

The effects of business ethics on consumers' perceptions of merchandizing and service giving businesses in Mekelle, Ethiopia

Gebeyehu Jalu Negassa

Marketing Management, Mekelle University Lecturer

Abstract- Economic activities of people are causing major threats to environment and to survival of all life on the earth. Importance of ethics in the business world is superlative and global in its nature. The fact is that some businesses operate in unethical and socially irresponsible way. The unethical action of businesses in developing countries is highly linked with economic problem. Some customers are not enjoying quality goods and services at their cost. Though there is such serious problem, yet I could not find study conducted in the area to describe the situation or to identify root causes of the problem that enable decision makers to take appropriate action. So, the study going to evaluate business ethical practice of the town along with causes and effects of unethical business practice in the town. Both quantitative and qualitative has been used in order to secure reliable data from all possible sources in a confidential manner. Primary data has been collected by using questionnaire, interview and focus group discussion to collect the desired data from customers and businesses (both merchandizing and service providing businesses). The study has been conducted through a case study. As the target population of the study has been consumers and business organizations of Mekelle town. The sample for the study has been selected from customers and merchandizing and service rendering business organizations. A Sample size of 150 is taken, the collected data has been analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods and the data analysis has been supported by SPSS 16.0 software. As result shows Several business misconducts and corporate talks have resulted to a new kind of consumer who is more skeptical and critical than ever, affecting individual choices, perceptions and system of values.

Index Terms- Social responsibility, corporate social responsibility, consumerism, product liability and abnormal profit.

I. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Economic activities of people are causing major threats to environment and to survival of all life on the earth. Business ethics is current issue of the world. Importance of ethics in the business world is superlative and global in its nature. The fact is that some businesses operate in unethical and socially irresponsible way where as some businesses recognized their ethical duty and act accordingly. The dimension of ethical issues include consumerism, employee treatment, community wellbeing, protection of the environment, obeying government

regulations, fair competition and compliance with laws and industry standards. Current ethical duties of business organization not only concern for the present population on Earth but also for future generations. These are new ethical duties that have arisen as man has begun to have a serious effect on the Earth's ecological systems in general and on other people in particular (Baker, 2007).

In developed countries of the world business firms are stressed with a novel role, which is to congregate the desires of the present generation without negotiating the ability of the next generations to meet their own needs. Organizations are being called ahead to take responsibility for the ways their operations force societies and the natural environment. They are also being asked to pertaining sustainability principles to the ways in which they conduct their business (D'Amato et al, 2009).

In developing countries of the world there are a number of business firms that conduct their activities in unethical manner. This unethical action of businesses in developing countries is highly linked with economic problem. Particularly many peoples in developing countries like Africa are striving to satisfy their basic needs. Combined with other causes, unethical practices to satisfy their economic interest created serious problem on business operations of developing countries of the world. Still there are some business firms do their tasks in ethical and social responsible way (Baker, 2007).

Business people contribute to a social and ethical responsibility to pleasure their consumers reasonably and operate in a manner that is not harmful to them. This action is said to be Consumerism. It is based on the conviction that consumers have certain rights. A frequently quoted statement of consumer rights was made by President Kennedy (1962). These rights of customers are summarized as following:

The Right to Be Safe modern business people must be familiar with obligations, both moral and legal, to guarantee the safe operation or products/services they providing customer should not cause harm on their health. A company should assume product liability for health problem caused by its product or service. Items that go ahead to injuries, either directly or indirectly can have devastating consequences for their makers. Many companies put their products through precise testing to avoid safety problems. Companies have to try to consider all possibilities and provide adequate warning of potential dangers. Sometimes substandard, defective or expired products cause illness or even death among consumers.

The Right to Be Informed Consumers should have access to product information to make responsible buying decisions.

False or misleading promotion of company's product/service is a violation of business ethics and regulations that govern advertising truthfulness. These rules prohibit businesses from making unproven claims about the performance or superiority of their goods or services. The responsibility of business to preserve consumers' right to be informed extends beyond avoiding misleading promotion. All communications with customers from salespeople's comments to warranties and invoices must be controlled to clearly and accurately inform customers. To protect their customers and avoid claims of insufficient information, businesses often include warnings on labeling of their products.

The Right to Choose Consumers ought to have the right to choose which goods and services they need and want to purchase. Socially accountable firms endeavor to preserve this right, even if they reduce their own sales and profits in the process. Some business firms force buyers to buy goods or use services without their preference.

