

Changing the Conversation

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How marketing professionals help to slow down the public's response to critical issues of our time by concealing the ecological truth from common consciousness - and the central role they could play in shifting human values from casual consumption to conscious living

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By now it's pretty clear that our planet home is in deep trouble and that means that people like you and me and our current way of living are in big trouble too. As participants in the complex, interdependent web of life in which everything is connected to everything else, every industry and profession is implicated. No one is immune to the consequences of the radical changes under way in the natural world.

The problem is that we have organised our civilisation around a set of taken-for-granted conditions that are now unravelling faster than we are waking up. In a voice that has become increasingly urgent, scientists tracking the accelerating decline, and in some cases collapse of vital ecosystems that sustain life, have been sounding the alarm for many years. Recently, John Schellnhuber, science advisor at the UK's Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, identified no less than twelve potential global warming tipping points, any one of which is likely to trigger abrupt and catastrophic climate change across the planet.

Given what we know, the question has to be: Why aren't we mobilising our energy and ingenuity and acting swiftly and decisively in what has been dubbed '*the fight of our lives*'? Why are we collectively sleepwalking towards a cliff-edge that is so clearly signposted?

Raiding the Future

The environmental crisis is the consequence of a deeper *cultural* crisis - a way of seeing, thinking and behaving that is profoundly flawed. We have cultivated a narrow worldview in which we have prioritised the values of money over the values of life to such an extent that human beings are now altering the nature of life on Earth, and shaping the path of evolution itself. Natural processes that once unfolded over millennia have been overwhelmed by the weight of human preferences, shaped in large part by marketing and media professionals serving financial and commercial interests.

Individually we may feel our actions are small, even benign, but amplified by the reach of our global institutions and the power of our technologies, we are taking a wrecking ball to the foundations of life. Acting as if we are separate from, rather than embedded in the natural world, we are systematically raiding our children's future to prop up an unsustainable way of living today.

The story of growth

Human culture is created and sustained through an ongoing conversation about who we are, why we are here, and what life is for. Every moment of the day, in countless ways, we learn to embody the values and beliefs of the story that connects us to each other and supports our way of living.

The overarching story of contemporary culture is the story of economic growth and the belief that having and consuming is the road to human happiness. Writing in 1955, American retail analyst Victor Lebow, wryly observed a shopping binge that was already well underway: *“Our enormously productive economy... demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption... We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever-increasing speed.”*

While the language of modern business may be more subtle, its objective hasn't changed. In fact, the new-is-better, more-is-necessary, buy-one-get-one-free rallying cry of the marketplace has been so comprehensively communicated in our culture that the world's 'haves' have managed to consume more natural resources in the past fifty years than all the human beings that ever walked the earth. In the past twenty five years alone, we've plundered more than a third of the resources that sustain life.

It's not easy to empathise with the living-breathing-world through percentages like these, but even a superficial appreciation of the delicate interdependencies that sustain complex living systems, and how swiftly they collapse once vital threads in the web are broken, is enough for these stats to cause a stab of anxiety.

And it's all happening at breakneck speed. When I was a kid, we kept our toys under the bed. Today, my nieces and nephew need whole rooms to store the stuff they and the adults around them think they need, and almost everything kids see on TV is something they can buy. From viral marketing to product placement to celebrity endorsement to brand licensing on all media platforms, the insinuation of market and brand values into the fabric of modern life is almost total. As the CEO of Prism Communications (UK) said, tellingly: “They aren't so much children as what I like to call 'evolving consumers'.”

The narrative continues into adulthood. Who would have guessed that one day grown-ups would be persuaded to buy *“Water you can*

wear”, or that branding water as a fashion item would build a \$154 billion global industry that drains aquifers, often diverting supply away from the world's poorest communities, bottles it in oil-based plastic, hauls it by sea, road and rail across international borders to consumers who ultimately send billions of empties to landfill where they will remain for up to 500 years. And all for something you can get from a tap for a fraction of the cost. I guess Victor Lebow would call it a marketing triumph. Today's business analysts and executives call it innovation. And of course the beverage industry is not alone. There's simply no end to the ecological insanity business regularly anoints as 'smart strategy'

Cultural cover up

To behave intelligently, living systems need accurate feedback. Put your hand on the hotplate, it hurts, you don't do it again. But the feedback that should serve as our wake-up-call is weak, first because large systems send weak signals, but more significantly in this context because the powerful cultural story designed to keep The Lebow Show on the road keeps us distant from the consequences of our current consumption patterns, and the fate of people and places whose compromises make our way of life possible.

