

Consumer Activism to Secure Ecological Objectives: Recent Boycott Initiatives Directed Against Major Corporations

This interview study attempted to advance knowledge of consumer activist efforts to secure ecological objectives. The study focus was on 12 environmental protection boycotts and 12 animal rights boycotts. Two noteworthy study findings are 1) almost all of the boycotts were media-oriented rather than marketplace-oriented, and 2) most of the boycotts did not realize their objectives. Implications of the study findings are discussed for ecological change agents seeking to influence corporate policies.

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A concern with perceived threats to environmental quality, for humans and non-humans alike, has prompted new groups to form to vigorously protest the offensive actions of corporations. Among the participants in the protest actions have been environmental protection (EP) groups as well as animal rights (AR) groups. The concerns of the EP groups have included destruction of the rainforest, biodegradability of consumer product packaging, recycling of oil in the production of automobiles, and the seemingly needless destruction of wildlife in natural settings, e.g., dolphins. AR activists have shared the environmentalists' focus on wildlife but they have also concerned themselves with the treatment of animals in captivity. Particularly offensive to these groups is the use of laboratory animals in consumer product development and testing (e.g., cosmetics), especially if this results in cruel treatment or death to the animals.

The targets of the boycott actions have included well-known brand names representing the consumer products and services of major corporations. Included here were automobile manufacturers (General Motors, Chrysler, Peugeot and Mitsubishi), food processors (Heinz and Bumble Bee Seafoods), drug companies (Bristol-Myers, Squibb, and SmithKline Beecham) and cosmetics firms (Avon, Mary Kay, Chesebrough-Ponds, and Neutrogena). Still other boycott targets have included American Express, Benetton, Dow Chemical, Georgia-Pacific, Gillette and Weyerhaeuser.

While several consumer tactics have been used by protest groups, their dominant tactic has been the consumer boycott. As several observers have noted (e.g., Putnam and Muck, 1991), unlike other tactics, the consumer boycott threatens the very survival of corporations by depriving them of sales. And this threat is not viewed as a empty one by American business; indeed, a Sentry Insurance Company survey in 1977

found that boycotts were the expression of consumer protest which American business leaders perceived as more effective than any other (Sentry Insurance, 1977).

The primary objective of the empirical study reported herein was to secure an understanding of contemporary consumer boycotts dealing with EP and AR issues. These two issues, while relatively absent in the boycott agendas of the 1970s (Friedman, 1985) and the early 1980s (Garrett, 1987), have emerged as major concerns of boycott efforts in the late 1980s and early 1990s, reflecting the larger contemporary role assumed by the EP and AR movements.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure consisted of three stages.

Stage 1: Literature Review

A major effort was made to secure information pertaining to EP and AR boycotts occurring in the five-year time period for the study (1987-1991). This time period was selected since boycotts occurring prior to it were likely to be too old to yield much useful information from interviewees, and boycotts occurring later were likely to be too new to provide information about long-term effects.

The data sources drawn upon included 15 literature retrieval indexes for newspapers and magazines. Also included were file materials from two major boycott resource centers - the Institute for Consumer Responsibility and Co-op America. The literature search identified more than 100 EP and AR boycotts.

Stage 2: Mail Survey

To secure more information about these boycotts a brief screening questionnaire was prepared and mailed to the principals representing the boycott groups and targeted firms. Accompanying each screening questionnaire were copies of materials secured in Stage 1 describing the boycotts. To make matters easy for the addressees, each was simply asked to check the materials for accuracy and completeness, and to provide, where appropriate, the necessary corrections and additions. A current address and phone number were also requested for the individual most knowledgeable about the boycott in the addressee's organization (boycott group or targeted firm) who could serve as a contact person for additional questions.

Stage 2 yielded 32 instances of matches, or cases in which the two parties to a boycott (boycotter and boycottee) both responded to the survey and included information on contact persons.

