

Radical Rethink

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The realities of climate change transform the context for marketing, challenging marketers to take a totally different tack for the sake of all our futures.

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The conclusions of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) affect every human being, in every walk of life and will fundamentally redefine 'success in business' this century, with profound implications for business-as-usual and the financial bottom line.

Its recent report was the fourth from the global panel of 1,500 scientists tracking shifting patterns of climate for almost 20 years. Following hot on the heels of the UK's Stern report, it takes its place in a lengthening queue of evidence catalogued by experts from many disciplines, all of which add up to just one thing: climate change is really happening, and human activity is the cause.

These reports are an appeal from nature that we wake up - and fast - because over the next two decades, well within the professional lifetime of many of you reading this, abrupt climate change is now a real probability. This matters to *Marketing* readers because the cultural story we are selling is the cause of this catastrophe. We are the problem.

With few exceptions, every car, aircraft and power generator, every cup of coffee, soft drink and cereal, every housing development and weekend break in New York - our entire way of life - is causing extraordinary ecological damage and no matter what commercial enterprises we support with our creativity, our labour or our custom, every one of us is implicated.

Despite this, normal life continues more or less uninterrupted. On TV and radio, the IPCC's findings

were broadcast to the soundtrack of consumerism as usual and the news pages covering the report, along with graphs of rising temperatures and bleak pictures of their impacts, also carried ads for cars, reduced-fare flights, cheap breaks and various electronic gadgets and consumer goods.

This is particularly interesting in the light of John Fanning's recent review of *Marketing Genius*. In it, veteran British marketer Peter Fisk claims that marketing can develop a central role if the profession becomes more accountable and involved in wider strategy. Businesses must focus on the future, he says, and as the biggest challenges facing business today come from outside not inside the company, his belief is that marketing professionals are ideally placed to "inherit the earth" by not only understanding but anticipating the world's changing needs.

Fisk's critique does not go far enough because it is not informed by a sufficiently radical appreciation of the changing context for business. Every profession wants to be taken seriously and marketing is no exception. But given that companies have to survive in a world that is now directly threatened by the patterns of production and consumption underlying the brands it creates, what is the marketing profession doing to earn its place at the strategic table?

Some systems thinking

Starting to understand life's principles and living systems throws a new light on what is unfolding and goes some way towards explaining the need to respond to these worrying signals. Evolutionary lesson number one: the key to long-term survival for any organism or life form, including every industry, profession and

business, is to stay responsive, relevant and meaningful to its wider context. Otherwise, like cells that no longer serve the body's purpose, you get wiped out or flushed out of the system. As with the corporations marketers serve, the more you believe the key to your future lies in tweaking existing practices and processes, rather than transforming your assumptions and reinventing the story shaping everything you do, the more your days are numbered.

Given that the earth you want to inherit is facing a cocktail of climate instability, ecosystem decline, resource depletion, chronic waste and pollution, the psychic problems of over-consumption and significant socio-political instability, the evolutionary challenge for those who craft the stories shaping consumer choices and decisions - indeed shaping our entire culture - is captured by a simple question: Is what you do every day responsive, relevant and meaningful in the real world?

Challenge for stuff

In the early days of advertising and marketing when producers of 'stuff' were responding to a plethora of unmet needs, the product message was about features and function: Wow! Look what this can do for you! Fast forward a few decades to a world of product sufficiency and oversupply and persuading people to replace stuff that's perfectly good requires an entirely different approach: a play on emotions and human vulnerabilities. Product as lifestyle choice; brand as community.

In a marketplace teeming with alternatives and virtually nothing to distinguish one from the other, the Hunkey Dory strategy seems inevitable: push out the boundaries of taste as far as you can to make a splash. Any splash, at any cost, so long as you are visible.

Without a purpose deeper than profit, agencies will have to create extreme or frivolous campaigns to be heard above the din and noise of product choice. PR firms will have to mop up the mess and business will become a collective race-to-the-bottom of no real value to society.

But in an overheating, carbon-restricted world, where the interplay of complex ecological and social forces begins to bite hard, things move in a different direction. Suddenly products, brands and patterns of consumption are political: the energy embodied in the production process and expended in the journey door-to-door, the supply-chain story, the human

communities the production process has helped or hindered. All of this is moving centre-stage.

