

THE ROLE OF GREEN MARKETING IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION: EVIDENCE FROM COSTA RICA

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Abstract

This article examines the role of green marketing in advancing sustainable consumption, using Costa Rica as a case study. Although sustainability and corporate responsibility are widely discussed in marketing research, there remains a need to assess how green marketing campaigns translate into measurable outcomes for consumers and businesses. Drawing on secondary data from international organisations, government reports, and corporate initiatives, the study analyses three emblematic campaigns: the Costa Rican Tourism Institute's "Discover Sustainable Costa Rica", Banco Nacional's "Green Loans", and Kölbi's "Recharge Your World with Clean Energy". Results indicate that Costa Rica has successfully leveraged green marketing to strengthen its international reputation as a sustainability leader, foster adoption of renewable energy, and attract eco-conscious tourism. However, the absence of systematic evaluation of attitudinal and behavioural change remains a limitation. The findings offer lessons for countries seeking to align green marketing strategies with sustainable development goals, including Bulgaria, where eco-tourism campaigns could benefit from Costa Rica's experience.

Keywords: Costa Rica, green marketing, sustainable production and consumption

JEL: M31, Q01, Q56, Z32

Introduction

Marketing has assumed a role of great importance since the 1970s, as noted by the American Marketing Association (AMA, 1975), owing to the incorporation of sustainable development goals and products. The concept of green marketing originated in the 1990s, emphasising the alignment of consumer needs with environmental protection through sustainable business practices. Early initiatives, such as Nike's "Green" campaign (1989), illustrated how companies began shifting product focus to meet consumer expectations while considering

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social and environmental impact. This evolution reflects how consumer decision-making has increasingly incorporated ethical and ecological concerns alongside traditional drivers such as price, convenience, and status.

Sustainability has now become one of the defining challenges for both governments and businesses. Consumer demand for environmentally responsible products has given rise to green marketing, which is a strategy designed not only to sell products but also to promote behavioural change toward sustainable consumption. Despite a growing body of literature, many studies remain theoretical and lack concrete evidence of how green marketing campaigns work in practice.

This article addresses this gap by examining Costa Rica, a country that has positioned itself globally as a leader in renewable energy and eco-tourism. The research question guiding the study is: *How has green marketing contributed to promoting sustainable consumption in Costa Rica?* The thesis is that Costa Rica's success stems not merely from policy and natural endowments but also from deliberate green marketing strategies that influence consumer choices, both domestically and internationally. By analysing emblematic campaigns, the study provides insights into the effectiveness of green marketing and its applicability to other contexts.

