

# The communication of the sustainability of products and services

**Lia Krucken**

Doctor in Production Engineering by Santa Catarina Federal University (*Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina – UFSC*), with research in conjunct with the Department of Industrial Design of Politecnico di Milano. Researcher and professor in the Minas Gerais State University (*Universidade do Estado de Minas Gerais – UEMG*) and in innovation programs in the Institute of Managerial Competences of FIAT and in the Foundation Dom Cabral. (CV updated in 2009)

lia.krucken@gmail.com

**Christoph Trusen**

Doctor in Agrarian Science, graduated in Economy, specialist in Rural Development and in the Management of Natural Resources. Consultant of the German Technical Cooperation in the Pilot Program for the Protection of the Brazilian Rainforests (PPG7). (CV updated in 2009)

christoph.trusen@gmail.com

## Introduction

A product or service that we buy and use is the result of a conjunct of activities and choices, conscious or not, that were valued by the actors that compound its value chain. It involves the use of resources of the biodiversity of a determined territory and ecosystem, based on the knowledge related to the cultivation and to the fabrication process of combined elements that determine its essence and personality.

This way, the final configuration of a product represents a series of decisions and

projectual choices, conscious or not, aligned or not. Being conscious of this decision process may orient the efforts of the many actors towards the development of a strategic vision and the definition of shared objects. That is, it means consciously seeking for the coherence of the system that originates the product and, therefore, of the product itself.

Promoting the “visibility”, as well as the development of conditions so the potential of the local resources can be converted into a real and lasting benefit, is a necessity that is getting more accentuated with globalization and that represents a great challenge for the emerging economies.

Design<sup>1</sup> may contribute significantly in this context, looking for ways of making visible to society the history behind products. Telling the “product’s history” means communicating its associated historical, cultural and social elements, making it possible for the consumer to evaluate and appreciate the product in a broader way, considering for example, the environmental services inbuilt in the product. This way, the communication may contribute for the adoption and valorization of sustainable practices in the production, commercialization and consumption.

## Qualities and values of the products and services

The way people evaluate quality is a subjective process, strongly influenced by cultural issues. Many “quality dimensions” are considered in the choice of a product or service. For the consumer, the value of a product is directly related to its “perceived quality”<sup>2</sup>, bond that is built in relation to the product, its origin and the place where it is exposed and commercialized.

The perceived quality of a product or service is the conjunct result of six dimensions of value:

a) functional or utilitarian value – measured by objective attributes, it is characterized by the “adaptation for use”. It refers to the intrinsic qualities of

---

1 “Design is a creative activity that aims to establish the multiple qualities of the objects, processes, services and their systems in their entire life cycle. Therefore, design is a central factor for the innovative humanization of the technologies and a crucial factor for the economical and cultural change” - International Council of Societies of Industrial Design - ICSID (2005).

2 This topic was firstly approached by Zeithaml (1988) in the evaluation of the quality of services.

the product, its composition, origin and properties; to the safety of consumption (sanitary control in relation to the raw materials, to the form of production and commercialization, to the ingredients and additives, to the safety of the package etc.) and to ergonomic aspects;

b) emotional value – with an emotional character, it incorporates affective motivations related to the sensorial perceptions, that comprehend tactile, visible, olfactory and gustatory components, and to the feeling linked to the purchase and to the consumption/utilization of the product. It also incorporates our “memorial” dimension, related to positive and negative memories of past events;

c) environmental value – mainly linked to environmental services throughout the sustainable use of natural resources such as forests. The main environmental services are the protection of watersheds (production of water with a good quantity and quality), the conservation of the biodiversity and the carbon sink in the context of climate changes;

d) symbolic and cultural value – deeply connected to the other dimensions of quality, it is related to the importance of the product in the production and consumption systems, of the traditions and related rituals, of the myths and spiritual meanings, of historical origin, of the belonging sense that it evokes. It is associated to the desire of manifesting social identity, belonging to an ethnic group, political positioning, among other intentions. Strongly influenced by the sociocultural context (time, place) and by the contemporaneous phenomena, this dimension is related to the “spirit of time”<sup>3</sup> and to the condition of interpreting the product in an esthetic referential;

e) social value – it is related to the social aspects that permeate the processes of production, commercialization and consumption of the products (example: equitable distribution of the benefits, inclusion, quality of relations, well-being, recognition). The moral values of the citizens and the actuation and reputation of the organizations in society are also included in this dimension;

f) economical value – with an objective character, it is based on the relation cost/benefit in monetary terms.