Stage 3: Personal Interviews

An effort was made here to interview each member of the 32 pairs, either in person or by telephone. Two interview forms were developed and pretested, one for the boycott group and one for the target corporation. An extensive campaign in mid-1992 yielded personal interviews with both members of 24 matched pairs (boycotter and boycottee). Of the 24 boycotts, 12 dealt with EP issues and 12 with AR issues.

Study Highlights

Since the total number of boycotts of each type was small, the data analysis was primarily descriptive with attention given to a variety of boycott dimensions noted elsewhere (Friedman, 1991). Due to space limitations we focus here on the major data trends or highlights uncovered by this interview study.

At the outset it should be noted that interview studies which focus on highly publicized group conflicts are likely to suffer from significant methodological limitations and the current study is no exception. As a result its findings should be treated with considerable caution.

With this caveat in mind it is well to ask what generalizations are suggested by the interview responses. Of special interest are generalizations which are consistent with past research findings on consumer activism. Among the data suggestions of interest are the following:

1. Contemporary EP and AR boycotts tend to be national in scope.
2. Contemporary EP and AR boycotts tend to be more instrumental than expressive in character.
3. Contemporary EP and AR boycotts tend to be relatively long affairs with many lasting for a year or more.
4. Contemporary EP and AR boycotts tend to assume a militant status featuring such actions as picketing and demonstrations.
5. Contemporary EP and AR boycotts tend to target producers and processors rather than retailers.
6. Contemporary EP and AR boycotts tend to be more media-oriented than marketplace-oriented.
7. In seeking targets for their actions, the largely media-oriented EP and AR boycott groups tend to look for image-related weaknesses to exploit through the skillful use of dramatic devices and techniques.
8. However, marketplace-oriented boycott considerations, such as product characteristics, are not ignored in EP and AR actions.
9. Communications between boycotters and targets in contemporary EP and AR actions follow no simple pattern.
10. Whether measured by execution or consequence criteria, the success rate for EP and AR boycotts tends to be modest.

The Role of Consumer Activism in Securing Ecological Goals

A key concern of the interview study was to determine what lessons could be learned from the boycott experiences to help activists work more effectively to secure ecological goals. In this section we address this concern.

First it should be noted that almost all observers agree that a major societal transformation will be required to move markedly closer toward realizing the ecological goals confronting humanity. And this transformation, which would impact such critical areas as energy utilization, pollution control, and waste disposal, cannot succeed without the help of major corporations. There are many ways to secure their participation (government regulation, tax incentives, etc.), and consumer activism in general, and consumer boycotts in particular, would appear to be one of them. Indeed, a case could be made for organized consumer action in the form of boycotts as one of the more attractive tactics available to ordinary people seeking to secure ecological

goals. For, in theory, the boycott permits such individuals to exercise "economic democracy" every day with their purchases in the marketplace by rewarding companies whose actions are ecologically sound and by punishing companies whose actions are not.

The critical question that naturally arises is how well economic democracy theory translates into practice. The findings of this modest study suggest that what works in theory may not work in practice. While it is true that some of the boycotts were effective, most were not. And those which were effective were characterized by certain psychological properties that may limit the usefulness of the consumer boycott tactic to the promoters of ecological goals. In particular, the objectives of the successful boycotts tended to be cognitively simple and emotionally appealing. Indeed, some of these objectives took on the character of catchy slogans, such as "save the dolphins" (from the nets of the tuna fishermen) or "save the rabbits" (from the tests of the cosmetics developers). Unfortunately, the complexities inherent in many ecological recommendations for corporate practices are not likely to be reducible to simple slogans for energizing and directing boycott campaigns.

The successful boycotts apparently worked not because consumers stopped buying the boycotted goods but because the boycotters were able to secure news media coverage of the offending practices of the targeted firms. This suggests that change agents intent upon securing ecological goals through changes in corporate behavior, may wish to consider mounting major media-oriented boycott campaigns, especially if the boycott objectives can be reduced to simple slogans. Such campaigns are often expensive and, indeed, it was the relatively large and well-funded organizations in the study which were able to initiate and sustain them.

References

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Endnote

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