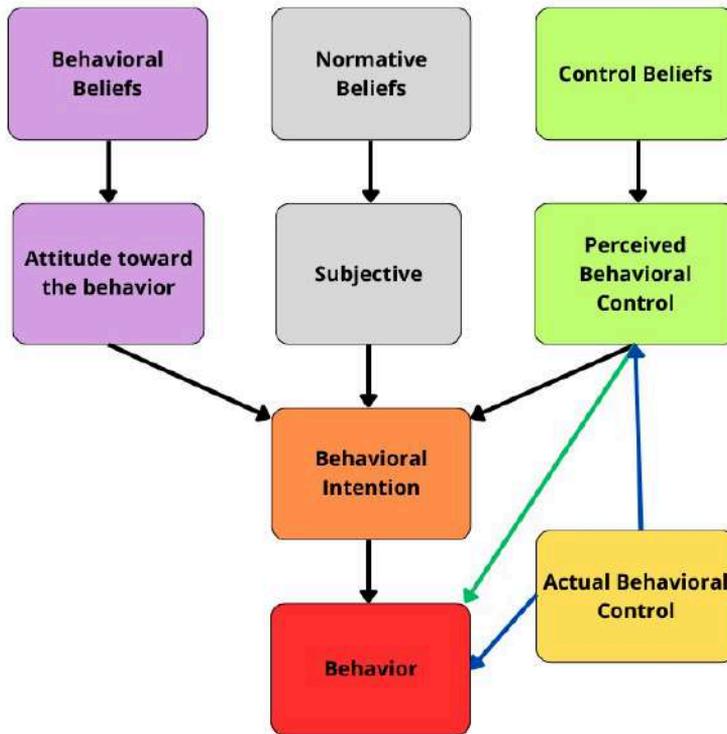
Theoretical Framework

Defining Green Marketing

Green marketing is defined as the planning and implementation of strategies designed to meet consumer needs while minimising environmental harm (Ottman, 2011). It differs from sustainable marketing, which integrates long-term economic, social, and ecological goals (Belz & Peattie, 2009), and from corporate social responsibility (CSR), which emphasises ethical commitments rather than market-driven strategies. An additional challenge is to avoid greenwashing, that is, the use of “green” messages to conceal unsustainable practices, which undermines consumer trust and damages corporate credibility.

Consumer Behaviour and Persuasion

Green marketing effectiveness is often analysed through consumer behaviour theories. Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (1991) explains how behavioural intentions depend on attitudes, social norms, and perceived control. Festinger's Theory of Persuasion (1957) emphasises the role of social influence in attitude change. These frameworks suggest that campaigns succeed when they simultaneously shape awareness, align with social values, and reduce barriers to action.



Source: Ajzen (1991).

Figure 1: Organisational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes

These theories are integral to understanding consumer behaviour, recognising that consumers are persons embedded in social environments and seeking well-being. Consumer behaviour is not merely a matter of habit, as is often thought, but also requires education on sustainability, which ultimately influences consumers' decisions and behaviours when making purchases (Leonidou, Katsikeas & Morgan, 2013).

Measuring Effectiveness

The effectiveness of green marketing can be measured through three key dimensions:

- *Awareness*: changes in knowledge and attitudes toward sustainability.
- *Behavioural outcomes*: adoption of eco-friendly practices (e.g., renewable energy use, eco-tourism participation).

- *Certification and loyalty*: consumer preference for brands with recognised sustainability credentials.

Recent research (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012; Leonidou et al., 2013; Vargas & Gutiérrez, 2020) highlights the importance of linking marketing communication with verifiable results. While digital marketing tools, such as social media and online platforms, are increasingly used to amplify green messages, their effectiveness ultimately depends on credibility and measurable impact.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, with a descriptive and historical orientation. The aim is to explore and understand the phenomenon of green marketing within the specific context of Costa Rica, tracing how strategies have evolved over time and how they are applied in practice. Unlike quantitative research, this approach does not seek generalisation; instead, it provides an in-depth, contextualised view of the observed reality (Yin, 2014).

Case Selection

Three campaigns were selected for their national relevance, visibility, and alignment with sustainability objectives:

1. *Discover Sustainable Costa Rica* – eco-tourism promotion by the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT).
2. *Green Loans* – Banco Nacional financing initiative for renewable energy adoption.
3. *Recharge Your World with Clean Energy* – corporate campaign by Kölbi.

Data Sources

The analysis relies on secondary data from international organisations (UNEP, CEPAL, UNDP), Costa Rican government agencies (ICT, ICE, Banco Nacional), and corporate communications (Kölbi). This dependence on secondary sources constitutes a limitation, as it restricts the ability to measure consumer attitudes or long-term behavioural changes directly. Future research should incorporate primary data collection (surveys, interviews, focus groups) to strengthen the evidence base.

Analytical Dimensions

Each campaign is analysed along the following dimensions:

- Target audience.
- Reach and media mix.
- Budget (where data is available).

- Attitudinal outcomes (awareness, perceptions).
- Behavioural outcomes (adoption of products/services).

This framework allows a systematic comparison of cases while recognising contextual limitations.