The intelligent business response to this is not to fake change with a dash of corporate social responsibility (CSR) to ease the conscience, but to engage in something more fundamental: a search for a new organisational truth appropriate to a different world. A deeper sense of purpose and direction, and a whole new story around which to align every decision and action.

Challenge for services

Issues of culture and story are just as acute in service businesses facing the challenge of living brand values at the interface between customers and staff. Now this is a tough one. On the inside, marketing and PR tactics are doomed because insiders know the organisational truth and are fully aware of any gaps between the 'say' and the 'do'. On the outside, customers can feel it.

There's nothing for it but to be real: work must be meaningful for people to fully engage, and the organisation's 'say' and 'do' must be in sync.

In this so-called knowledge economy, where the source of added value and differentiation is found in hearts and minds, the gap between people's search for meaning at work and the lack of meaningful work should ring alarm bells. The Management Agenda annual survey of 600 UK managers finds 70 per cent of respondents lack meaning in their lives. Over half admit to tensions between work and personal values. Proudfoot calculated 37 per cent of all working time is wasted. A Mercer-Gallup survey found that 73 per cent of workers are disengaged from their organisation and 19 per cent would happily sabotage it. Last year, a Royal College of Surgeons study found that Irish managers had a lower quality of life than the terminally ill!

Survey after survey reveals a crisis of meaning at the heart of western culture, underscoring the fundamental human need to make a contribution. Work is central to our well-being but work which is meaningful is what really matters and there can be little meaning in our work if it neglects or damages what we consider to be important.

Is it not worth considering what would happen to productivity and the bottom line if the 'daily grind' was devoted to the meaningful task of reinventing products and services to meet the tough challenges on our horizon?

Culture shift

It is far from a Pollyanna-like ideal. The work we do shapes the world and there is nothing but opportunity awaiting those with the vision to see beyond the next quarter and willing to realign their business model and value proposition to meet a future whose shape and texture is now visible.

In its report *The Business of Climate Change*, Lehman Brothers provides an overview of the implications for every industry from aviation to banking, food to telecoms. Ultimately, the crunch issues are not technical but cultural and it boils down to mindset.

We know we have a crisis, we know we are the cause and we know there will be evolutionary winners and losers. The losers will be those who deny reality, resist change and minimise their response, like the AIB chairman who, when asked about the bank's response to global warming, said they had relocated some of their data files to higher ground to avoid the risk of flooding.

The smart money is on companies whose leaders accept the inexorability of change and choose to create their own destinies. Like Interface, one of the world's largest floor-covering makers, which has changed from being hugely resource-hungry and polluting to becoming environmentally responsible. The company's workplace changed so much that Interface took on a new and deeper meaning for staff, customers and stakeholders alike, resulting in a hike of 1,000 per cent in brand value.

Such a transformation does not happen because of new rules designed to make a business "less bad", or a tweaking of surface policies and practices, or adopting a new set of brand values. It is the result of a radical shift in our fundamental assumptions and values, based on a realistic understanding of our impact and an honest appraisal of the shadow we are casting over the world.

This is a big challenge to how brands and brand values are usually created. The process of discovering a new organisational story and the values that may support it and then mapping the values currently operating to identify and close the gap between where we are and where we need to be, engages everyone in re-imagining the business and is radically different from the usual outside-in approach of adopting a new corporate 'suit'.

To discover a new truth, you don't begin on the outside. You dig deeper inside to become more of who you really are in response to the real world. The result is authenticity, integrity and relevance and in the maelstrom of fad and spin, the real deal is so rare you can spot it a mile off. ||| **dya**

About the author

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She has a Distinction in *Communication Studies* and a Masters with Distinction in *Responsibility and Business Practice* from the University of Bath and has studied *Systems Thinking* at the Open University. Alongside her organisational development work she writes and speaks on the challenges and opportunities of system change.

She is a co-author of *Exploring the Communication Dynamic: 301 Building Blocks to Enrich your Working Relationships*. She helped create *Q5 - New Leadership at Work* to prompt a movement for personal and organisational change, in which each of us begins to see our working and professional life as an opportunity to address the critical issues of our generation.

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