The Right to Be Heard Consumers supposed to be able to articulate legitimate suggestions and complaints to suitable parties. Many companies use considerable endeavor to ensure full hearings for consumer complaints. Still there are a number of business firms that have no interest to listen customer complaints. Even they abuse customers by contradicting the concept which holds that 'customers are king' as they determine survival and profitability business organizations.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

According to Josie Fisher (2004, pp. 391-400) as cited by Bekele Gebisa (2010), business ethics is the code of moral principles that sets standards of good or bad, or right or wrong, in one's conduct and thereby guides the behavior of a person or group. Particular business ethical issues in this study were product safety, employee health and safety, social responsibility and obligation of the company to the environment. Product safety is an important issue that needs to be underlined in the relationship between business and consumers. Most consumers lack the expertise to assess the safety of today's technologically sophisticated products and must rely at least to some extent on the impression they are given by sellers. Therefore, the growing lack of confidence in the market system to protect consumer safety is demonstrated by the increase in consumer protection legislation (Hoffman and Frederick, 1995).

An organization that wants to earn sustainable profit over the long period of time is well advised to perform its business operation in ethical and social responsible way. Businesses also must take into account a wide range of social and environmental issues into consideration. In short, businesses must find the right match between doing what is ethical and doing what is profitable.

This means businesses expected to balance the qualitative dimensions of consumer, employee, and societal benefits, with the quantitative measures of sales and profits. In today's business practice social performance of companies can be seen from provision of quality product, reasonable price of a product/service, employment opportunity, providing equal employment opportunities, treatment of employees, environmental protection, providing a safe and healthy workplace. To make known their ethical practices and social responsibility, several companies highlight charitable

contributions and community service in their annual reports and on their Web sites (Business in global environment, 2009).

There is an amounting awareness that business needs to manage its relationship with the wider society. Businesses are responsible and accountable for their business impact on society and the natural environment beyond legal compliance. Meeting these challenges requires the combined efforts of a global society and responsible leadership devoted to diversity, ethics, and values (D'amato et al, 2009).

In order to speechless problems and issues caused by unethical practice and social irresponsibility of business organizations, it needs systematic and fact-finding research to identify the real problem. Resolving an ethical problem requires the analysis of particular circumstances and the study of specific facts. Unless it is solved with detail analysis and investigation, it is difficult to ensure business instability caused by unethical, unsafe and unfair business practices which is bad for consumers, the economy, the society and the government. It disturbs market condition, force society to use defective product, reduce government revenue and force ethical firms run out of the market (Baker, 2007).

In Mekelle many customers are suffering from unethical as well as illegal business practices of business firms. From my life experience in the town, I observed some businesses operate to deceive customers and they do not worry for social wellbeing. They are trying to make killing profit. Even though Mekelle is recognized as the center of trade activities, a number of unethical business practices and social irresponsibility of business organizations observed. Ethical practice of a number of business organizations were deviated from ethical principles and theories. Some customers are not enjoying quality goods and services at their cost. Though there is such serious problem, yet I could not find study conducted in the area to describe the situation or to identify root causes of the problem that enable decision makers to take appropriate action. So, the study going to evaluate business ethical practice of the town along with causes and effects of unethical business practice in the town.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to evaluate business ethics practices of companies operating in Mekelle town. Particularly, the research going to achieve the following:

1. To examine whether brand equity is being affected in a positive way by manufacturing and service giving business.
2. To investigate consumer's evaluation of companies based on moral criteria, except of economic and financial ones.
3. To examine how the consumers keep on buying if the brand of their choice will not fulfill their expectations in moral terms.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are different approaches to define business ethics; among utilitarian, religious, and the self-interest approach are the prominent. The utilitarian states that morally correct course of action is one that brings the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The religious view, emphasized in Judeo-Christian tradition and the Muslim religion, is where a person should treat others in the same way he/she wants to be treated. The self-interest perspective is where an action is morally right if it

increases benefits for the individual in a way that does not intentionally hurt others. Today's understanding of ethics is a combination of these approaches. It is clear that the utilitarian approach is a step higher than the other two where it pushes the limits from profiting self without hurting anybody else, to profiting others with actions one pursues (Gormus,2004).

