

Corporate Sustainability as a Competitive Strategy in Brazilian Companies

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Abstract

Only sustainable practices make it possible to guarantee the existence and usufruct of natural resources for coming generations. Certain Brazilian companies were classified in 2016 as the most sustainable companies in the cosmetics sector, according to the Exame sustainability guide; the objective of this study was to describe the sustainability activities that they implemented. The deductive method and qualitative approach were adopted, with reading and data analysis of the companies classified in the ranking of Revista EXAME in 2016. Research of an exploratory and descriptive character was used to organize, describe and compare the sustainable practices of the companies. The attitudes in the companies were

perceived to involve awareness but some restriction in the steps of sustainable practices and beliefs, with some way still to go, since not all the companies are normally aware of the importance of these practices, and they often intend merely to respect the laws and environmental rules, not taking into account the fact that the environment should be respected. The results obtained confirm that the continuous sustainable actions developed by Natura, Avon and Grupo Boticário are essential and such activities contribute to the renovation, preservation, and conservation of natural resources, which should serve as a reflection and alert not only for other companies but also for society as a whole.

Keywords: Brazilian companies. Sustainable competitive strategy. Sustainable practices.

1. Introduction

Sustainability has been defined as an ability to meet the needs of the present and not jeopardize future generations (Hart & Milstein, 2004). Sustainability has been gaining attention and becoming a central concept in the management of companies' conduct, reaching and providing sustainable activities in all sectors, whether with regard to the environment, the economy, education, administration or other areas.

Organizations can adopt sustainable actions and guarantee, in the medium and long term, the preservation of natural resources for future generations; they can also make the world more conscious of possible scarcity and the need to maintain the natural resources. Thus, in addition to introducing new practices and customs that benefit the economy, people and the environmental, organizations also seek to establish sustainability goals on the basis of their corporate social responsibility, to repair the impact of the disasters that have already occurred.

This study explores the sustainability practices implemented by Brazilian companies which apprehend the need for sustainable competitive strategy. To do so, it considered the sustainability practices implemented by Brazilian companies, based on the classification of the most sustainable companies in the year 2016. The study employed descriptive exploratory methods, with a qualitative approach, deductive method, and bibliographical and documentary analysis. Its criteria are based on information contained in the Guia Exame de Sustentabilidade, whose rankings of the 100 most sustainable companies of 2016 identifies the practices carried out by companies.

2. Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is seen in the practice of those who meet their legal obligations and commitments to the performance of the economy. According to Tenório (2006), CSR is characterized as showing a company's involvement in community activities; it may sometimes represent the social interests directed to its business environment or its group of employees (Daniel, 2014).

The social responsibility of a company is discharges in actions and direct participation that promote and prioritize social and environmental obligations and show more social communication with its employees. Not even its support for community development and preservation of the current situation is enough to characterize a company as socially responsible. It must also prioritize the well-being of its employees and

good communication, and transparency in its treatment of them.

In the liberal view, companies have the function and objective of always seeking higher returns for their shareholders and stockholders, including obedience to a "set of rules that governs ethical business behaviour"; thus they manage the choice by individuals (stakeholders or shareholders) to receive the returns generated by the company, which knows how to handle its resources. In this sense, they propose that each partner makes an individual decision to accumulate wealth or to assign benefits to society, as a matter of ethics and individual responsibility, not the concern of the company (Machado Filho, 2006). According to Machado Filho (2006), stakeholder theory is based on the idea that the final balance of a business organization's activity should take into account the returns that enhance the results not only of the shareholders but of all the stakeholders involved.

Finally, in Eon's view (2014), social responsibility consists of managing a continuous process and improving and developing the company's welfare and its relationship with its employees, suppliers, and society. The companies that give their management a socially responsible position grow more sustainably: that is, they improve their image and opportunities, being less likely to provoke judicial conflicts.

2.1 Business Sustainability

Sustainability is the ability to sustain. Sustainability has as its essence the preservation of natural resources, as well as respect for human dignity; it is concerned not only with the present but also with future generations (Mikhailova, 2004). Corporate sustainability is based on the development, implementation and maintenance of actions that make a competitive organization economically viable, it takes account of environmental efficiency and social responsibility in its operations, focusing on natural resources, society and its stakeholders (Pimenta, 2010).

