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The innovative dimension of environmental certificates in companies activity

Innowacyjny wymiar certyfikacji ekologicznej w działalności przedsiębiorstw

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Summary

The subject of discussion in the hereby article shall be the description of innovative character of ecological certification of products. Implementation of this type of solutions gains particular importance in relation to companies due to the fact, that possession of certificates has significant influence onto the perception of a company in the category of socially and environmentally responsible entity, which undoubtedly effects the ecological image of the company and in consequence it may also affect the financial results. Thus companies, which decide to implement this type of marketing eco-innovations not only manifest the currently desired innovative activity, but also contribute to conscious actions for environmental protection, as within their growth they treat environmental issues as equally important as business ones.

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule przedmiotem dyskusji uczyniono wskazanie innowacyjnego charakteru certyfikatów ekologicznych w odniesieniu do przedsiębiorstw, zwracając jednocześnie uwagę, iż ich posiadanie ma istotny wpływ na postrzeganie przedsiębiorstwa w kategorii podmiotu społecznie i ekologicznie odpowiedzialnego, co może pozytywnie rzutować na wizerunek środowiskowy oraz wyniki finansowe. W efekcie, przedsiębiorstwa decydujące się na implementację tego typu ekoinnowacji marketingowych wykazują się nie tylko, tak potrzebną obecnie, aktywnością innowacyjną, ale i przyczyniają się do świadomego działania na rzecz ochrony środowiska naturalnego, gdyż w zakresie swojego rozwoju kwestie środowiskowe traktują na równi z biznesowymi.

Key words: environmental certifications, marketing eco-innovations, environmental protection, enterprises

Słowa kluczowe: certyfikaty ekologiczne, ekoinnowacje marketingowe, ochrona środowiska, przedsiębiorstwa

Introduction

Within the last decade technological progress has led to rapid growth of both production and consumption which results in ever larger problems connected with the exhaustion of natural resources caused by fast exploitation of products and lack of waste recycling. Additionally,

regulations on environmental protection are changing, care for natural resources increases and conscious choice of ecological products is being propagated among consumers. This situation signifies, that environmental protection is becoming one of the indicators of performance of rational business activity.

Companies need to adjust to new functioning conditions and pay closer attention to the environment simultaneously keeping in mind the business aspects of their operation. All of these factors result in initiation of various types of pro-ecological activities including the increase of eco-innovative activity of companies, while the effectiveness of these initiatives depends largely on their innovative potential. Naturally implementation of all types of ecological innovations is particularly desirable nowadays; especially of those in the area of marketing. The idea of ecological marketing proves useful here, as it provides companies with numerous instruments enabling them to implement such novel pro-environmental solutions, as ecological certificates accounting for and simultaneously informing customers of the ecological features of offered goods. In consequence, the objective of the hereby article has become to indicate to innovative character of ecological certificates and of the role, they play in companies' activities from the perspective of benefits generated both for the companies themselves and for the environment, the protection of which is becoming one of the priorities of the contemporary world.

1. Ecological activities in the area of marketing

Within numerous activities initiated by companies for the sake of environmental protection we need to propagate above all ecological initiatives in the scope of products, processes, organisational structures and marketing, as these initiatives bring the largest advantages both to companies themselves and to the environment. Naturally it is impossible to implement all types of these solutions within every organisation in the full scope and at the same period of time - hence particular choices need to be made e.g. depending on the type of the performed activities, company size or market potential.

One of the crucial areas of pro-ecological solutions is the product and production area as the offered goods and production processes influence the environment to the largest extent. Companies interested in implementation of product and production solutions may do this for example within the Cleaner Production programme, which aims at continuous activities for the sake of increased effectiveness of production processes with simultaneous reduction of pollution risk for humans and surroundings (Kowal, Kucińska-Landwójtowicz, Misiołek, 2013, p. 170). Apart from that, the sole fact of possession of ecological products positively influences

the company's image and results in reduced environmental threats. However, we should not forget that implementation of the before mentioned solutions frequently forces companies to implement similar solutions in the scope of organisation and marketing – a fact which is often overlooked and considered less important. Nevertheless, activities in these areas are equally important, as they may positively influence the company's operation in relation to the environment, among others through implementation of integrated management systems including environmental management (e.g. environmental management systems ISO of 14001 series or EMAS) or through the introduction of pro-ecological labelling and declarations for the offered products (Kowal et alia, 2013, pp. 167-181).