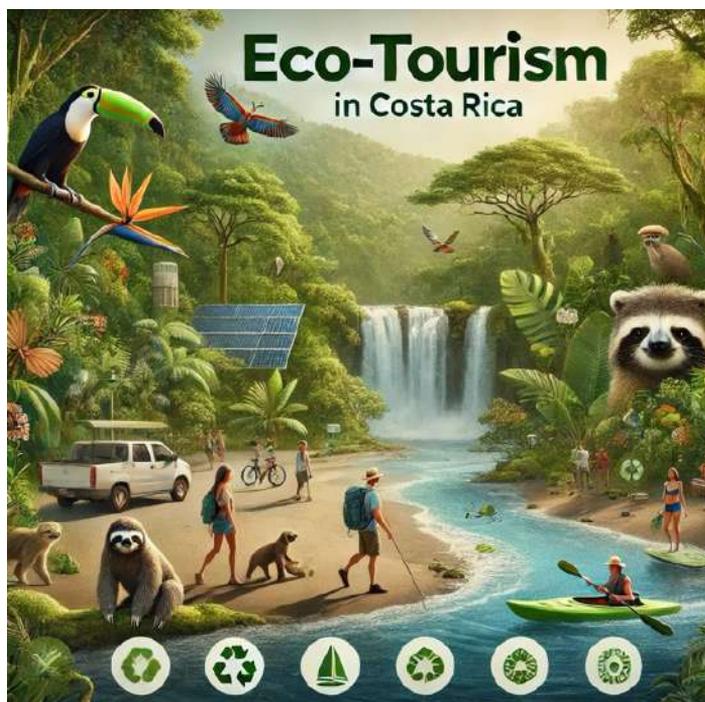
Results and discussion

ICT – Discover Sustainable Costa Rica

Target audience: The campaign targeted international tourists, particularly from North America and Europe, who were interested in responsible and sustainable travel experiences.

Reach and media mix: It was disseminated via digital platforms, international tourism fairs, and airline partnerships, with the message: *“Travel responsibly, discover a 100% green country”*.

Budget: No detailed public data on the campaign’s budget is available; however, it was part of the ICT’s national tourism promotion allocations, which are publicly funded.

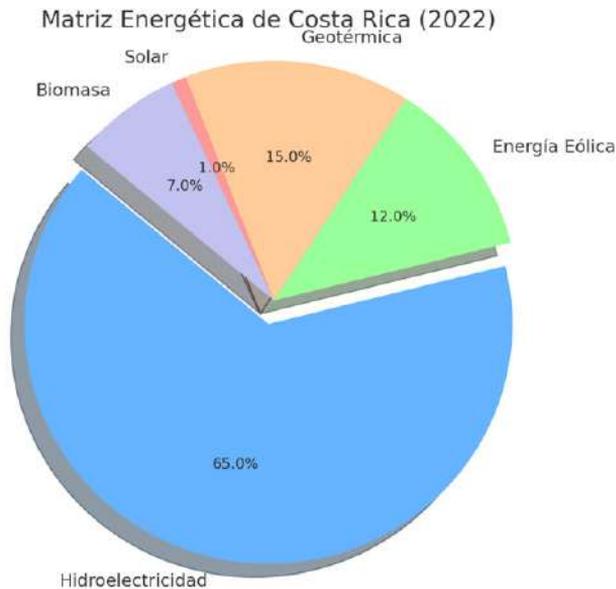


Source: CEPAL (2023).

Figure 2: Eco-tourism marketing campaign

Attitudinal outcomes (awareness, perceptions): Surveys reported that approximately 40% of visitors identified sustainability as a decisive factor in choosing Costa Rica as their destination (CEPAL, 2019), thereby reinforcing perceptions of the country as a global green leader.

Behavioural outcomes (adoption of products/services): In 2019, Costa Rica received more than 2 million international tourists. Hotels certified with the Tourism Sustainability Certification (CST) achieved higher occupancy rates, indicating a shift in consumer behaviour toward certified sustainable services.



Source: United Nations Environment Programme (2023).

Figure 3: Costa Rica's energy matrix

The pie chart shows the distribution of Costa Rica's energy mix in 2022, highlighting the dominance of hydroelectricity at 65%, with other sources, such as wind and geothermal, also playing an important role.