Sustainability is still defined by some authors as the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), which refers to the three dimensions of sustainability: to manage a business with social, economic and environmental circumspection, mapping its axes and identifying the company's position.

For Vellani and Ribeiro (2009), the definition of TBL focuses on the need for companies' strategic decisions to consider the economic Bottom Line, the social Bottom Line and the environmental Bottom Line; managers should consider economic sustainability as the calculation of profitability and the generation of value; social sustainability as the stimulation of education, culture, leisure and justice to the community; and ecological sustainability as maintaining the ecosystem and biological diversity. The interaction between these three kinds of sustainability forms the Bottom Line Tripod of Sustainability, illustrated in Figure 1.

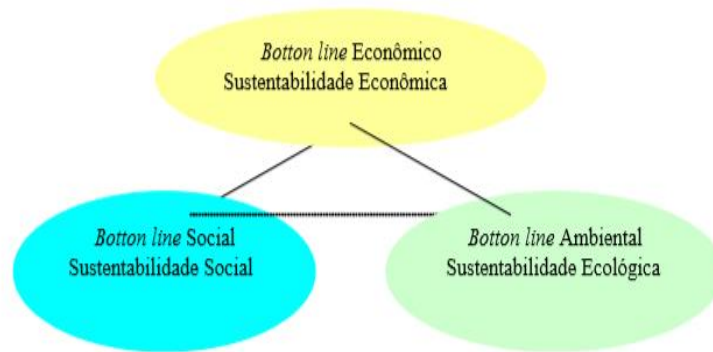


Figure 1. Interaction of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) of Sustainability

Source: Vellani and Ribeiro (2009).

Corporate sustainability is also seen in the sets of actions and responsibilities that the company must undertake to earn respect and recognition of its social and environmental maturity, allowing it to generate its business in a way that does not harm or endanger the environment. As stated by Azevedo (2006), constant economic, political and social external pressures are compelling companies to focus on the management of their businesses with sustainability in mind; he observes that groups of companies recognize that companies have a duty to plan their actions not only in relation to the environment but also to their employees and the community in which they are placed.

According to Furtado (2005), the right path to a sustainable business can be initiated and directed in different ways, such as organizational learning, building a global vision of sustainability or attaining it through the sequence and form of the tasks or actions selected and adjusted to the interests and conditions of the organization. The practices adopted should make it possible to improve the corporate image, the environmental conditions of the planet, the satisfaction of employees and shareholders, and the economic reduction of production costs.

However, the criterion of organizational sustainability is the well-being of society within the limits established by legal norms. Moreover, organizations respond to charitable demands and the claims of various social actors. The motivation for sustainable action lies in perceiving it as something imposed, an obligation or a correct behaviour (Munck & Souza, 2009).

2.2 Practices of Corporate Sustainability

Sustainable practices are very important since they enable a company to modify its image with the consumers in a positive way and can be very profitable when used as a strategy to increase its competitiveness while contributing to the well-being of humanity.

Companies have highly relevant embedded features, such as social responsibility, sustainability and socio-environmental responsibility (Razzoto, 2015). The following Table 1, presents examples of the sustainable practices undertaken by responsible enterprises.

Table 1. Examples of sustainable practices applied by responsible enterprises.

