing the acceptance of social ideas, and includes considerations of product planning, pricing, communication, distribution and marketing research. (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). And they are grouped into four lines of work: environment, social participation, harm prevention and health improvement. Likewise, in 1983, the term "cause marketing" first appeared in a campaign carried out by American Express (Walters, 2015). Cause marketing "is the process of formulating and executing marketing activities characterised by the company's offer to contribute to a specific cause when customers make a purchase". (Varadarajan and Menon, 1988, p.59). The customer relationship is established on the basis of the value added by the company through socially responsible actions.

There is a consensus definition of social marketing published jointly by the International Social Marketing Association, the European Social Marketing Association and the Australian Social Marketing Association in October 2013, that reflects these characteristics: