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Sustainability service in-store: Service work and the promotion of sustainable consumption

Introduction

While it is often argued that retailers, due to their strategically important position between production and consumption, have a key role to play in the promotion of sustainability (Gunn and Mont 2014, Fuentes 2011, Chkanikova and Lehner 2014, Chkanikova and Mont 2015), sustainable retail has only received scant academic attention in the past (Bansal and Kilbourne 2001, Chkanikova and Mont 2015). This is, however, beginning to change and there is now a growing body of work on sustainable retailing (Wiese et al. 2012).

Previous studies have examined and discussed how sustainable retailing is and should be conducted via case studies of specific sustainable retailing initiatives and programmes (e.g., Lindgreen and Hingley 2003, Goworek 2011). Research in the field of sustainable retail has also addressed how retailers' sustainability actions shape the perceptions, choices and practices of consumers (Gupta and Pirsch 2008, Kim et al. 2014, Williams et al. 2010). However, still largely missing from the field of sustainable retail are studies that examine the role that in-store service provision plays in the promotion of sustainability. While the work of the shop assistant is at times included in the analysis of green marketing, (Fuentes 2014a) or in sustainable consumption studies (Lehner 2015), the attention it receives in these studies is cursory. This deficiency is surprising given the prominent role that service is often attributed in retail studies more broadly (Brown and Dant 2009, Grewal and Levy 2009, Elms et al. 2010, Grewal and Levy 2007), and given the degree to which retailers now incorporate sustainability service practices.

The purpose of this paper is to address this gap by developing a first conceptualizing and illustration of how sustainability service is performed in-store and what role it plays in the promotion of sustainable consumption. Three questions are central: How is sustainability service in-store performed? What issues are crucial to its performance? In what ways, if any, does sustainability service in-store promote sustainable consumption?

This paper takes a socio-material practice theory approach (see, e.g., Knorr Cetina 1995, Preda 1999, Reckwitz 2002) and can be viewed as pertaining to the emerging field of marketing-as-practice studies (Skålén and Hackley 2011). Drawing on practice theory an approach is developed that takes as its starting point the actual doings and sayings of service provision. We conceptualize in-store sustainability service as a type of marketing practice conducted with the aim of promoting sustainable consumption. Sustainability service, the paper will argue, can fruitfully be understood as a set of socio-material and performative practices.

Empirically, the paper draws on an ethnographic study of a Swedish retail chain – W-Store – and its sustainability efforts. Interviews with management and “sustainability ambassadors”, focus group interviews with both shop assistants and consumers, and observations made in-store comprise the material analysed.

Retail Service Work as a Social Practice

While retail service is attributed great importance in the field of retail marketing, and seen as a source of competitive advantage and a crucial tool in maintaining customer satisfaction and promoting customer loyalty, there are few studies of the actual doings and sayings involved in the provision of service. Instead studies of service in retail use predominantly experimental and quantitative methods to examine issues such as what affects perceived service quality, whether retail service quality translates into customer loyalty (Mägi and Julander 1996, Wong and Sohal 2006), and whether service quality positively affects willingness to buy (Sweeney et al. 1997) (for comprehensive overviews see, Brown and Dant 2009, Grewal and Levy 2007).

In contrast, outside the field of retail marketing, mainly in sociology, there are a number of studies that examine the micro-practices of retail service work (For an overview see, Fuentes and Hagberg 2013). In line with a critical tradition (e.g., MacDonald and Korczynski 2008), and using predominantly ethnographic methods, this work is often concerned with what happens in the everyday lives of shops and in the complex relationships between workers, managers, consumers and commodities which are reproduced through retail practices (see e.g., Pettinger 2004, Cochoy 2008, du Gay 2004).

In this paper, we continue in a similar vein. Drawing on practice theory, the provision of service – or more specifically sustainability service – is conceptualized as a practical accomplishment involving a variety of doings and saying – practices – and a set of heterogeneous elements (Schatzki et al. 2001, Reckwitz 2002).

Practice theory is a loosely-connected school of thought that makes practices – arrays of doings and sayings – the central analytic unit (for more thorough reviews see, Schatzki et al. 2001, Reckwitz 2002) and argue that the social consists of a nexus of practices (Schatzki 2001). Since these initial formulations by Schatzki (1996, 2001) and Reckwitz (2002), practice theory has dispersed across the social sciences generally and management specifically, and has become a well-used resource within, for example, organization studies (Orlikowski 2007, Corradi et al. 2010, Corvellec 2010), strategy (Johnson et al. 2007, Whittington 2006), marketing (Järventie-Thesleff et al. 2011, Fuentes 2015a), and consumption (Warde 2005, Shove and Pantzar 2005).

What, then, is a practice? Reckwitz defines a practice as:

...a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, “things” and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. (Reckwitz, 2002: 250)

Practice theory commonly emphasises the socio-material nature of practices, as well as their performative nature.

Practices are socio-material in that they draw on (and interconnect) a number of heterogeneous elements – both human and non-human (Pickering 2001, Preda 1999). Practices are thus simultaneously social and material, always involving an assembly of different entities. In socio-material practice approaches, materiality and its meanings, image and things, humans and non-humans are treated as intrinsically interlinked (Orlikowski 2007, Reckwitz 2002).

Practices are also performative in that they do not simply make use of heterogeneous materials, but also transform them. Through practice, elements are interlinked and inscribed (Akrich 2000) and assemblages made and re-made.

The framework outlined above is used in this paper to conceptualize the provision of sustainability service. The specific practice theory approach to sustainability service formulated here rests on three tenets.

Firstly, *sustainability service is seen here as a set of practices guided by the goal of promoting sustainable consumption*. That is, a set of retail service practices – of interconnected sayings and doings involving a set of interlinked understandings, emotions, know-how, motivational knowledge and artefacts – which are carried out with the aim of encouraging, guiding, and enabling consumers to make more sustainable shopping and consumption choices in a retail setting.

Secondly, the provision of sustainability service will be conceptualized as a *socio-material practice*. That is, the provision of service, and in this case sustainability service, does not solely involve the relationship between staff and consumers. Service provision is instead thought of as a socio-material accomplishment whereby staff and store materialities – e.g. signage, racks, store layout, etc. – work together to offer consumers service (see also, Fuentes 2011).

Thirdly, and finally, the provision of sustainability service will be treated as a *performative practice*. Studies informed by practice theory have shown that marketing involves more than mere technique. Marketing practices are performative (Araujo 2007, Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006, Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007). The marketing of any product or service not only involves a range of different elements, e.g. understandings, knowledge, emotions, artefacts, and so on, it also transforms these elements (Araujo 2007, Cochoy 1998). Following this line of reasoning, the provision of sustainability service cannot be an “innocent” practice. Providing sustainability service also means enacting a specific version of sustainability.

Method and Materials

In this paper, an ethnographic study of a Swedish retail chain, here referred to as W-Store (a pseudonym), is used to explore and discuss the role of service work in the promotion of sustainable consumption. The service work carried out by W-Store, with the aim of enabling and promoting sustainable consumption, is thus used here as an illustrative example of what we call sustainability service.

There are several reasons why W-Store is an appropriate case in which to explore the provision of sustainability service. Most basic, W-Store is an appropriate example because it engages in sustainable retail. As we will describe below, W-Store has a diverse sustainability programme and is also well known in Sweden as a sustainable retailer. W-Store is also one of few retailers that have initiated programmes to educate shop assistants in the practice of providing sustainability service.

W-Store is also a suitable example because of its size and the scope of its range. Because of its size (more than 70 stores throughout Sweden), it is easy to study – there is extensive marketing material and practice to study and various products are marketed as sustainable.

Finally, W-Store is also a good example because it is one of the largest, and most visible and well-known retailers in Sweden and has a long history (founded in the late 19th hundreds).

Ethnographic methods were used to get an in-depth and contextualized picture of how sustainability was enacted at W-Store in general, and of how this translated into the practice of service provision in particular.