Company	Practices	Benefits
Natura	Pet Recycled post-consumption (2007)	Uses post-consumer recycled plastic (PET) in Ekos sub. - Promoting a continuous and significant reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions at all stages of the production process, from the extraction of raw material to the destination of the containers after consumption.
Pedroso	Segment of paper and pulp	Adopts the vision of sustainable development in its operations, highlighting the reforestation model of eucalyptus plantations.
Masisa	Relations with the community	Each community has unique characteristics; each of them has developed relationship plans, with open and systematic
Philips	Energy efficiency (2010)	Replaces conventional products with low consumption products by innovations that add more value to customers and consumers.
Walmart (2009)	Sustainable Meat Project: From Field to Table (2015)	Disseminates best socio-environmental practices in Amazonian cattle ranching, ensuring the conservation of forests, soils, and rivers, offering technical support to producers to increase their productivity and profitability without the need for new deforestation. Reduces the number of plastic containers and bags and reduces waste disposal to sanitary landfills, as well as
Malwee	Innovation in raw materials (2014)	Develops new processes for the use of materials that have a lower social and environmental impact, such as the use of PET and defibrated cotton.
Gramazon (2016)	-Health and safety at Work. -Purification and reuse. -Donation of leftovers. -Reforestation	- Shows concern for the health of employees with specialized professionals caring for their well-being, as a follow-up of general practitioner and psychologist. -Purifies and reuses water in production by a decantation process and storage in dams. -Uses the output of production leftovers (clay, earth) for landfills. -Supplies reforestation in degraded areas with tree plantations and pasture to reduce environmental impact.

Source: Adapted from Natura (2007), (2013), Pedroso (2007), Masisa (2015), Philips (2010), Walmart (2009) and (2015), Malwee (2014), Gramazon (2016).

Innovative ideas and practices are essential conduits, aimed at better results, which promote environmental and social respect. Coral (2002, p.31) highlights some business sustainability practices, such as: "the implementation of effluent and waste treatment systems in compliance with the current environmental legislation, the adoption of environmental management systems (EMS) and ISO 14001 certification."

The company's responsibility to the environment is necessarily a commitment to improving its quality; what is implied is education, awareness, and commitment to the micro and macro environment of which the company is a part, with support for sustainable environmental initiatives and practices. Support for

research projects, life cycle management of the impact of products or services, minimizing a company's environmental impact by the efficient planning and monitoring of production residues (Razzoto, 2015) Companies that assimilate a new environmental and social consciousness pay attention to different stakeholders and not just to investors by modifying their actions and benefits; they recognize and enforce the laws promoting an integrated approach based on sustainability. If a Social Report and environmental declarations or reports have been voluntary, then the legal and regulatory initiatives that encourage and urge companies to disclose non-financial information become more frequent (Dias, 2009).

2.3 Strategy: Concepts and importance in the business context

For Oliveira Thompson, Strickland and Gamble (2011), strategies in companies are concerned with the direction of competitiveness and the managerial approach, who use them for business growth, for attracting and satisfying clients, competing successfully to reach the optimum levels organizational performance.

Organizational strategies are affected not only by environmental forces and strategic capacity but by the values and expectations of those who have power inside and outside the organization. Whether the organization is expansionist or is more concerned with consolidation and if boundaries are set established on organizational activities can reveal much about the values and attitudes of those who, as stakeholders, have the power to influence the strategy of the organization (Johnson, Scholes & Whittington, 2007).

In Oliveira's (2007) conception strategy is significant for the company, which knows that the executive must recognize that choosing the most propitious moment to implement a strategy is as critical as the strategy itself, the plan of the best paths to follow to meet the companies objectives an overcome its goals, and challenges. Strategy is imposed on a company as the art of using things appropriately. Deciding on a course of action is necessary for a company when it debates which paths to follow in determining its business strategy.

Piacentini et al. (2018) focus on strategy in the context of improving the production practices traditionally developed in sensitive ecological environments. For these authors, a sustainable approach when facing new commercial demands involves the reviewing of knowledge, technologies, and methods according to precepts which protect the environmental and social context,

Finally, strategies are conceived as a central framework for entrepreneurs to manage their businesses, a way of planning a set of methods and practices that will form the primary focus of their actions, and one that can be applied and characterized by companies in different ways to target and determine for themselves their own competitive behaviour in the market (Oliveira, 2007).

3. Methodology

The present research is of the applied type, follows the deductive method and takes a primarily qualitative approach. It starts with the analysis of data from documents about the Brazilian companies that were ranked as more sustainable in 2016. For this purpose, it was used to interpret a specific content, which focused on the categories of sustainable practices identified in the literature review (Appolinário, 2006; Gil, 2008; Martins & Theóphilo, 2007; Gerhardt & Silveira, 2009; Piacentini, 2017).

