Chapter 20
Consumer Boycotts as a Consequence of Consumerism

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ABSTRACT

Consumerism is not a new concept for marketing, but it has grown in importance in the recent years. Researchers have studied consumerism from within different dimensions. However, its relationship with consumer boycotts has not been dealt with accurately. A consumer boycott is a type of consumer behaviour in which consumers collectively prefer not to use their purchasing power towards a product, brand, or all products of a country. Motivations for participating in boycotts differ in accordance with various factors such as consumers’ beliefs, needs, or attitudes. Being boycotted by consumers may cause economic damage and decreased amount of reputation incurred in return. Organizing a boycott and calling for people’s participation is much easier today than it used to be in the past. The Internet, especially social media, is an effective tool to inform people about boycotts and free of charge. However, that does not mean all the information circulating in the Internet is always of a reliable nature. In this chapter, the case of Danone in Turkey is thoroughly analyzed. Danone has been the target of Turkey’s biggest Internet smear campaign which resulted in 26% shrinkage in its whole category sales. The aim of this chapter is to examine the case of Danone in Turkey as an example of the relationship between consumerism and consumer boycotts. The research for the case of Danone, which has a special importance in Turkey, uses secondary sources such as the daily newspapers, news pages in Internet, and Danone’s web page.

INTRODUCTION

Consumerism is a concept of growing importance especially for the last decades. Generally it covers all activities which are aimed to protect consumers from some illegal activities such as fraud or negative concepts such as misperception etc. However it also refers to the consumer activism against those illegal activities or negative concepts. One of the most important tools for consumers to protecting themselves is boycotts. Consumer boycotts are used for various reasons such as unethical marketing activities, religious and political reasons. The main goal of boycotts is to lead to the desired change in the policies of the targeted body, thus boycotts can well be described as an effective economic weapon that the consumers have. With developing information technology and proliferation of the Internet related social media, it is nowadays relatively easy and costless to call people

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to boycott. Individuals and/or organizations share information with people about the reason why the target firms or countries should be boycotted. However, diffusion of information via the Internet is difficult to control and may lead to unsolicited results for some companies due to misinformation. One of the striking misinformation examples is that of Danone in Turkey. Back in the year 2005, on a website, by means of a formal document, it was claimed that Danone products had harmful ingredients for children’s mental health, with a signature underneath belonging to a renowned professor from a university in Turkey. Although this was false news, millions of people came to believe it and it ultimately led to 26% shrinkage for Danone in the Turkish market. This study analyzes the boycott concept as a consequence of consumerism while at the same time looking into the details of Danone case.

CONSUMERISM

Consumerism is a social and economic order that is based on the systematic creation and fostering of a desire to purchase goods or services in even greater amounts. The term “consumerism” is also used to refer to the consumerist movement or consumer activism, which seeks to protect and inform consumers by requiring such practices as honest packaging and advertising, product guarantees, and improved safety standards (Mirchevska & Markova, 2011). Consumerism defines a specific analysis category that studies the phenomenon that came up with mass production development and consumption expansion (Bostan, Burciu, & Grosu, 2010). It has been defined for example as “organized group pressure which has become a set of values held not only by the consumers of a company’s products but also within the wider society” (Jones et al., 2005, p. 35). Kotler defined consumerism “as a social movement designed to augment the rights and powers of buyers in relation to sellers” (Varadarajan & Thirunarayana, 1990, p. 6). By consumerism, it is understood that assembly of ideologies regarding social activism, pressure groups (consumer associations) and in general that trend that tries to raise the rights and the consumer’s power in relation to the entities (Bostan, Burciu, & Grosu, 2010).

In the twentieth century capitalism, the focus shifted increasingly from production to consumption, resulting in a parallel shift from the control and exploitation of workers to the control and exploitation of consumers. Capitalism has created a controllable “consuming mass” to complement the control of the “producing mass”. The central concern here is to concentrate the means of consumption on the control of consumers in order to get them to spend as much as possible (Assad, 2007).

Protecting the consumer is not an invention of our times, the consumer protection legislation, for example against altered food and scale fraud appears ever since the Old Testament and also in the Hammurabi’s Code of Laws (Bostan, Burciu, & Grosu, 2010). Various scholars have traced the roots of consumerism back to the 16th century England, with its inspiration seeming to come from the Renaissance Italy (Brunner, 1996). The emergence of consumer-oriented societies has become the central trait of our era. In such societies, sustaining a productive economy demands that consumption should become a way of life, along with the purchase and usage of goods to be converted from a utilitarian exercise to ritualistic excess. The consumerism phenomenon was born in the beginning of the 20th century in the USA, where in the year 1906, the first mass protests were so powerful that they constrained the federal government to approve a very important set of rules to the industry at that time (Bostan, Burciu, & Grosu, 2010, p. 20).

The consumer society had already expanded from the USA to Western Europe and Japan by the 1960s (Assad, 2007). In the early 1960’s, consumer protection movement started in the United States and then in Europe as a result of consumer
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