Ethics refers moral evaluations of decisions and actions as right or wrong on the basis of commonly accepted principles of behavior. Ethics usually concerns relations of mutual concern in society between all individuals and the need to limit one's self-interest when it goes against the general interest (Ferrell, 1991).

2.1. Theories of business ethics

2.1.1. The Stockholder Theory

According to this theory, managers act as agents for the stockholders. They are empowered to manage the money advanced by the stockholders, but are bound by their agency relationship to do so exclusively for the purposes delineated by their stockholder principals. They work to maintain the interest of stakeholders. The existence of this fiduciary relationship implies that managers cannot have an obligation to expend business resources in ways that have not been authorized by the stockholders regardless of any societal benefits that could be accrued. This implies that a business can have no social responsibilities. Their social responsibility is to increase their money by using resource properly. Stakeholder theory holds that effective management requires the balanced consideration of and attention to the legitimate interests of all stakeholders, defined as anyone who has "a stake in or claim on the firm." This has been interpreted in both a wide sense that includes "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the corporation," and a more narrow sense that includes only "those groups who are vital to the survival and success of the corporation." It is perhaps more familiar in its narrow sense in which the stakeholder groups are limited to stockholders, customers, employees, suppliers, management, and the local community. Thus, as an empirical theory, the stakeholder theory asserts that a business's financial success can best be achieved by giving the interests of the business's stockholders, customers, employees, suppliers, management, and local community proper consideration.

2.1.2. The Social Contract theory

It asserts that all businesses are ethically obligated to enhance the welfare of society by satisfying consumer and employee interests without violating any of the general rules of justice. The social contract theory is explicitly modeled on the political-social contract theories of thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The social contract theory is based on an implicit agreement between society and business firms in which society recognizes the existence of the entity by using resources on the condition that it serves the interests of society in certain specified ways like ethical operation and social responsibility. This generalization may be thought of as giving rise to a social contract with two terms: the social welfare term and the justice term.

I. The social welfare term recognizes that the members of society will be willing to authorize the existence of businesses only if they gain by doing so. Further, there are two distinct

capacities in which the members of society stand to gain from businesses: as consumers and as employees. As consumers, people can benefit from the existence of businesses in at least three ways: Firstly businesses provide increased economic efficiency by maximizing the advantages of specialization, improving decision-making resources, and increasing the capacity to acquire expensive technology. Secondly businesses provide stable levels of output and channels of distribution. And thirdly they provide increased liability resources from which to compensate injured consumers (public goods). As employees, people can benefit from the existence of businesses by receiving increased income potential, diffused personal legal liability for harmful errors, and the ability to participate in "income-allocation schemes separated from the vicissitudes of their capacity to produce.

However, businesses can also have negative effects on consumers and employees. People's interests as consumers can be harmed when businesses pollute the environment and deplete natural resources, undermine the personal accountability of its constituent members, and misuse positional power. Therefore, when fully specified, the social welfare term of the social contract requires that businesses act so as to:

- Benefit consumers by increasing economic efficiency, stabilizing levels of output and channels of distribution, and increasing liability resources;
- Benefit employees by increasing their income potential, diffusing their personal liability, and facilitating their income allocation; while
- Minimizing pollution and depletion of natural resources, the destruction of personal accountability, the misuse of political power, as well as worker alienation, lack of control over working conditions, and dehumanization.

II. The justice term recognizes that the members of society will be willing to authorize the existence of businesses only if businesses agreed to remain within the bounds of the business ethics and social responsibility. Admittedly, precisely what these responsibilities require is far from what already settled. However, since there seems to be general agreement that the least they require is that businesses "avoid fraud and deception show respect for their workers as human beings, and avoid any practice that systematically worsens the situation of a given group in society, it is reasonable to read the justice term as requiring at least this much.

2.1.3. Importance of Business Ethics and Social Responsibility

Businesses have great potential to change living standard of the community and to combat poverty through utilization of economic resources in productive way if done ethically and considering the impact of their operation on the society and ecology. This can bring fast economic growth that increases living standard of the society. They produce goods and services that customers want and they create job opportunity. Through paying taxes, they contribute to government revenue that can finance schools, hospitals and other public services