The research has an exploratory and descriptive character, which sought to know the theoretical

possibilities of certain categories and then to classify, describe and compare the sustainability practices implemented by the most sustainable companies in 2016.

Following Piacentini et al. (2017), the qualitative approach in the present study seeks to discover and classify the variables according to their relationship, and the exploratory objective binds with the theme to make the problem explicit.

The ranking by the national magazine 'Exame de Sustentabilidade' was adopted to improve the comparison of these companies to the international classifications in the global list of the 100-Most Sustainable Corporations in The World, which listed two Brazilian companies as the most sustainable in Brazil in 2016. Information about sustainable practices was collected from the reading and identification of categories according to the findings in the Guia Exame de Sustentabilidade. The variables thus identified and analyzed were the sustainability practices of Natura, Avon, and Boticário, three firms in the cosmetics sector.

4. Analysis and Discussion of Results

In this section, the data collected in the documentary research are summarised.

4.1 Natura

Founded in 1969, Natura is a Brazilian multinational company in the cosmetics, hygiene and beauty sector, with a commitment to develop products that represent values and behaviours that are more sustainable in the network of relationships. It is considered one of the ten most innovative companies in the world with 7,000 employees, 1.5 million consultants, and its suppliers and partners and has established itself in France and six countries in Latin America (Natura Annual Report, 2016).

Natura invests in innovation as one of the main pillars to reach a model of sustainable development, seeking to create values for society in social, economic and environmental terms. The transformation of Brazilian biodiversity into products is already a trademark of the Natura and its relationship with the Amazon Forest dates from the year 2000, with the launch of the Ekos line. The company's philosophy is that, by using renewable raw materials that generate income for indigenous communities, it can intercept predatory cycles and creating a stable forest economy (Revista Exame, 2016, p.110).

To reach Ucuuba's new line of butter-based cosmetics, for example, Natura devoted six years of research to identifying a sustainable way to use Ucuuba and the most appropriate method for extracting and transforming it into cosmetics such as moisturizers and soaps. The primary challenge to this process was to change the customs of the local population, because the firm's intention was to show that harvesting the fruits yielded more than could be gained from cutting the trees down. Preserving the trees was three times as valuable as destroying them (Revista Exame, 2016).

The organized cooperatives are now directed to harvest only 50% of the fruits so that the remainder can fall into the rivers and be carried away to germinate. The Ucuuba harvest is gathered by 15 communities, totalling 600 families, in the state of Amazonas and Pará. The packaging of the Ucuuba line has been made recyclable, with 50% green vegetable PET, and 50% recycled PET. The company claim to "seek a model in which the use of Brazilian biodiversity in cosmetic products can help strengthen not only the region's economy but also social progress and awareness of the importance of the forest to the planet" (Revista

Exame, 2016, p. 110). Pedroso (2007) says that organizations which employ sustainable practices must ensure three dimensions, environmental, economic and social, at the same time.

4.2 Avon

Avon is a company that supports 6 million resellers in more than 100 countries. It has operated for more than 130 years, working for beauty, innovation, optimism, above all for women (Avon, 2017). Avon has several sustainable movements that differentiate it from other companies, since it commits itself to developing both people and the environment.

Avon has a long-standing commitment to managing its environmental footprint. Addressing essential impacts on other companies and focusing on continuous improvement, with particular emphasis on the areas that most important to itself, to society and to the planet, it has a global network of associates dedicated to environmental stewardship and applying the principles of sustainability to its daily work (Avon, 2017).

Avon invests in its internal structure in a way that guides and stimulates the innovation process. Based on the guidelines from and priorities of the business, a team of eight people is responsible for capturing initiatives in different areas, offering technical training so that proposals can materialize. Each effort to improve is collective, formed by each employee's vision in various regards, such as processes, the use of natural resources and financial management.

A strategic vision of the opportunities for improvement contributes to the company's integration of actions and results. One example of an outcome is the Out of the Box project, born of the proposal for changing the packaging of a specific line, but spreading to all areas of production. The packaging was redesigned to avoid the former waste of space and material in the manufacturing stages, and also in the storage and transportation. a closed relationship circle with suppliers was created, using pallets and reusing or recycling cardboard boxes. These changes and innovations contributed to reducing by 88% the generation of waste wood pallets, saving 1,000 tons of cardboard.

