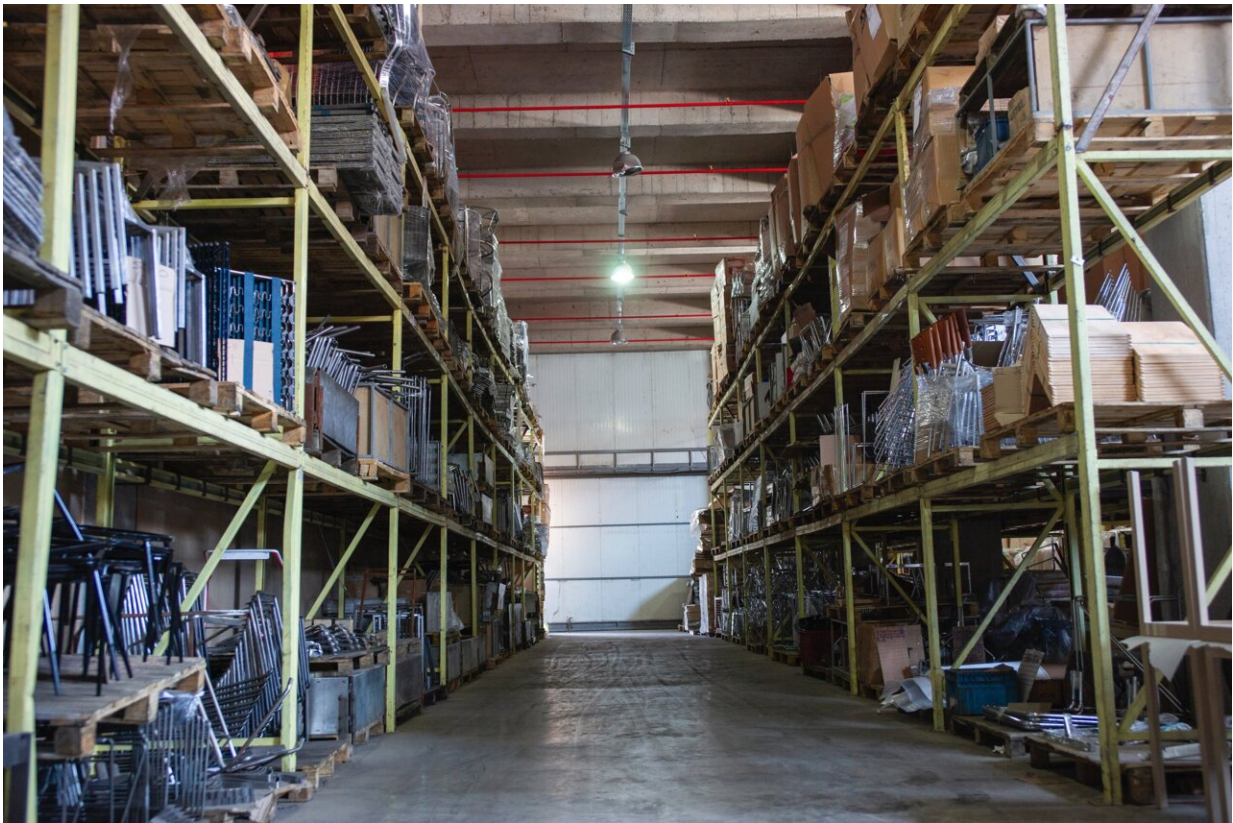


How marketing and business school educators can help combat climate change

January 9 2024, by Mikayla Mace Kelley



Credit: Engin Akyurt from Pexels

The holidays are a wrap, and the new year offers an opportunity for reflection and change. For many people, the holidays are a time when consumption kicks into overdrive, but a University of Arizona

researcher concerned about the environmental impacts of overconsumption—and the marketing that drives it—says it doesn't have to be this way and offers solutions.

In a [recent study](#) published in the *Journal of Macromarketing*, lead author Sabrina Helm—an associate professor in the UArizona Norton School of Human Ecology and the College of Agriculture, Life and Environmental Sciences—and her co-authors surveyed marketing educators from 42 countries to understand if and how they are integrating [climate change](#) into their curricula.

They found that just over one-third of respondents actively integrate sustainability and climate change into their classrooms. About half recognize the need for change but feel stuck teaching "business-as-usual" marketing curricula, Helm says. The remaining respondents value the standard marketing curricula. Members of this group don't deny climate change, but rather, they believe marketing education is not the place to address the issue.

"It does not make sense to teach our standard business-as-usual marketing repertoire while we are confronted with these grand challenges in society," Helm says. "I hope people realize how much impact we have as educators on the decisions of business leaders of the future. If climate change is caused by overconsumption, and marketing—as one of its goals—is driving [consumer behavior](#), you can immediately see the connection and need for change."

In the paper, the research team also provides suggested solutions and supporting resources for educators interested in altering their research or curriculum to promote an economy that incentivizes the restoration of nature and net-zero carbon emissions.

"It's my role, and the role of all educators, to drive these discussions in

the classroom," Helm says. "I don't have solutions to the climate crisis, and I can't revamp the capitalist system, but I can bring new ideas to my students. I can teach them to ask good questions and persevere in getting answers and enacting good practices when they get into their careers."

More than just in the classroom, change needs to happen at multiple levels, Helm says, including the individual level, the university and industry level and the wider social landscape.

"The current economic system has worked for many of us in many ways—including cleanliness, comfort, convenience—but it doesn't work for everyone, and it definitely doesn't work for nature," Helm says. "The model that requires infinite growth cannot be workable when you think about resource constraints on our planet. It will require rethinking what economic success means and changing how we live our lives. The task is huge, but I think it's quite interesting to think about marketing in that context because marketing has been pursuing this growth mantra, but we can instead use marketing for good."

Helm also hopes that educators will consider how they can change their [work environment](#) to be more amenable to changing curriculum. For example, often faculty on the tenure track feel restricted in what they're allowed to teach and research, she says. Even more so, faculty who are not on the tenure track can feel pressure to conform to the system, because they exist on short-term contracts.

"If [higher education](#) ignores our responsibility to teach what needs teaching, then we lose our license to operate," Helm says. "My students are very climate conscious. If we don't address it, it leaves them in a state of cognitive dissonance. They think that marketing or business is what they'd like to do in their career, but without integrating sustainability into our curriculum, they might find that their values are not aligned with their future careers."

Helm, who also studies climate change and anxiety, acknowledges that such discussions with students can be challenging, but says doing so in a thoughtful way can lead to better results and greater change.

As the paper states: "How we teach about climate change is as important as what we teach."

If not taught with intent, [climate](#) anxiety can lead to agnosis, or strategic ignorance, to cope with the stress of threat, Helm says.

"It's totally normal to react with extreme worry, anger, disillusionment, hopelessness, but if we leave it there, then we will probably resort to maladaptive coping mechanisms, like apathy or even retail therapy, which doesn't help us confront the problem and can even contribute to it," she says. "We need to remain productive and proactive to cope with the challenges ahead of us.

"I tell my students this: The way to cope with it is do whatever you can within your means. You're young, you're powerful and have a mind that can change so many things."

Ultimately, Helm is working to encourage students, companies and consumers to build a business environment where marketers and businesses cause less harm or no harm—or are even able to do good.

"It's a great time to reflect on what we can and should be doing to make positive change," she says.

More information: Sabrina V. Helm et al, "No Marketing on a Dead Planet": Rethinking Marketing Education to Support a Restoration Economy, *Journal of Macromarketing* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/02761467231211302](https://doi.org/10.1177/02761467231211302)

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