These dimensions can be represented in the “star of value” (FIG. 1).

---

<sup>3</sup> The “spirit of time” or *zeitgeist* (from German) refers to the intellectual and cultural climate of a determined epoch, to the spirit and appearance of a generation. (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2008).

## DIMENSIONS OF VALUE OF A PRODUCT OR SERVICE

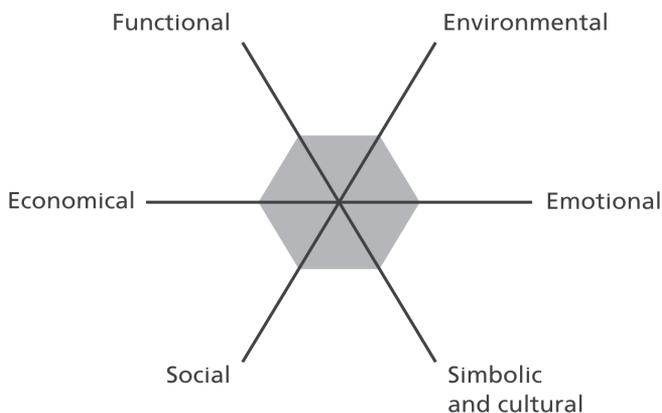


FIGURE 1 - Star of value: dimensions of value of products and services  
Source: KRUCKEN (2005, 2008), adaptation by the authors.

The values are established in an integrated and dynamical way. We may consider, therefore, that the quality is a result of how the product is produced and consumed: it involves the production and consumption systems, the producers, consumers and the whole net that is developed around the product or service.

If we consider a wide approach of sustainability, we may observe that all the dimensions of value of products and services are inter-related. The consumer, by buying products in a conscious way, plays a fundamental role in the valorization and preservation of these dimensions of quality. As Manzini *et al.* (2006) reinforces, the relations between the quality of the products (in their biological and cultural diversities) and the producers, and between the places of production and the consumers, must be recognized.

### How to communicate the sustainability of products and services?

By evaluating a product, people look for information that can be seen as "warranties" or "clues": the identification of the producers, elements of the

product's history, identity markers and indicators of the socio-environmental quality of the production process. These types of information help to perceive if the product is authentic and traceable. The consumer, therefore, can take a conscious decision and throughout the purchase of a determined product contribute with the conservation of the biodiversity or with the combat against climate changes.

Both characteristics – authenticity and traceability – are becoming more and more important due to the proliferation of products in the market and to the food crisis, like the mad cow disease and the avian flu. The food catastrophes, in fact, announce that the limits of the current production and consumption systems have been already over passed and they signalize a necessity of producing and consuming less.

The technical traceability<sup>4</sup> of products is directly related to the safety of consumption and to their objective attributes. However, it is necessary to consider other aspects to evaluate their quality.

The main objective and subjective elements that support the perception of a product's quality are: a) geographical indications of its origin; b) indications of the technical quality of the product, of the process and of its control; indications of the socio-environmental and economical qualities of the product and of its production chain.

Information related to trade and to the production of family agriculture are examples of indications that help the consumer evaluating the profile of the product in what concerns its sustainability. The communication about practices used in the production is also essential.

The indicators are especially important for consumers that are distant from the context of production or that do not know the products or services, but need signs of trust. The efficient communication brings visibility to the relation between who produces and who consumes, contributing to bring consciousness about the importance of the practices of production and of the choices of consumption.

Especially about the environmental value of products and services, we may observe the tendency of looking for strategies to promote and to communicate it

---

<sup>4</sup> Traceability is "the capacity of tracing the history, the application or the localization of an item throughout registered identifications" (ABNT, 1997).

in a global level. This topic is also approached by Trusen (2008), Krucken (2009) and Paggiola *et al.* (2005).