The ethnographic approach is used here to gain a first hand, detailed, and contextualized understanding of the practices involved in the provision of sustainability service. In line with the ethnographic tradition, this study combines multiple data-gathering techniques and has an emergent design (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). The analysis presented below draws on five types of materials; i.e. interviews with store ambassadors and management; focus group interviews with shop assistants; focus group interviews and photo-elicitation with consumers; ethnographic observation in-store; marketing material.

Initially, three in-depth interviews with staff in leading positions were conducted. These interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were transcribed in full.

This was followed by three focus group interviews with shop assistants. An interview guide was used which was based on and on more general questions about service work and the store's view of sustainability questions. The focus group interviews focused on the store's sustainability strategies and service work, lasted about 45 minutes, and were transcribed in full.

Also, three focus group interviews and photo-elicitation were conducted with young consumers aged 20 to 30 in an effort to understand how the green W-Store outlets, and their sustainability work, were perceived and used by consumers. These focus groups lasted about 60 minutes and were transcribed in full.

Observations were conducted at the stores. The in-store observations focused on the cities of Malmö, Lund, Helsingborg, Gothenburg, and Stockholm. Approximately 15 observations lasting between 15 and 90 minutes, were conducted during 2012 and 2013.

Finally, marketing material was collected both from the stores (brochures and catalogues, for example) and from the retailers' websites and web pages (printed and saved digitally).

The analytical categories were developed by means of close readings of the material (e.g. interview transcripts, field notes, brochures, and websites), and the use of both common coding techniques and the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Categories were constructed and relationships between them were formulated by closely reading the material in order to identify themes and particularities. Three questions guided the analysis: 1) How is sustainability service performed? What is involved in the successful accomplishment of sustainability service? In what ways (if any) does sustainability service promote sustainable consumption?

Service work and the promotion of sustainability

In what follows, the three retail service practices involved in the promotion of sustainable consumption at W-Store are described, analysed, and discussed. We begin, however, with short description of the W-store and its sustainability work.

The W-Store and its sustainability work

W-Store focuses on female consumers and on the areas of fashion, beauty, and home décor. W-Store presents itself as a caring company that is concerned with the environment and “social” issues. W-Store has a broad approach to sustainability incorporating various issues such as diversity and equality among staff, staff training, environmental concerns, animal rights, labour law, and child labour.

Although a broad approach to sustainability is being taken, one can also discern a clear focus in the way W-Store approaches sustainability. Above all, W-Store aims to provide its customers with sustainable products. Although this retailer has a variety of customers, it sees the “active woman” as its main customer:

After all, we have a fairly distinct focus on ... women ... I suppose in the early middle-age group actually, 25 to 45 ... So, women living very busy lives with kids and so on, with very full diaries. (Interview with Sustainability Manager)

As we can see from this interview extract, W-Store makes the busy modern woman its main focus, organising its range, department stores, and marketing to accommodate this consumer (see also, Fuentes 2015b). W-Store’s goal is to be the first call on *her* shopping trip and “women’s favourite” store for fashion, beauty products, and home décor.

According to W-Store, women lead active lives and make many choices. This is a consumer society in which shopping can be both fun and a time-consuming task. The problem, then, is that the active female consumer has to manage this complexity; a problem that W-Store believes is particularly true when it comes to sustainability issues.

W-Store’s take on sustainability is shaped by this idea. Many of W-Store’s sustainability efforts are aimed at simplifying sustainable shopping. W-Store seeks to make sustainable consumption easy for consumers by becoming a one-stop shop for green products in fashion, beauty products, and home décor. The service work described below can in part be seen as an extension of this; a way of making sustainable consumption easier in a complex world.

Greening the self-service system

Perhaps the most crucial practice involved in the provision of sustainability service is arranging the self-service system of the W-Store outlets. Shop assistants are responsible for organizing and maintaining the store assemblages that allow and support customer self-service.

The rationale here – the purpose of this service practice – is to organize “green” shopping trails; i.e. incorporating a number of green elements into this self-service system to allow consumers to browse and shop sustainably. The idea is to provide W-Store’s conscious (female) consumers with the opportunity to make informed sustainable choices.