Contributing to the product's integration with the supply chain was the reorganization of the transportation route, which has made it possible to withdraw 1500 trucks since 2013. It ceased to run an unnecessary 2 million kilometres and reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by 660 tonnes.

4.3 Boticario Group

The Boticario Group is formed by the companies O Boticario, Eudora, who said, Berenice? and The Beauty Box and maintains the Apothecary Group Foundation for the Protection of Nature. It was created in 2010, with the vision of generating complete and innovative solutions for its consumers (Grupo Boticário, 2017). One of the principles of Grupo Boticário is to avoid testing its products on animals. It has developed alternative tests, making it the first cosmetic company in Brazil to create 3D skin technology, and has adopted a technological chip which simulates human organs for testing its products. From the exploration of raw materials to the development of packaging, its processes all respect sustainability. In addition, it uses alternative energy sources and has reduced its water consumption in its daily practices (Grupo Boticário, 2017).

Its 21 cooperatives, located in the cities of São Paulo, Mesquita (RJ), Itumbiara (GO), Feira de Santana (BA) and Ji-Paraná (RO), received new equipment and its management had technical assistance in the process of greening the firm. 110 workers, 73 of women have benefited from this change.

These initiatives have contributed to the promotion of the recycling market. Support was also given to the firm’s cooperatives with training, improved management and increased production, a decision which contributed to raising the average income of these organizations by 28 last year, reaching 840 reais per month (Revista Exame, 2016, p. 115).

With its accumulated experience, the Boticário group as it developed its products began to worry even more about post-consumption use. According to those responsible, "Our objective is to use more and more material of less environmental impact. When this material is discarded, we want it to find a favourable recycling scenario, especially with regard to cooperatives" (Revista Exame, 2016).

4.4 Business Practices

Table 2 was elaborated to illustrate the reported aspects of the actions performed by the companies Natura, Avon, and Grupo Boticário, in order to compare and analyse the results of their practices.

Table 2. Sustainable practices in the companies surveyed.

Companies	Sustainable Practices	Results and Contributions
Natura	Avoid deforestation and generate income for communities in the Amazon.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encouragement and support in changing indigenous practices with regard to ucuuba trees, showing that the gain from the fruits is more profitable than that from the cut trees. -Orientation to the cooperatives in the harvesting of only 50% of the ucuuba fruit, letting the remainder fall into the river and be swept away to germinate. -Investment in the improvement of plants that benefit the community – Manufacture of packaging made of 50% green PET of vegetable origin, and 50% recycled PET.
Avon	Construct green buildings; Reduce emissions; conserve energy and water; and improve distribution. Reduce waste; plan recyclable packaging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support sustainable building practices; By 2020, reduce absolute GHG emissions from Avon operations by 20% and reduce water consumption per Avon manufacturing unit by 40% from baseline levels in 2005. - By 2020, reduce waste by 30% per base-waste unit per Avon manufacturing unit. In 2015 the recycling rate was 88.6%; next, reduce waste by 7%. - Avon Paper Promise, a comprehensive policy to promote responsible forest use and protect forests.

	Reforestation	
Group Boticário	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Don't use animals in tests. -Energy alternatives and reduction in water use -Project recycling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Development of technology organs on a chip for testing products that simulates human organs. - Reducing by 71% the time needed to manufacture products; reducing the consumption of electricity by 70%, the cost of processing by 15% and the cost of raw materials by 10%. -Recovering and delivering the packaging in cooperatives -Investing in improving the conditions in five new cooperatives

Source: Survey data (2017).

The practices of Natura, Avon and Grupo Boticário reveal attitudes that produce benefits in the medium and long term, formed of interconnected strategies and processes generated and applied sustainably. The organizations in question provide their products and services strategically allied to the dimensions of the economy, society and the environment.

