

Deciding to Initiate a Consumer Boycott: Questions of Right or Wrong

Although consumers have participated in hundreds of boycotts in the last decade little scholarly attention has been directed at the ethics of these often-controversial actions. In this paper ethical dilemmas are examined relating to the decision to start a consumer boycott. Also considered is the consumer boycott, an organizational alternative some observers believe is more free of ethical problems than the consumer boycott.

Monroe Friedman, Eastern Michigan University¹

Initiating Consumer Boycotts: Questions of Ends and Means

For many observers a most salient ethical issue relating to boycotts concerns the act of starting (rather than stopping) a consumer boycott. For these observers the key question is whether the ends sought by a proposed boycott initiative justify the means to be used to attain them. In their efforts to deal with this question some analysts have focused on boycott "ends" while others have concentrated on boycott "means." Let us look at these two positions in turn.

Boycott Ends

To illustrate this position, Neier (1982) has proposed a simple preference model based on the nature of the offensive behavior which the boycott seeks to end. He is most sympathetic to "boycotts against practices that are deemed objectionable," such as the exploitation of farmworkers. He is least sympathetic to "black list" type boycotts; these are actions which attempt to punish individuals or groups (often performing artists) simply because they hold points of view which are offensive to the boycotters.

Boycott Means

To illustrate this position, Garrett (1986) has contributed to the discussion of boycott ethics by identifying three parties which could be injured by injudicious use of the boycott strategy. One, of course, is the corporate target, and the ethical questions loom large if it finds itself falsely accused, or if it finds that it is incapable of responding to the boycotters' demands. A second group identified by Garrett consists of the customers of the boycotted firm, who, he believes, should not be forced by intimidating tactics to honor the boycott against their will. Finally, Garrett's third group consists of secondary parties (typically non-principals in the boycott struggle who find themselves caught in the cross-fire, such as workers, suppliers and distributors) whose economic fortunes could well be affected by the boycott and its outcome.

We look next at three types of boycotts with the potential to harm such groups.

1. Obstructionist Boycotts. Boycotts of this type raise ethical issues since they place obstacles in the way of consumers who are attempting to purchase a boycotted product or service. Perhaps the best known variety of an obstructionist boycott is the sit-in, a technique used by African-Americans at segregated lunch counters in Southern communities in the 1950s and 1960s.
2. Secondary Boycotts. This boycott type focuses on an economic entity, usually a retailer, who buys the wares of the primary boycott target for the purpose of reselling them to consumers. Since the targeted retailer may sell many thousands of products, it seems highly questionable ethically to threaten its economic viability and the livelihood of its workers simply because it carries a few products sold by the offending primary boycott target. And this point has been recognized in the law which has often banned secondary boycotts but allowed picketers to inform the customers of a retail store that it is selling certain goods which are the focus of a primary consumer boycott.
3. Surrogate Boycotts. Ethical issues relating to boycotts are especially important in light of the growing popularity of "surrogate boycotts." With these indirect political actions, a protest group finds itself dissatisfied with the public policies of a city, state, or foreign nation and acts upon its feelings by boycotting surrogates (the business firms operating in the affected geographic area). Needless to say, there are many non-principals in such boycott struggles who may be adversely affected by their outcomes.

Concluding Comments and a Proposal

As we have seen, even ordinary garden-variety consumer boycotts have the potential to harm many innocent parties including rank-and-file workers and the various economic entities that depend upon the boycotted firms that employ these workers. And, of course, certain variations on the boycott theme can damage even more neutral parties as became evident in the discussion of obstructionist boycotts, secondary boycotts and surrogate boycotts.

To end these remarks on an encouraging note we look at another distinction between boycott actions, that between a "positive" boycott and a "negative" boycott. The positive boycott takes the form of a "black list" of items not to buy in the marketplace. In this sense it is synonymous with a consumer boycott. The negative boycott is a positive boycott with a twist in that the focus is on what to buy rather than what not to buy. For this reason it often takes the form of a "white list" of items to purchase, and is sometimes referred to as a "buycott." Perhaps the most common example of the buycott is the effort on the part of organized labor to encourage consumers to buy products with a union label.

What some observers find attractive about buycotts is that unlike boycotts, with their focus on threatening or punitive measures, buycotts simply encourage consumers to reward firms that have demonstrated behavior that is deserving of support in the view of the buycott organizers. And while this may be more easily said than done, the buycott, in theory at least, has much to commend it, both ethically and instrumentally, as a social change initiative.

References

- Garrett, D. E. (1986). Consumer boycotts: Are targets always the bad guy? *Business and Society Review*, 58, 17-21.
Nejer, A. (1982, May 29). On boycotts. *The Nation*, pp. 642-643.

Endnote

- 1 Professor, Department of Psychology