At each store today, there is an appointed “sustainability ambassador” who passes information about sustainability efforts on to his/her colleagues. At the store, sustainability strategies coming from the head office are translated into programmes of action. Arranging the green shopping trails is mainly accomplished in two ways; i.e. by incorporating sustainable products into the display spaces of the stores and by using signage and labels to clearly mark out

the sustainable products on offer.

W-Store carries a considerable range of environmentally-friendly and fair-trade products, and is continuously working towards expanding the number of sustainable products in its three core areas; fashion, beauty, and interior design. A selection of these products, deemed to meet the high environmental and social standards of the company, are labelled with W-Store's own responsible-choice label "Oh Wow".

Shop assistants not only organize these products and make them part of the shopping trails at W-Store, they also make sure that these products are highlighted and clearly marked using signage and labels, with the explicit goal of increasing the sales of sustainable products:

We use small signage. And we also have quite a lot of brochures lying around. So the customer can clearly see that this is a good choice. /---/ At head office, they've set a goal regarding how much we have to sell. A 10 % increase by 2015 ... we call it the green theme ... (Focus group interview with shop assistants)

The result of this work is a shopping space where consumers can easily find the ecological and fair-trade products marked "Good choice". More knowledge-hungry consumers can also, by reading the tags attached to the products, inform themselves about ecologically grown and harvested cotton, what the different eco-certifications stand for, and much more.

What emerges from the practice of arranging green shopping trails is a complex and artefact-intensive marketing device (Callon et al. 2007). This device is intended to allow consumers to engage in sustainable self-service. This is a marketing device that enables and even encourages green shopping and sustainable consumption (on the importance of supporting green shopping practices in stores see, Fuentes 2014b).

However, while we were clearly able to observe the green elements of the W-Store shopping trails during our fieldwork, with some consumers also mentioning these elements during interviews, there were also many consumers who voiced their criticism over the lack, or invisibility, of sustainability products and messages.

Some argued that W-Store does not put enough effort into the greening of its department stores, that the W-Store sustainability range is virtually invisible:

... I was in there only today. And I didn't even notice these labels. I saw nothing about it being green or anything actually. (Group interview, consumers)

For these consumers, the green artefacts that populate these department stores are not "doing their job". They do not – in any effective way – communicate the green message of the store.

Others have noticed the sustainable products and messages on display in-store but argue that the sustainability concept is not consistent enough; it has not been thoroughly implemented. Consumers find it contradictory that W-Store, for example, markets environmentally-friendly candles but then also uses plastic bags. Or that W-Store markets green fashion but then also, and simultaneously, tries to maximize its sales of regular unsustainable fashion.

One can also find general scepticism among consumers towards W-Store's

sustainability work and communication. Some wonder if it is even possible for a large mainstream retailer like W-Store to be sustainable. They are, in the eyes of consumers, too big, too urban, and not “natural” enough to be convincingly green:

When I go to a store thinking “now I’m going to buy ecological products”...I don’t go to W-Store. ... I’d rather go to ... I like shopping in a country store in the summers. You know, I kind of feel ... I feel closer to the environment and slightly bohemian, kind of. But W-Store ... nope, big city. (Focus group interview with consumers)

If I’m going to buy ecological stuff, then there’s more chance I’ll go to boutiques or that kind of thing. You know, where things feel a bit more genuine somehow. You know, shopping malls, supermarkets, or large stores don’t feel so ... that’s my association with the ecological side of things presumably. (Focus group interview with consumers)

It is clear from these interview extracts that W-Store does not fit into these consumers’ image of a green retailer. A green retailer is, according to these consumers, small scale and “natural”.