## Strategies to communicate the sustainability of products and services: examples

Initiatives to promote consciousness about the choices of consumers and the impact of their lifestyle have been a stand out in the past years. With the purpose of illustrating the reflection conducted in this text, we present two illustrations of strategies to communicate the sustainability in products and services.

### Illustration 1 – Environmental table

The environmental table supplies information about the origin and the impact of the ingredients used in products and packages (FIG. 2). It is an initiative promoted by the Brazilian cosmetic company Natura.

Environmental information\*

PRODUCT	renovable vegetal origin	88,3%
	natural vegetable	0%
	with certification of origin	88,0%
PACKAGE	recycled material	5,5%
	recyclable material	12,4%
	recommended number of refills	0

\* percentages calculated on dry basis

FIGURE 2 – Environmental table adopted in cosmetic products by the company Natura

Source: Natura, 2008.

In the table there is information that go from the raw material to the package waste. The objective is to stimulate the consciousness of the consumer in relation to the impact of his choices over the environment, the society and himself.

## Illustration 2 – The “Real Cost” and CO2 emission

“Real Cost” is an initiative that has the objective of promoting consciousness about the environmental impact of choices made daily by Internet users. The information about the “real cost” of a service is similar to a nutritional table of food products, but it indicates the emissions of carbon dioxide. When buying an airplane ticket, for example, one can compare the environmental impacts of the choice of traveling by plane, car, bus, train and other transport means (FIG. 3).

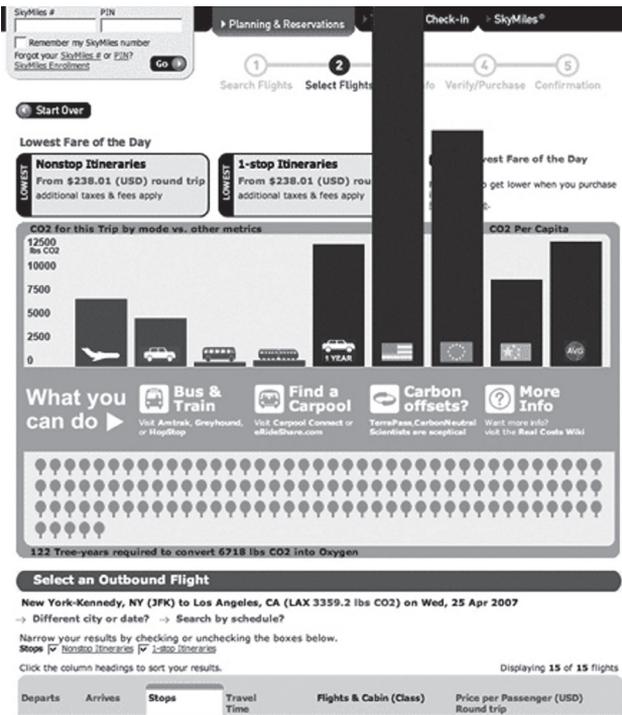


FIGURE 3 – Indication of the “real cost” of an airplane ticket  
Source: www.therealcost.com, 2008.

In this process of bringing consciousness about the alternatives of choice may stimulate the transformation of a passive consumer into an engaged citizen – according to the idealizers of the visualization strategy of the “real cost”.

The search for the transparency of the products aims to stimulate the active participation of the consumer that, throughout his choices, may support the development of sustainable value chains. An initiative that reinforces this consideration is the commercialization of "ethic-solidary" products<sup>5</sup>. Throughout the packages and materials of support (posters, books, calendars etc.), the consumer receives information that contribute to identify the qualities of the products and of the associated environmental products<sup>6</sup>. For those qualities to be perceived by the consumers, it is necessary to develop communication strategies that are adequate to the different contexts, stimulating consciousness about the values involved in the production and consumption. In other words, it is necessary to make a "translation" of the values inbuilt in the product into information and images of easy comprehension by the consumer.