In the era of globalisation and media culture it is undoubtedly worth to direct one's attention to certain marketing initiatives, which are gaining in importance such as: eco-marking and eco-labelling, issuance of environmental declarations of product or ecological certificates compliant with for example ISO standards, which in their essence are aimed at confirmation of lower ecological harmfulness or lack of it for products that bear them (Fijał, 2005, pp. 71-88). For instance, within eco-marking or eco-labelling of products we encounter activities relying in marking a product with a special sign (label) whose function is to make the product stand out among other, competitive products in the scope of positive environmental impact. Ecological symbols or labels may be granted to business entities by various governmental bodies, associations, foundations or other organisation dealing with environmental protection and in Europe one of the key institution issuing and standardising the rules of eco-labelling is the European Union (Adamczyk, 2004, p. 183). Companies wishing to obtain and eco-sign bearing the logo of the European Union are obliged to meet strict criteria of ecological labelling defined in an applicable Regulation (Regulation, 2010), where special attention is paid to ecological effectiveness of products, when their lifecycle and the strategic objectives of the EU in the scope of environmental protection are considered, including among others the following (Nierzwicki, 2006, pp. 81-82):

- reduction of negative impact onto climate change, nature and biodiversity,
- lower consumption of energy and natural resources, rational waste management, reduction of pollution emission, replacing dangerous substances with safer ones,
- taking into account social and ethical aspects.

Another body responsible for the preparation of principles and procedures of creation and awarding ecological signs and environmental declarations is the International Organisation for Standardization, who has created the Standard ISO 14020. This Standard categorises the issues

under discussion in the hereby article in details by assigning them into three basic groups containing: 1st type of environmental labelling (Standard ISO 14021:2002), 2nd type of environmental labelling (Standard ISO 14021:2002) and 3rd type of environmental declarations (Standard ISO 14025:2010) (Matuszczak–Flejszman, 2010, p. 98). In case of the above mentioned ISO standard it is worth mentioning, that both environmental labels and declarations should be precisely described and verifiable, and also commonly accessible both for the present and prospective buyers, based on scientific methods and they should take into consideration interests of all interested parties, while their development process needs to be open and the information on ecological aspects of the labelled products commonly accessible (Nierzwicki, 2006, pp. 83-90). What is more, they should neither generate any difficulties in international trade nor hinder implementation of such innovations, which may lead to the reduction of pollution. Generally, a continuously growing number of ecological signs is appearing and they are more frequently used by various businesses – that is why it is so important to popularise mostly those signs, which are granted by independent and renown bodies.

Among the marketing initiatives mentioned here product certification deserves a special position, as it is most often connected with grating certificates, that is documents confirming the compliance of the offered products with the environmental protection requirements – either those declared by the producer or those stipulated in general legal regulations; or possibly they confirm the fact, that the given manufacturer possesses competence in the scope defined by the quoted certificate, that is e.g. in relation to goods manufactured with the reduction of harmful effects for the environment or without such negative influence on it. Basically, certificates are issued by specially established independent institutions of high social trust, whose task is also the performance of inspection in the area of fulfilment of obligations resulting from the possession of certain certificate. In consequence, products certification by non-governmental institutions is becoming a crucial element of neoliberal environmental management additionally standardising the principles of sustainable growth (Klooster, 2010, p. 117).