The issue of “naturalness” recurs throughout the interviews. Many of the consumers we talked to expressed a desire for more natural-looking products. According to them, the in-store green marketing of W-Store did not sufficiently stress the natural element:

... for me, it’s kind of the credibility somehow. It has to feel earthy... I would like to see some leaves here and there. /.../ if the packaging had been brown, then maybe... (Focus group interview with consumers)

In this consumer’s narrative, it becomes apparent that consumers value “naturalness” as an attribute of sustainable products. Sustainable products should be marketed using natural props (e.g. leaves, as suggested by one consumer), natural colours, and images of nature. For these consumers, the W-Store shopping space is simply not “natural” enough to be convincing in its sustainability claims.

For some consumers, then, W-Store shopping trails do not deliver sustainability service in an appropriate way. They do not inform the customer about sustainability in a convincing and engaging way; the sustainable products marketed are not deemed meaningful to these consumers and the overall green message is not being communicated correctly (either not enough or not in the right way).

However, this is not the whole picture. While it is clear that some consumers are critical of W-Store’s green shopping trails, it was also apparent that W-Store’s self-service assemblage was managing, at least some of the time, to provide sustainability service. This was done by accomplishing two important tasks. Firstly, the greened shopping trails at W-Store outlets make sustainable products readily available to consumers to examine and compare. They make it possible for consumers to “shop green” in different ways. At the store, we were able to observe consumers reading sustainability labels and signage, looking for specific green products and/or specific green brands. These consumers spent considerable amounts of time on W-Store’s shopping trails, examining, and comparing green products. Others seemed to be more interested in avoiding certain materials and substances. These consumers are often on the lookout for

non-toxic products and spend considerable amounts of time reading through the declaration of contents on the products. Finally, at other times, the focus did not seem to be on avoiding toxins, but on finding natural products. These consumers walked the shopping trails of W-Store outlets on the lookout for things that are natural or natural looking. These ways of shopping were made possible by the green shopping trails arranged by shop assistants at W-Store outlets.

Secondly, over and above making green shopping possible, these shopping trails and their green elements (products, packages, signage) also educate consumers on sustainability issues. Commenting on a “good choice” label, one consumer stated that:

What provides me with the information is the last bit here: “Being ecological entails raw materials or ingredients being grown without chemical insecticides and artificial fertilizers”. That’s really where it tells me: “Ok, what does this item entail?”(Focus group interview with consumers)

W-Store also makes consumers aware of sustainable issues and alternatives that have previously escaped their attention. In the extract below, a consumer talks about a display of ecological candles at a W-Store outlet:

But otherwise it wouldn’t have occurred to me that there are ecological candles. So I think that the sign opens my eyes for me, kind of thing, and I think “right, ok!”(Focus group interview with consumers)

Consumers are made aware, then, of sustainable alternatives regarding products that they might not even think had any connection with sustainability.

To conclude, the green shopping trails of the W-Store outlets are far from perfect. Consumers criticize them for not being green enough, or for not being the right type of green. However, in spite of these problems, the introduction of green shopping trails seems, at least some of the time, to be doing what it was intended to do. That is to say, the arranging of sustainable products, informative signage, labels, and marketing material that addresses sustainability issues constructed a green(er) socio-material shopping trail works (in some instances) towards promoting sustainable consumption by providing W-Store’s consumers with the possibility of examining and purchasing sustainable products and informing themselves about sustainability issues.

Answering sustainability questions

There is, however, more to the promotion of sustainable consumption than greening shopping trails. Sometimes, shop assistants also have to talk with consumers about sustainability. The second sustainability service practice we want to discuss is answering consumers’ sustainability-related queries.

W-Store shop assistants are asked a wide variety of sustainability questions, ranging from the concrete and simple (e.g. where to find a certain product) to the complex (e.g. answering questions regarding W-Store’s entire sustainability programme). Shop assistants also have to interact with a heterogeneous group of consumers; from the enthusiastic green novice to the knowledgeable dark green consumer. Answering sustainability questions is thus more demanding than one might expect. Being aware of this, W-Store has designed an educational programme for its shop assistants. Shop assistants attend courses on sustainability issues and each store also has its own sustainability ambassador – a staff member

who receives special training in sustainability issues and who is also responsible for training other staff members and keeping them informed about new issues. If they are to answer the consumers' various sustainability questions, they will have to be knowledgeable about the sustainable products that W-Store carries, what these products contain, and how they were made.