2.1.4. Causes of Business Ethics

The motivation of being unethical is to generate a killing profit. In such case, the unethical individual or company profits while other individuals, companies, societies or future generations lose. In such an instance, short-term private interests are favored over long-term customer and public interest. The lack of ethics in business can crash stable and sustainable business system at country level or internationally. Unhealthy competition, dishonesty and violence can poison the environment in which healthy businesses can run. Business organization probably is less efficient and loses profitability in the long period of time if it is completely immoral and unethical. (BAKER, 2007) Poitras also mentioned intention to generate abnormal profit as major causes of unethical business practice. This makes the firm suffer from shifting of customer to buy competitors product/service and declining profits in the long-run. Short-term interest of a company for abnormal profit is given priority over the interest of business players, social wellbeing and ecological conditions. Lack of ethics (Unhealthy competition, dishonesty, fraud, abnormal profit etc) in business can disturb the healthy business system, leading to economic and social crises of particular country, city or company. Many businesses even not agree on the importance of ethical operation and social responsibility of businesses, whereas others agree on its importance but they refuse to incorporate in their business system and implement it (Poitras, 1994).

2.1.5. Standards of Business Ethics

According to BUSA (2009), the following are recommendable standard of business ethics that should be implemented by business organizations:

Responsibility:-responsibility requires taking ownership of and being accountable for, one self's acts and omissions. It requires taking care of what is entrusted to somebody, recognizing the economic, social and natural environments in which the business operate. It include Exercising obligations with due care, diligence and the required skill and Pursuing business practices that are economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable

Integrity:-integrity requires doing what we say, and always acting in good faith. This builds trust, which is necessary operate profitable business. It covers being truthful and honest in all dealings with customer and honoring commitments and delivering what are promised.

Respect:-respect requires acknowledging others' rights and inherent human dignity. Treating customers with dignity,

recognizing their interests and capabilities and avoiding unjustified discrimination of customers are vital components of customer respect.

Fairness:-fairness requires even-handedly balancing the interests of various parties, ensuring that everyone gets what is right. Supporting free and fair competition by not being involved in price-fixing or other anticompetitive activities and negotiating in good faith, and refraining from coercion are advisable here.

2.1.6. Ways of Shaping Ethical Conduct in Organizations

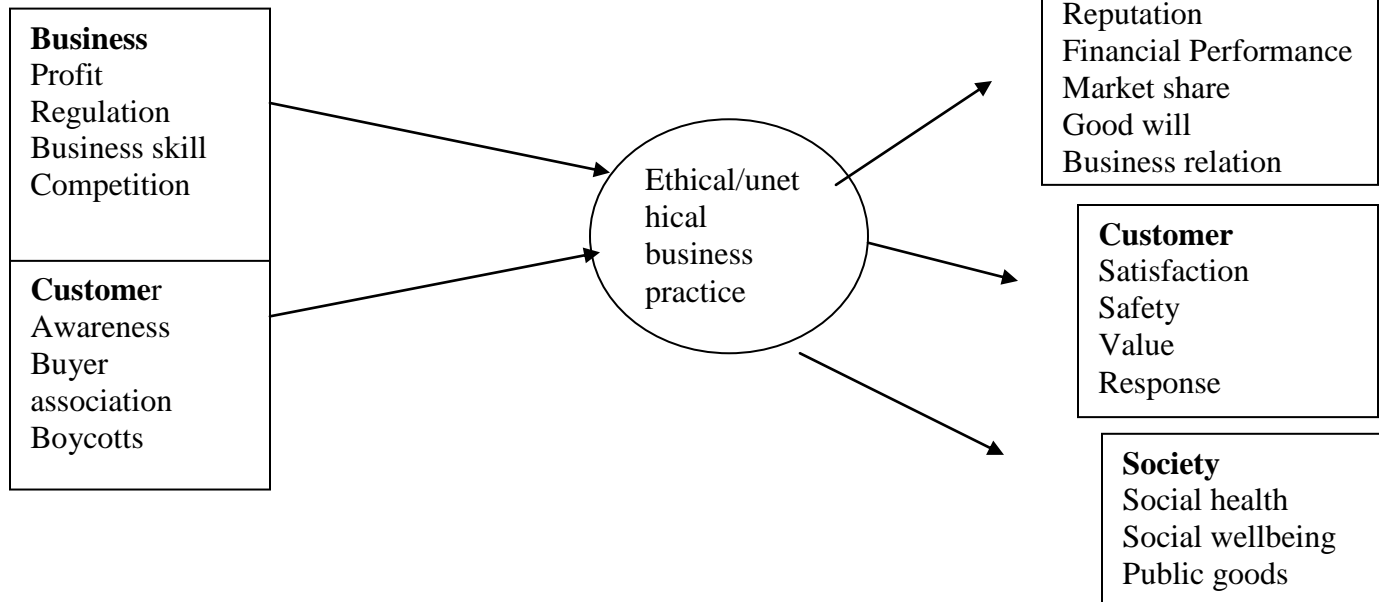
Most ethical practices in business reflect the values of the firm's corporate cultures. Development of a corporate culture to support business ethics based on four elements: ethical awareness, ethical reasoning, ethical action, and ethical leadership. If any of these four factors is missing, the ethical climate in an organization will weaken.