A characteristic feature of marketing initiatives mentioned here is the fact, that they may be classified to one group of activities whose main objective is to notify customers of ecological attributes of offered goods – an aspect which nowadays is continuously gaining in importance for buyers making conscious choices (Proto, Malandrino, Supino, 2007, p. 669). As a result, especially the companies' marketing strategies are transformed, as they more often take into account social and ecological criteria instead of merely the economic ones.

In literature on the subject the described solutions frequently fall into the issue of the so called „ecological marketing”, which is currently thriving thus creating a new paradigm for the performance of environmentally friendly business activities, although its originates from as early as the 1980s (Lim, Ting, 2011, p. 139). Consequently, ecological marketing may be perceived as a set of activities aimed at meeting customers’ needs with simultaneous consideration for the idea of sustainable growth (Zaremba–Warnke, 2009, p. 7). This is important in as much as the pro-ecological conditions of company functioning stem from the concept of sustainable growth to a large extent, the concept which aimed at prevention of negative effects of economic growth resulting from technological progress, increase of global production and globalisation processes.

2. Ecological certificates as eco-innovative solution

The issue of eco-innovations started spreading in the previous century, which witnessed the visible process of innovation evolution towards solution of strictly ecological character, resulting from the increasingly serious threats related to pollution and also with the rise of importance of innovativeness and innovations in the process of improving competitiveness and economic growth (Szpor and Śniegocki, 2012, p. 3). In consequence, eco-innovations are perceived as derivatives of innovative activities, which are currently being or shall be undertaken by companies in order to protect the environment, which simultaneously influence the creation of an image of ecological business and constitutes an effective element of lasting competitive advantage (Wysocki, 2016, p. 1067). Environmental protection issues as well as environmental benefits for all beneficiaries of such innovations are perceived as the most important issue within the frames of eco-innovations instead of focusing purely on economic profits obtained by companies implementing this type of innovations.

Nowadays the scope of application of eco-innovations is truly wide due to the fact, that in case of companies they may refer to the following areas: alternative energy sources, more efficient exploitation of resources, energy saving, repair of damages to environment, transport, recycling, development and production of new products or processes, creation of business models, alternative exploitation of already possessed products and materials, environmentally friendly agriculture and construction industry or eco-tourism (Sarkar, 2012, pp. 8-9). Naturally, implementation of eco-innovations in companies should lead to business benefits above all, preferably the financial ones, connected with the reduction of production and logistics costs or

lack of environmental fees as well as the improvement in effectiveness of exploitation of resources and increased market share resulting from marketing activities and creation of a company image, as of a business respecting and caring for the environment. Unfortunately, companies do not always spot the opportunities resulting from implementation of pro-ecological solutions, or if they spot them, businesses expect short-term effect – hence they undertake such initiatives rather unwillingly. Luckily, modern administrative measures in the scope of environmental protection provide a considerably effective motivating element for such activities as well as the growing ecological awareness of consumers, who prefer to purchase ecological products more frequently.

In the existing situation, from the perspective of economy, the environment and society any forms of eco-innovativeness of companies should thus be supported and treated as worthy of attention or imitation regardless of the type of eco-innovation or its scope of application. Another argument proving that research and innovation implementation constitute priorities in the EU agenda for economic growth and increased employment level is constituted by the initiative of the European Union devoted to research on eco-innovations, which is currently the Eco-innovations Observatory. Within this initiative the Eco-innovation ranking has been created on the basis of 16 selected factors, which classifies Poland among the group of countries working on eliminating their deficiencies in this area (Bartoszczuk, 2016, p. 6). However, the most crucial aspect is that, the treatment of environmental issues as equally important as business matters characteristic for eco-innovations results in the fact, that their absorption may bring a series of measurable, long-awaited benefits both for companies which implement them and for the environment (Leszczyńska, 2011, p. 44). Thus, the most important aspect is the very fact of implementing of eco-innovation rather than their type, such as: product, process, organisational or marketing eco-innovations.