Pimenta (2010) points out that pure entrepreneurship, the adoption of one or another assessment tool or mechanism focused on sustainability does not always mean that the company has reached its full potential for corporate sustainability. This is manifestly justified as a comment, since each initiative must be seen as a process of continuous learning, and the participation of government and society may be seen in this process.

The actions carried out by the companies Natura, Avon, and Grupo Boticário are parts of active processes, with favourable results that develop sustainability every step. Such actions as reforestation, the use of recycled materials, emission reduction and the reduction of water and light consumption are both varied and similar. It should be emphasized that the practices of these companies are varied, but have similar objectives, that is, to preserve and encourage the use of new actions and attitudes to the environment.

Furtado (2005) affirms that sustainability must be applied from adequate practices, from the economic and socio-environmental point of view, including the extraction and use of necessary materials (including water and energy); the production, distribution and marketing of goods and services; the disposition and environmentally friendly disposal of non-products (waste), packaging, [...], always taking into account the obligation to prevent the wasteful destruction of natural, social and human resources.

5. Conclusion

The objective of this research was to identify and describe the sustainability practices implemented by Brazilian companies classified as the most sustainable in 2016, and also to compare sustainability practices of companies and evaluate whether they can be considered sustainable competitive strategies.

According to the research study, the three companies Natura, Avon and Grupo Boticário aggregate strategies for sustainable actions and projects that aim to mobilize and incentivize conduct in a socially

beneficial way. This allows them to contribute not only to following the country's environmental legislation, but also to producing their goods with a sustainable vision, adopting practices that replace what they take out of the environment. Awareness of a sustainable vision delivers many advantages for a company that uses natural resources as its raw material, such as Natura, Grupo Boticário and Avon, because they are committed to managing their supply chain without the risk of degradation or the violation of the environmental laws; even if this risk is disregarded by the business world, the advantages of not taking it lie in good management and having a good image in the eyes of society, in particular all other stakeholders.

Comparing the sustainable practices applied by the companies Natura, Avon, and Grupo Boticário reveals that they have sustainable actions in common. Even their important innovations imply the same goal: to produce and guarantee environmental, social and economic responsibility. These actions are the same for many companies because the purpose of these practices has the same goals, even when the companies vary in consumer needs, awareness, and strategic tactics.

The most frequently recurring practices among the selected companies are investment in renewable raw materials, emission reduction, the use of recycled materials and packaging, water and energy conservation, reforestation and the non-use of animal testing. These are the activities requiring the greatest consumption and the ones that most need to be made sustainable; that is, they are products or services made daily in the companies that require a strategy of reduced consumption or more sustainable practice.

As for the evaluation of sustainable practices in relation to viable competitive strategy, it is observed that the attitudes of management in the companies Natura, Grupo Boticário and Avon, have been adopted in order to compete in practice and in more sustainable approaches/ Their actions should be strategically well-designed and they should offer companies the excellent prospect of being durable and exemplifying values that society might embrace. However, it is noted that companies view sustainability not only as a strategy for becoming competitive but also as a challenge to aggregate and always develop afresh in sustainable actions, without degrading ecological resources. Sustainability as a competitive strategy is a routine in companies, but it requires more awareness and truthfulness in companies' actions, not merely their marketing ploys.

Given the results, it was verified that companies are becoming aware of and restricting themselves to sustainable attitudes and the required to put them into practice. However, they still have some way to go, since in general, not all companies are aware of the importance of these actions, or often propose to merely to conform to environmental laws and regulations, not worrying about the fact that the environment is not infinite. Thus, the results of the research make it clear that companies should set themselves a single objective, to produce their products and services with the awareness that they must work out their steps in relation to the environment if they want to guarantee the medium and long term sustainability of the world, since what is withdrawn from the ecosystem must be replenished in a way that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

It should be noted that the practices developed by Natura, Avon and Grupo Boticário address all three dimensions, economic, social and environmental, since they have medium and long-term strategies to achieve it although some of these companies generally develop piecemeal, improving now in one

dimension and now in another, evolving faster than their competitors only in certain respects. Each practice developed by companies, regardless of size, will benefit its competitiveness, since each action or attitudes developed contributes to the protection of the environment, and signifies right social and economic conduct that generates good environmental awareness and actions.

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