Ethical Awareness: - ethical dilemmas occur frequently in the workplace. So employees need help in identifying ethical problems when they serve customers & they need guidance about how the firm expects them to respond. One way for a firm to provide this support is to develop a code of conduct. Companies use their codes of conduct to specify ground rules and/or identify key corporate values and provide frameworks that guide employees when dealing with customers.

Ethical Education: -although a code of conduct can provide an overall framework, it cannot detail a solution for every ethical situation. Some ethical questions are confusing, so businesses must provide instituted ethics trainings and awareness creation programs.

Ethical Action: - firms must provide structures and approaches that allow decisions to be turned into ethical actions. A firm whose managers set unrealistic goals for employee performance may find an increase in cheating, lying, and misdeeds, as employees attempt to protect themselves.

Ethical Leadership:-Executives must not only talk about ethical behavior but also demonstrate it in their actions. This principle requires employees to be personally committed to the company's core values and be willing to base their actions on them. The damage from ethical misconduct can powerfully affect a firm's customers and its profit. In more clear way the conceptual frame work shows that the cause of business ethics and its effects.



III. METHODOLOGY

Both quantitative and qualitative data has been used in order to secure reliable data from all possible sources in a confidential manner. Primary data has been collected by using questionnaire, interview and focus group discussion. Both close ended and open ended questionnaire has been prepared in accordance with research objectives and research questions to collect the desired data from customers and businesses (both merchandizing and service providing businesses). The study was conducted through a case study. As the target population of the study has been consumers and business organizations of Mekelle town, it is not feasible and economical to use census study. Therefore case study method has been the appropriate to accomplish the desired objective of the study. The sample for the study has been selected from customers and merchandizing and service rendering business organizations. Based on similar studies conducted by Guo et al (2009) a Sample size of 150 is taken. This is done purposefully to collect the desired data required to accomplish the proposed study. The data analysis has been supported by software SPSS 16.0 to infer generalization about business ethics practices of the town based on the finding of the study.

IV. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

4.1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

This chapter focuses on the data analysis of the current research. First, the demographic characteristics of the respondents that participated in the survey are being presented. Then, there is the description of the data information and preparation, as well as the descriptive characteristics of the

sample and the scaling check. The first question of the case aimed to identify the demographic characteristics of the respondents. First, there was a question concerning their gender. According to their answers 60% of the sample was male while 40% of them female. The second question of the case was concerning the age of the respondents. As the results are shown, most of the individuals answering the questionnaire belong in the range of age: 18-24 (66% of the sample) while 29% of them are from 25 to 33 years old. Finally, there was a question concerning the education level of the respondents which is separated into four main categories. In the first category there were people who have finished the high school. In the second and third, are individuals who have obtained a Bachelor or a Master Degree respectively. In the fourth category there are those who own a Ph.D. Degree, while on the fifth there are those who work as Academics. As the result shows most of the participants own a diploma (52% of the respondents) while 34% of them have a Bachelor Degree.

2.2. Business Ethics Descriptive Statistics of the study

4.1.1. Business ethics

To begin with, the business ethics mean ranged from 5.47 to 6.17. On one hand, the highest mean rate belongs to the responsibility of a company towards its employees' rights. On the other hand, the lowest rate item is the responsibility of a company towards the social initiatives. In general, all of the mean rates are considered high, since they are more than 3.5 points in the Likert Scale, which indicates the general demand of the consumers for manufacturing and service giving business ethics. Refer table1.