## Final considerations

Some indicators may effectively help the consumer to evaluate the sustainability of a product or service. The information must give transparency in relation to the items that support this evaluation, like the identification of ingredients, processes of fabrication, origin, environmental impact, package, values adopted by the producers, environmental services associated to the product/service, among others.

For the communication to be aligned with the message being transmitted, it is essential to consider some aspects:

- the images and texts must be of easy and fast comprehension;
- the language must be adequate to the target-public;
- the message must motivate and show coherence in relation to the values of the producers, brand and lifestyle of the target-public.
- the communicational mean must support the message, offering other elements of reference (example: a package that allows refill communicates values related

---

5 "Fair trade" is a partnership based on the dialog, transparency and respect, that seeks more equity in the international trade[...]. Organizations of Ethical and Solidary Trade (sustained by consumers) are actively engaged in supporting producers, consciousness and campaigns for changes in the rules and practices of the conventional international trade." (International Fair Trade Association – IFTA, 2008). Available at: <[www.ifat.org](http://www.ifat.org)>.

6 Many publications about products of solidary economy were organized by Lorigliola (2004), aiming to bring consciousness to the citizens about the role of the consumer in the promotion of sustainable value chains.

to sustainability and may strengthen the image of the product).

At last, we highlight the design as an important ally in the development and in the communication of innovative and sustainable solutions, getting producers and consumers closer, giving transparency and strengthening the values that pervade production and consumption.

## References

ASSOCIAÇÃO BRASILEIRA DE NORMAS TÉCNICAS - ABNT. NM ISO 8402 - *Gestão da qualidade e garantia da qualidade: terminologia*. Rio de Janeiro, 1997.

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF SOCIETIES OF INDUSTRIAL DESIGN – ICSID. *Definition of design*. Disponível em: <[http://www.icsid.org/about/Definition\\_of\\_Design](http://www.icsid.org/about/Definition_of_Design)>. Acesso em: 18 Jan. 2005.

KRUCKEN, L. *Design e território: valorizando identidades e produtos locais*. São Paulo: Nobel, 2009.

\_\_\_\_\_. Designing innovative forms of intermediation and communication: Towards sustainable production and consumption systems. In: CONFERÊNCIA INTERNACIONAL CHANGING THE CHANGE - WORLD DESIGN CAPITAL TORINO, 2008, Torino. *Proceedings of changing the change Conference*. Torino: Allemandi, 2008. 1 CD-ROM.

\_\_\_\_\_. Design and the valorisation of agricultural biodiversity products - a case study. In: INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE EUROPEAN ACADEMY OF DESIGN, 6., 2005, Bremen. *Proceedings of 6<sup>th</sup> international conference of the European Academy of Design*. Bremen: University of the Arts of Bremen, 2005. 1 CD-ROM.

LORIGLIOLA, S. (Org.). *Biodiversità ricchezza dei popoli: consumatori e produttori per colture e culture libere in una comune terra*. Verona: CTM Altromercato, 2001.

MANZINI, E.; MERONI, A.; KRUCKEN, L. Relação entre produto, território e consumidor. Visibilidade e comunicação entre local e global. In: SEMINÁRIO INTERNACIONAL BIODIVERSIDADE, CULTURA E DESENVOLVIMENTO, 2006, Curitiba.

PAGIOLA, S., BISHOP, J.; LANDELL-MILLS, N. (Org.).  *Mercados para serviços ecossistêmicos: instrumentos econômicos para conservação e desenvolvimento*. Rio de Janeiro: Rebraf, 2005.

TRUSEN, C. Valuing Biodiversity and Payments for Environmental Services: A new policy for tropical countries. In ALLEGRETTI, M.; SCHOLL, J. (Org.): *Biodiversity: conservation, sustainable use and corporate responsibility*. Debates promoted by Natura and GTZ at the Eighth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity - COP 8 in Curitiba, Brazil. Curitiba and Brasília 2008, Panel-Discussion S. 72-81

ZEITHAML, V. A. Consumer perceptions of price, quality and value: a means end model and synthesis of evidence. *Journal of Marketing*, Birmingham, v. 52, p. 2-22, jul. 1988.