In consequence, the before mentioned marketing initiatives, involving among others obtaining ecological certificates for the needs of the conducted activities, may be treated as a specific type of eco-innovations in the area of marketing. As mentioned above, ecological certification aims at distinguishing those products and services, which are produced in compliance with certain environmental and/or social standards and it should provide consumers with information on their origin and method of production. This results from the fact, that the certification system consists of definite standards and requirements for producers applying for ecological certificates, verification processes, accreditation mechanisms and labelling of products manufactured in accordance with the standards listed for the given certificate.

The possession of an ecological certificate is truly useful nowadays, as it considerably influences the image of the company as socially and environmentally responsible entity and subsequently it affects the company's sales results. This means the attempts to receive the certificate are worthwhile as it is considered a credible document confirming the appropriate "ecological standard" of the offered products and services. Additionally, obtaining certificates motivates companies to continuous self-improvement which proves the important role of these documents in the process of company growth, provided the company wishes to be recognisable and trustworthy, particularly in the area of conducting activities for the sake of environmental protection. Moreover, possession of certificates enhances generation of additional benefits not only for companies, but also for the whole economy, society and the environment, as has been presented below in table 1.

Table 1. Sample benefits resulting from possession of certificates

Benefits resulting from ecological certification
1. Creation of brand and company image as environmentally friendly and enjoying social trust, winning customers who appreciate the value of ecological label.
2. Increased market share or gaining access to new markets due to increased demand for resources possessing the certificate, resulting from the increased ecological awareness of consumers.
3. Creation of ecological market as well as social and environmental awareness among contractors and customers who popularise products possessing such certificates further.
4. Guarantee of verification of the origin of raw materials and products in compliance with the certification systems requirements throughout the whole supply chain.
5. Opportunity to reduce costs of business operations thanks to changes in quality and management systems, resulting from the implementation of standards binding within independent certification systems.
6. Supporting development of forests worldwide in the scope of preservation of their biological diversity, high productivity and regeneration potential through appropriate shaping of their structure and manner of exploitation (mainly in relation to wood industry).





Source: own materials based upon: <https://www.blauer-engel.de/en/>, <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/>, <http://www.fairtrade.net/>, <http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/>, <https://ic.fsc.org/>, <http://www.pefc.org/> (20.02.2017).

Naturally, in case of businesses the above mentioned certification activities need to be closely connected with the search for reduction methods of the negative influence onto the environment in the scope of products and services offered by companies, but with simultaneous maintenance of economic benefits and care for customers' needs (Piontka, 2001, p. 210). Implementation of this type of solutions within a company may be classified as ecological innovation only in this viewpoint, as potential customers obtain knowledge on either ecological origin or pro-ecological features of the offered product.

At the same time it is worth mentioning, that certification services constitute a manifestation of a novel approach to the issue of sustainable growth as all parties: the company, customers and the environment benefit in a defined way from this practice (Overdevest, Rickenbach, 2006, p. 93). Sustainable growth, on the other hand, is considered to be a central model of social progress and also the superior principle of global environmental and economic policy both at the state and company level, which in the context of efficiency of natural resources or dematerialisation is closely connected with ecological innovations and their synergic effects for economy (Kryński, Kramer, Caekelberg, 2013, p. 60).

The most popular and distinguished certificates we need to enumerate among others are those, which refer not only to the ecological origin of raw materials and products but additionally guarantee ecological character of the whole production and distribution chain. That's why wood sector may constitute a good example here within which several types of certificates listed in table 2 have been functioning successfully.

Table 2. Certificates used in wood sector

Name of certificate	Description
Blue Angel and Ecolabel 	Certificates confirming minimisation of negative environmental impact in the process of raw material processing and also of production, granted among others for wood or wood-based products and also for paper products (paper for publications, copying and hygiene)
Fairtrade 	Certificate guaranteeing fair trade relationships at distribution stage of both raw materials and final products, but granted solely to FSC certified entities.
Rainforest Alliance 	Certificate covering the stage of obtaining raw materials and granted among others for wood and paper products. This certificate belongs to FSC organisation.
FSC (<i>Forest Stewardship Council</i>) and PEFC (<i>Programme of the Endorsement of Forest Certification</i>) 	Certificates confirming realisation of sustainable forestry principles and focusing on enhancing the protective and productive functions of forests as well as on their social aspects; additionally guaranteeing supervision over the source of origin and flow of wood products within the frames of the performed economic activities.