Table 1: Business Ethics Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St.devation
I perceive positively a company when it seems very	150	1	7	5.59	1.054

concerned with the local community.					
I perceive positively a company when it seems very concerned with the environment protection.	150	1	7	5.80	1.158
I perceive positively a company when it seems very concerned with the rights of their employees.	150	3	7	6.17	.948
I perceive positively a company when it seems very concerned with their employees in third world countries.	150	1	7	5.69	1.171
I perceive positively a company when is actively participating in social initiatives.	150	1	7	5.47	1.113

2.3. Consumer Perceptions

Additionally, the consumer perceptions items ranged in mean from 3.32 to 4.24. The item describing the consumers' experiences, concerning businesses' behavior based on what they

heard from others or the media in the past year, had the lowest rate, while their expectations concerning businesses behavior in the coming year, and had the highest rate. Refer table2.

Table 2: Consumer Perceptions Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St.devation
Based on my own experiences as a consumer in the past year, businesses I dealt with generally behaved:	150	1	7	4.071	1.351
Based on what I heard from others or the media in the past year, businesses behaved:	150	1	7	3.32	1.411
Based on my own experiences as a consumer last year, I expect businesses in the coming year to behave:	150	3	7	4.24	1.584
Based on what I heard from others or the media last year, I expect businesses in the coming year to behave:	150	1	7	4.12	1.578

2.4. Brand Equity

Brand equity items ranged from a mean of 4.28 to 5.07. The item that describes the willingness of a consumer to choose a considered ethical company even with many available choices of

alternative brands had the lowest mean rate. In contrary, the lowest mean rate belongs to the willingness of a consumer to buy from a company that is acting ethically as a first choice. Refer table3.

Table 3: Brand Equity Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St.devation
When a company is acting ethically its products and services are my first choice.	150	1	7	5.07	1.084
When a company is acting ethically I feel myself loyal to this brand.	150	1	7	4.84	1.350
When a company is acting ethically even with many choices I will not choose alternative brands.	150	3	7	4.28	1.455
When a company is considered ethical, I believe that the brand is associated with very good quality.	150	1	7	4.49	1.598
When a company is considered ethical, I believe that the likelihood of this brand will function well is very high.	150	1	7	4.68	1.313
When a brand is considered ethical, I believe that the likelihood that this brand is reliable is very high.	150	1	7	4.97	1.342
A high ethical company is usually associated with the leader of its sector.	150	1	7	4.72	1.374
A high ethical company is usually recognized among its competitors.	150	1	7	4.95	1.325

2.5. Willingness to Buy

The mean of the willingness to buy items ranged from 3.81 to 4.34. The item with the lowest mean rate is the willingness to

buy from a brand, such as Nike for example. The item with the highest mean rate is the likelihood to purchase a brand. Refer table 4.

Table 4: Willingness to Buy Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	St.devation
My willingness to buy from the ethical brand is high.	150	1	7	3.81	1.790
The likelihood of purchasing from the ethical and legal brand is high.	150	1	7	4.34	1.714
The probability that I would consider to buy from the ethical brand is high.	150	3	7	4.28	1.455

V. CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on drawing conclusion on the basis of the analysis of the data, the research methods employed and the final results of this study. First the demographic profiles of the research respondents are demonstrated and the corresponding descriptive statistics are presented.

Moreover, the results demonstrating that although brand equity is not positively related with consumers' perceptions, the latter is positively related with consumers' willingness to buy. The implications of this study, both theoretical and managerial, as well as conclusions from the findings are discussed in the chapter that follows.

Today, in our contemporary and highly competitive business world, ethics and ethical considerations are being increasingly important due to the influence of globalization, new technologies, consumerism and the different type of crisis that we experience (financial, ecological, political, system of values).

- Consumers appear to be becoming increasingly more hostile to marketing, as marketing professionals' disregard for the ethical effects of their actions.
- Several business misconducts and corporate talks have resulted to a new kind of consumer who is more skeptical and critical than ever, affecting individual choices, perceptions and system of values.
- Socially-Responsible Marketing, includes morally-just marketing alongside socially-responsible and ecologically-friendly marketing but it is far from common practice in the marketing and businesses community (Manrai & Manrai, 2007), as empirical research results consistently fail to link its various forms, such as corporate citizenship, to measurable financial outcomes.
- Despite the fact that business ethics is considered as a multidimensional and complex phenomenon, it seems as an opportunity for companies to invest in it and gain insights, to invoke positive brand images and consumer perceptions.

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AUTHORS

First Author – Gebeyehu Jalu Negassa, Department: Marketing Management, Mekelle University Lecturer