

6-10-2017

CHANGING THE CALCULUS OF A POLICY IMPASSE: ENTREPRENEURIAL RESPONSES TO COOPTATION OF THE RECYCLING MOVEMENT BY THE PACKAGING INDUSTRY (SUMMARY)

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Recommended Citation

Hunt, Richard (2017) "CHANGING THE CALCULUS OF A POLICY IMPASSE: ENTREPRENEURIAL RESPONSES TO COOPTATION OF THE RECYCLING MOVEMENT BY THE PACKAGING INDUSTRY (SUMMARY)," *Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 14 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://digitalknowledge.babson.edu/fer/vol37/iss14/2>

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≈ SUMMARY ≈

**CHANGING THE CALCULUS OF A POLICY IMPASSE:
ENTREPRENEURIAL RESPONSES TO COOPTATION OF THE
RECYCLING MOVEMENT BY THE PACKAGING INDUSTRY**

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Principal Topic

This paper is among the first to explore the ways in which sustainable entrepreneurship may play a role in neutralizing the adverse effects of cooptation strategies undertaken by large-scale incumbents. My central interest is in asking: When and how can entrepreneurs identify and exploit opportunities that positively change the calculus of a complex policy landscape dominated by non-sustainable firms, practices and attitudes? The context for this inquiry is the household material recycling industry. I first examine how large-scale packaging manufacturers have used cooptation strategies to embrace the recycling movement in order to shift the costs of recycling subsidies from private manufacturing firms to society. In the second stage of the study, I examine how sustainability-minded entrepreneurs have launched new start-ups that develop and exploit attractive niches for Cleantech-based packaging alternatives that focus on upfront packaging innovations rather than back-end recycling aims.

Methods

The study employs a mixed methods approach that combines qualitative textual analyses of case histories (Allison 1984; Fleming & Harrington 2011; Tuma and Hannan 1979) and quantitative assessment of operational and financial data as well as patent filings by market participants in the packaging industry (Hoffman & Locker 2009; Malepiero 2005). The qualitative analysis involved coding more than 1,200 documents drawn from a 50-year period, extending from 1965 – 2015.

Results and Implications

The study contributes to efforts to understand how profit-seeking, market-based entrepreneurial action can contribute to sustainability aims by forging tenable business models in domains left unaddressed by incumbents, especially when existing firms explicitly pursue strategies aimed at preserving the status quo, such as cooptation. The results confirm that packaging industry incumbents engaged in a profitable strategy of coopting the rhetoric of the recycling movement in order to retard sentiment and policies aimed at more fundamental changes to packaging production and use. Moreover, the study suggests that the cooptation strategy created profitable niches that have been exploited by sustainable entrepreneurs. Through this, the costs of developing and producing goods that require less packaging is gradually shifting back to the private sector.

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