So what types of questions is the staff asked? Many of the questions asked can be divided into three groups; i.e. consumers wanting to know more about W-Store's sustainable range, wanting to know about the content of W-Store's sustainable products, and wanting to know more about how and under what conditions W-Store's sustainable products were manufactured.

The first type of question has to do with finding W-Store's sustainable products in the store. "Where can I find environmentally-friendly t-shirts"? Or "Do you have toys made of eco-friendly PVC-free plastic?" Here, the work of the shop assistants consists of pointing consumers in the right direction, towards the sustainability products and guiding them through the retail space. This requires knowledge of where the products are located along the W-Store shopping trails, but not much more than that.

However, there are also occasions when this involves more elaborate ways of assisting consumers in finding W-Store's sustainability range. For example, one shop assistant spoke of an instance when a customer came into the store looking for sustainable products, but was having difficulties finding sustainable alternatives. To assist this customer, the shop assistant went to the computer and printed out a list of the entire sustainable range:

I printed out our entire list of ecological garments for her ...it was several pages long...I went in and searched. I knew we had it, So then she [the customer] was completely "Wow, do you have so much?" It's probably more than either the customers or we realise. (Focus group interview with shop assistants)

By listing all the sustainable products carried by W-Store, the shop assistant showed the consumer the multitude of green alternatives available there. In doing so, the shop assistants – together with the W-Store information system – accomplish something that the shopping trails are not able to do on their own; i.e. visualize the complete W-Store sustainability range at once.

The second category of question, regarding the content of sustainability products, often has to do with chemicals and other potentially toxic substances. As mentioned above, many consumers are concerned with finding "safe", "clean", and "natural" products (see also, Fredriksson and Fuentes 2014). Helping consumers accomplish this is knowledge-intensive and staff have to be well informed and to keep themselves abreast of the latest developments. According to the staff, the questions and issues discussed by consumers are continually changing, partly in connection with current media reports.

These questions can be difficult for shop assistants to answer; many of them talked about the uncertainty they felt when addressing complex questions regarding chemicals and their effects on the body and the environment. To assist them, W-Store developed new information systems that allow shop assistants to track the contents of products:

... this business of chemicals, it's an entirely new procedure at W-Store. It applies to all chemicals in clothes, all that stuff. And we can trace a

chemical on a detailed level if the customer wants that. So, there are very robust procedures. A lot of people at the company are working towards making the customers feel secure about buying the products we sell. (Focus group interview with shop assistants)

Moreover, according to store staff, new procedures and routines were developed as a direct response to consumer pressure:

...talking about parabens has taken centre stage during recent years. /.../ lots of people have changed that particular ingredient. We even have small labels on certain brands now where it says “free of parabens”. /.../ You clearly see how the customers have had an impact; the customers themselves have influenced this. (Focus group interview with shop assistants)

According to the shop assistants, consumer pressure has changed both the way the suppliers market their products and the way W-Store markets the products in-store.

Finally, consumers also ask questions about the manufacture of the products sold at W-Store outlets. They want to get behind the glossy face of sustainability and know more about where and how the products were manufactured:

Now and again, we get customers who really ... “Where’s this cup from? How much do they make?” Then, we push them on to head office. /---/ That’s not something that the shop floor staff know anything about. (Focus group interview with shop assistants)

As we can see from this interview extract, the type of information requested by consumers is seldom available to shop assistants and they must therefore rely on their head office for information. In these instances, the customer is normally referred to Customer Services, or given a direct line to call. According to the shop assistants, the customers are given a “quick answer” and “they [will] get this almost instantaneously”. As in previous examples, we see how the shop assistants make use of organizational IT systems and procedures that were put in place to assist them in their efforts to provide sustainability service.