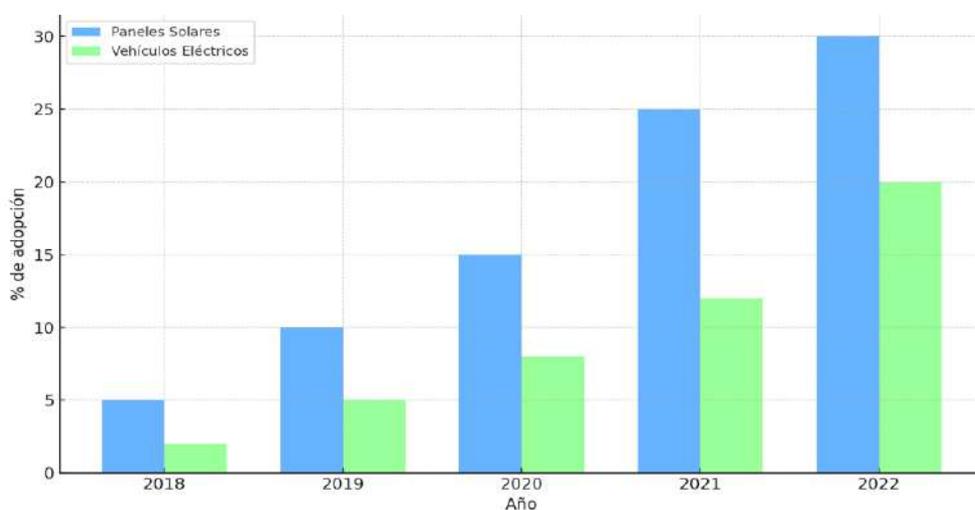
Discussion: This campaign linked national branding to demand for ecotourism, leveraging Costa Rica's image as a country that generates over 98% of its electricity from renewable sources. This alignment of marketing and policy strengthened credibility and created a competitive advantage.

Banco Nacional – Green Loans

Target audience: Households and businesses interested in investing in clean technologies, such as solar panels and electric vehicles.

Reach and media mix: The campaign was promoted through nationwide advertising in print and digital media, as well as partnerships with renewable technology providers.

Budget: The specific budget was not disclosed; however, the initiative was supported by government incentives under the National Decarbonization Plan 2018 – 2050.



Source: United Nations Environment Programme (2023).

Figure 4: Growth in renewable technology adoption in Costa Rica (2018 – 2022). This bar chart illustrates the increasing adoption of solar panels and electric vehicles.

Attitudinal outcomes (awareness, perceptions): The program enhanced perceptions of Banco Nacional as an institution committed to sustainability, thereby fostering consumer trust in accessing green financing.

Behavioural outcomes (adoption of products/services): By 2022, the initiative had financed more than 5,000 solar panel installations and several hundred electric vehicles, reflecting a direct impact on the adoption of sustainable technologies by households and businesses.

Discussion: This initiative demonstrates how financial instruments marketed through sustainability branding can drive behavioural change at the household level. It is consistent with the government’s National Decarbonization Plan

2018 – 2050, which promotes the electrification of transport and the adoption of clean technologies.

Kölbi – Recharge Your World with Clean Energy

Target audience: The campaign targeted both the general population and corporate clients.

Reach and media mix: It was disseminated through television, social media, and outdoor advertising, emphasising the company's use of 100% renewable electricity in its operations.

Budget: No official figures were published regarding the budget allocated to this campaign.

Attitudinal outcomes (awareness, perceptions): The campaign reinforced Kölbi's image as an environmentally responsible company, increasing consumer trust in the brand (INCAE, 2020).

Behavioural outcomes (adoption of products/services): The campaign contributed to stronger customer loyalty, translating into consumer retention and preference for the company, where positive perceptions aligned with concrete consumption decisions.

Discussion: Corporate green marketing can reinforce national sustainability narratives. Kölbi's efforts also reflect broader structural changes, such as the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE) ensuring a stable supply of renewable energy.