Source: own materials based upon: <https://www.blauer-engel.de/en/>, <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/>, <http://www.fairtrade.net/>, <http://www.rainforest-alliance.org/>, <https://ic.fsc.org/>, <http://www.pefc.org/> (27.02.2017).

FCS and PEFC certificates should be considered the most important ones among those listed here, due to the fact, they possess the widest range and international renown and additionally they create two global systems of ecological certification, which refer directly to the conditions

of the performance of sustainable forestry and what is more, they function successfully in Polish wood sector (Referowska-Chodak, 2010, p. 229; Strykowski, 2015, p. 51). In the first case the possessed certificate guarantees the origin of raw material from forests managed in compliance with certain environmental standards and in the second case it confirms limited harmful influence of manufacturing processes connected with this raw material and its derivatives onto the environment or human health, as well as the ecological form of distribution and application of fair trade conditions.

Data from 2016 on the number of entities possessing certification of their products confirm, on the example of FSC and PEFC certificates, that the amount of marketing eco-innovations implemented in Poland is smaller than in other European countries. Subsequently, the number of companies with FSC CoC and PEFC CoC in Poland at the end of 2016 reached respectively 1467 and 163 entities, while in Great Britain the same numbers equalled 2377 and 1180 entities, in Germany 2208 and 1689 entities (<https://ic.fsc.org/> and <http://www.pefc.org/>). However, the most important issue remains the fact, that the environment benefits from products certification, particularly wood products – a fact which has been confirmed by a series of research revealing the correlation between products certification and the deforestation process resulting from excessive exploitation (Marx, Cuypers, 2010, pp. 414-422). Moreover, forests certification and the resulting wood origin certificates constitute institutional innovation, which enhances the implementation of sustainable forest management (Overdeest, Rickenbach, 2006, p. 93).

Ecological certificates are applied not only in wood sector companies, i.e. those producing cellulose, paper, cardboard packaging, paper and wood products or dealing with furniture production, but also those operating in construction industry and trade. For instance, in construction industry the selection of materials with ecological label indicates to the aspect of responsibility for environment in course of realisation of construction projects and offers the opportunity to apply for ecological certificate, whereas in trade activities the possession of certificate and related ecological labels influences sellers' reputation and they in consequence force suppliers (e.g. paper and packaging manufacturers) and competitors to implement certain ecological standards (http://www.ic.fsc.org/FSC-Market-Info-Pack_2015, p. 34).

Conclusion

Carefully thought-through and properly conducted implementation of ecological certificates benefits all participants of the market game and in particular the economic surroundings in the

sphere of environment, additionally in micro, mezzo and macroeconomic dimension. This results from the fact, that certification forces aspiring entities to treat environmental issues as matters of equal importance to business issues – a fact which constitutes the core of eco-innovations aimed at environmental benefits stemming from popularisation of sustainable and environmentally oriented economy.

However, in practice eco-marketing initiatives serve producers to a larger extent due to the fact, that when they obtain ecological certificates in the area of raw materials acquisition, production process, packaging or distribution, they gain the opportunity to distinguish themselves among their competitors and to gain competitive advantage offering opportunities for long term company growth. Nevertheless, all interested parties connected with the given business entity become beneficiaries of certification, and especially those interested in protection of both social and environmental values. And although universal certificates have not been introduced yet in the sense of certificates covering all ecological aspects in the whole chain of production and supplies and also in all spheres of economy, which would solve all ecological issues, the already existing certificates contribute to the increase of ecological awareness both among companies and consumers.

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