Although shop assistants regularly deal with these questions, they experience them as threatening (see also, Fredriksson and Fuentes 2014). Questions like these, shop assistants told us, have a more negative tone and often come across as a kind of “interrogation”. Some of the shop assistants’ insecurity has to do with what they perceive to be an information asymmetry; some consumers come across as experts in sustainability issues and their knowledge makes the shop assistants feel uncomfortable:

Well, they start asking questions ... then you feel like you’re not really familiar with the product and so on. And the fact that the customer can be better informed. You know, more comprehensively informed, too. Then you might feel a bit stupid. (Focus group interview with shop assistants)

One way of coping with this feeling of insecurity is “keeping to the script”. That is, keeping to the store’s sustainability strategy and replying within the framework of this, as far as possible. Another way of coping with this type of situation is to

re-frame it as an exchange of information between equals. That is, instead of seeing it as a failure on the part of a service provider to answer a question, they redefined it as a dialogue through which they could also learn from consumers:

She knew more than I do. But I didn't feel that I needed ... we helped each other kind of. She explained what she was looking for, and why. And that started up a dialogue instead. (Focus group interview with shop assistants)

This approach is at odds with the strategy of W-Store to be a sustainability simplifier, making sustainable consumption easier for caring but stressed women. In W-Store's vision, it is the staff and stores that inform the consumers, not the other way round. It is clear that these demanding and knowledgeable consumers do not match the image that the management of W-Store has of its customers.

In sum, the shop assistants at W-Store outlets face a number of different sustainability-related questions and have to interact with a wide variety of green consumers. To accommodate these consumers and answer their questions, the staff draws on their competence – acquired through training and experience – and make use of supporting IT systems and procedures. By answering these questions, W-Store is enabling consumers to shop for sustainable, “safe”, “clean”, and “natural” products. W-Store is enabling a specific type of sustainable shopping and consumption, and contributing towards educating consumers in sustainability matters.

Promoting sustainability in-store

Finally, in their interactions with consumers, they also try to proactively promote sustainability and sustainable alternatives, to both green and non-green consumers alike. We will refer to this service practice as “promoting sustainability in-store”.

Far from all the customers who shop at W-Store are looking for sustainable products. In fact, according to the shop assistants (but contrary to the opinions expressed by management), the typical W-Store consumer is not a green consumer. And, if they are interested at all, this interest is seldom the main driving force behind their shopping practices. To change this, the shop assistants proactively work towards promoting sustainable alternatives. One part of this is providing positive feedback to consumers who have chosen sustainable products. The staff talked about how this was actually part of their service script:

We're supposed to say, especially when the customer is paying, “you've made a good choice today”. ...I think maybe we can have even more of an impact there. (Focus group interview with shop assistants)

They call this “putting green words in your bag”, and the intention is to reinforce the sustainability dimension by putting an emphasis on it at the point of sale (see also, Fredriksson and Fuentes 2014).

Another important part of this is encouraging consumers who may be interested in sustainability to actually buy sustainable products. One of the shop assistants working in the beauty department talks about how this is accomplished:

... you see them, they're already standing beside that particular piece of signage. And then they usually say: “well ...”. And then I usually say: “Do you know this is ecological?” Most of them usually answer yes.

And that shows, of course, that they're well informed, that they want to know. "Yes, I'd like to know a bit more about it" is the next question.
(Focus group interview with shop assistants)

Here, we see that consumers who might be thinking about sustainability issues are encouraged to ask more. This way of engaging consumers in sustainability issues becomes a gentle push towards sustainability for those who might be either indecisive or only marginally interested. It is a way of greening consumers through service work.

Organizing sustainability service

The provision of sustainability service is accomplished, in this case, via three service practices: arranging green stores, answering sustainability questions, and promoting sustainability to green consumers in-store. This analysis, we suggest, makes three issues clear.

Firstly, the analysis confirms and illustrates the socio-material character of sustainability service and shows furthermore the key role that artefacts play in the accomplishment of this kind of service. The practice of greening the self-service system focuses on arranging and maintaining a shopping device that enables and promotes sustainable consumption. Its socio-material character is evident. The practice of answering questions was performed with the help of IT systems and other organizational artefacts, and almost always in relation to the self-service system of the W-Store outlets. Finally, in the practice of promoting sustainability in-store, shop assistants work together with the self-service system to "push" consumers towards sustainable consumption. The performance of sustainability service was then dependent on a socio-material service assemblage.