Ecotourism and Certification Programs

Programs such as the Blue Flag Award and CST provide tangible recognition for environmentally friendly practices. They operate as marketing tools, signalling trustworthiness and enabling differentiation. However, adoption is voluntary and uneven.

The evidence collected across the three campaigns is summarised in Table 1, which presents a comparative analysis across five analytical dimensions.

Table 1. Comparative Insights from Green Marketing Campaigns in Costa Rica

Campaign / Program	Target Audience	Reach & Media Mix	Budget (where available)	Attitudinal Outcomes (awareness, perceptions)	Behavioural Outcomes (adoption of products/ services)
ICT – Discover Sustainable Costa Rica	International tourists (mainly from North America and Europe)	Digital platforms, international tourism fairs, and airline partnerships	Not publicly disclosed; financed within ICT’s national tourism promotion budget	Strengthened perception of Costa Rica as a “green” country; ~40% of tourists reported sustainability as a decisive factor	+2 million tourists in 2019; higher occupancy in CST-certified hotels
Banco Nacional – Green Loans	Households and businesses investing in clean technologies	Nationwide advertising; partnerships with renewable technology providers	Specific figures not disclosed; supported by government incentives under the National Decarbonization Plan	Enhanced trust in Banco Nacional as a sustainability-driven institution	5,000+ solar panel installations; hundreds of EVs financed
Kölbi – Recharge Your World with Clean Energy	General population and corporate clients	Television, social media, and outdoor advertising	Not publicly disclosed	Increased perception of Kölbi as environmentally responsible; strengthened brand image	Greater customer loyalty and retention; preference for renewable energy-based services

Source: Own elaboration based on secondary data (CEPAL, UNEP, INCAE, ICT, Banco Nacional, ICE).

To ensure consistency with the analytical framework, each campaign was examined across five dimensions: *target audience, reach and media mix, budget (where available), attitudinal outcomes, and behavioural outcomes*. This systematic approach enables comparison of the initiatives on equal terms and identifies both their contributions and limitations in promoting sustainable consumption. The following table summarises the evidence-based findings.

The comparative analysis shows that while the three campaigns differed in scope and resources, all contributed in complementary ways to Costa Rica's sustainability agenda. Tourism promotion primarily influenced international perceptions and stimulated demand for certified eco-services; financial products enabled the concrete adoption of renewable technologies at the household and business levels; and corporate branding reinforced trust and loyalty among national consumers. Together, these outcomes illustrate how green marketing can generate both attitudinal and behavioural changes, although the absence of systematic budget data and long-term evaluation mechanisms remains a limitation.

Conclusion

This article examined the role of green marketing in promoting sustainable consumption, using Costa Rica as a case study. The findings show that green marketing is more than a communication tool: it can mobilise consumers, businesses, and entire industries toward sustainable practices.

Key findings include:

- The integration of marketing and public policy was critical to Costa Rica's success.
- The tourism and finance sectors were particularly effective in aligning green marketing strategies with consumer decision-making.
- Behavioural outcomes suggest that marketing can reinforce sustainability transitions, although most evidence remains short-term.

Challenges remain:

- Limited data on long-term attitudinal and behavioural change.
- Over-reliance on branding without systematic monitoring and evaluation.
- The risk of greenwashing if sustainability claims are not continuously verified.

Recommendations:

- **For Costa Rica:** Institutionalise evaluation mechanisms, including consumer surveys and behavioural data, to assess the long-term effectiveness of campaigns.

- **For other countries (e.g., Bulgaria):** Leverage eco-tourism potential by combining national branding with certification schemes, public-private partnerships, and financial incentives, following Costa Rica's example.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how the alignment of policy frameworks and marketing strategies enhances the credibility, effectiveness, and transferability of green marketing practices. By showing both successes and limitations in the Costa Rican case, it provides a roadmap for other nations seeking to promote sustainable consumption through evidence-based green marketing.

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