It also follows from this that, in order for sustainability service practices to be possible, retailers have to invest in and develop both the human competence of their staff (e.g., training programs) and a supporting infrastructure (e.g. tools such as IT systems, new routines, documents, and so on).

Moreover, these elements also have to be configured to work together (Orlikowski 2007). That is, *socio-material congruence* is a matter of importance when developing sustainability service. What is required then is a retail organization that understands and manages technical and human competence simultaneously and in relation to each other.

Secondly, the provision of sustainability service is also shown here to be a complex matter, dependent on as well as shaped by multiple elements. In particular, the performance of sustainability service was dependent on what could be called *retailer-consumer image congruence* and many of the problems associated with sustainability service could be traced to image divergence.

In the case of the green shopping trails, credibility problems emerged when there was a mismatch between how consumers imagined a sustainable retailer – small-scale, rural, natural – and the version of sustainable retail enacted by W-Store: large scale, urban, and not necessarily "natural".

Conversely, in the practice of answering sustainability questions, the problems instead constituted a mismatch between how W-Store imagined its sustainable consumers (caring but not knowledgeable, not that interested in learning) and how (some of) the actual sustainable consumers visiting the stores acted (caring, knowledgeable, and information-hungry).

This points to the need for retail organizations to be investigative and reflexive. That is, organizations that study consumers and consumers' imaginary and also reflect on the type of corporate sustainability they are communicating and enacting.

Third, the performance of sustainability service was dependent on the ability of the organization to adapt to changing sustainability discourses. For example, the trustworthiness of W-Store's sustainability claims were linked with consumer ideals regarding how sustainable retail should be (small-scale, less urban, and more "natural"). These ideals are in turn linked with widespread discourses on sustainability and are, as such, outside the direct control of W-Store. Likewise, the kinds of questions faced by shop assistants were influenced by the mass media and contemporary debate. Because of this, the sustainability issues focused on by consumers were continually changing, forcing shop assistants and the W-Store organization to adapt.

It seems as sustainability service, like other organizational practices (Schatzki 2006), has to be continually reinvented in order to fit with changing discourses, materialities, organizational realities, strategies, and consumer practices. Sustainability service practices are thus, by definition, provisional and in a state of continuous remaking (as are all practices, some would argue, see Schatzki et al. 2001).

This tells us that *organizational adaptability* is important to the development of sustainability service. Retail organizations have to work towards keeping themselves updated about and adapted to the changing sustainability discourses.

In sum, the provisioning of sustainability service is a complex accomplishment that rests on a fragile arrangement. When elements of this practice change, the provision of sustainability service is likely to break down. However, when they it does work it has the potential to enable and shape sustainable consumption through a combination of green self-service and personal service attuned to the shopping practices of consumers.

Conclusions

The point of departure of this paper was the existence of a need to investigate and conceptualize the provision of sustainability service. The argument made was that sustainable retail research should not be limited to conceptual discussions about sustainability approaches, case studies of sustainable retail programmes, or studies that examine the effect of retailers' sustainability activities on consumers. If sustainable retailing is to play the crucial part that it is often assigned, as the promoter of sustainable consumption, then sustainability service and its relationship with sustainable consumption should be empirically examined and conceptualized.

Drawing on practice theory, and making use of an ethnographic study of W-store, this paper has taken an initial step towards addressing this issue. The analysis and conceptualization developed here show that sustainability was a complex accomplishment dependent on the combination and successful configuration of human competence (service staff) with IT and other organizational artefacts, the alignment of retailer-consumer images, and the ability of the retail organization to adapt to changing sustainability discourses.

Retailing sustainable products is thus not simply a matter of including sustainability products in your range and instructing your shop assistants to

promote them. Nonetheless, when the necessary conditions were met, sustainability service worked towards promoting sustainable consumption by making various forms of green shopping possible, educating consumers in sustainability issues, and motivating them via positive feedback and dialogue.

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