Behind the walls of our comfort zone, we don't have to confront the real consequences of what is done in the name of cheapness, margins and market share. We don't have to see the waste. We don't have to witness ancient forests uprooted. Or look displaced communities in the eye. Or worry about species exploited to extinction. Or even understand the toxic burden now borne by every living thing on earth, from the heart of our largest cities to the remotest places on earth.

Modern business logic is predicated on a lie because prices don't tell us the ecological truth. The real costs are not reflected in the price of a flight to France or a green bean from Ghana or a cut-price kettle. But of course, in the interconnected web of life there's no such thing as a free lunch. What we do to the earth we do to ourselves. What goes around inevitably comes around and the impact of this flawed mindset is embodied all around us - not just in

the climate crisis, or in the invisible so-called 'third' world, but right here, where we're suffering the physical and psycho-social diseases of overconsumption and disconnection from the natural rhythms that sustain us.

The growth-is-good story at the heart of our culture amounts to a cultural cover-up that dulls our senses. The result is a breakdown between the forces of production and the forces of consumption, creating the illusion that we live in a world without physical limits, and that we can keep consuming as if we had the resources of three planets, rather than one.

Demand ...and supply

Marketing is at the heart of the dilemma because it's part of the effort to manufacture demand by keeping people permanently focussed on themselves, permanently dissatisfied, and permanently seeking (but never finding) satisfaction by consuming more and more 'stuff'. But marketing is also a crucial part of the solution, and here's why.

As evidence that the current story is running out of road becomes more and more visible, personal awareness is growing. Under the radar of mainstream commentary, a quiet revolution is sweeping across the planet. Literally millions of individuals are rejecting what's on offer in the aisles and ad breaks and creating a new culture. Their value system is expressing itself in countless ways, from localising to downsizing to cycling and recycling to buying organic or buying less, and a host of counter-cultural educational, professional, recreational, health and spiritual pursuits.

So far, the media has tended to frame these behaviours as marginal rather than mainstream. Quirky, eco-friendly, interesting - but slightly odd. Marketeers tend to file them under 'niche markets', yet collectively they constitute a wide spectrum of largely unmet social and consumer preferences that challenge every profession, service and industry to reinvent just about everything we do, use and consume. More and more people *want to do the right thing*. What they're looking for are ways to do it.

In the UK, we know that more than half of all consumers are now willing to make personal

sacrifices for climate change, and behavioural evidence tracked by longitudinal cultural research and advertising agency mapping, shows a new self-image around conscious consumption moving centre stage. According to American market researcher Paul Ray, more than fifty million people in the US and a hundred and twenty million in Europe are part of an emerging category he has labelled 'Cultural Creatives'. As the multiple crises of energy, food, water and climate converge and deepen, it's clear that changing lightbulbs isn't enough, and it seems the public is ready to have hard conversations about tough choices.

In his latest book 'Blessed Unrest', businessman and environmentalist Paul Hawken gives visibility to the "worldwide movement that is determined to heal the wounds of the Earth with the force of passion, dedication, and collective intelligence and wisdom. Groups ranging from ad-hoc neighbourhood associations to well-funded international organisations are confronting issues like environmental destruction, the abuses of free-market fundamentalism, social justice and the loss of indigenous cultures. While they are mostly unrecognised by politicians and the media, they are bringing about what may one day be judged as the single most profound transformation of human society."

Thirteenth tipping point

This transformation is arguably the most urgent and important tipping point of all - a fundamental shift in human values and how we think about the world and our place in it. A new understanding of the intelligence of life and living systems is already inspiring a myriad of *intelligent* alternatives in design and planning, transport and construction, food and farming, insurance and investment ... giving us a glimpse of the life we could make possible for our children, if we took these principles to scale.

According to a recent UK World Wildlife survey, 81% of marketing professionals believe they have a strong influence over consumer behaviour, but only 3% are held responsible by their employers for the environmental and social impacts of that behaviour. Imagine what could happen if organisations stepped firmly into the space for change that is now opening up and led

a transformation in our cultural Story: from casual consumption to *conscious living*. That is the tipping point which if triggered, could just pull us back from the cliff-edge.

Marketing and media professionals are the critical interface between organisation and consumer. You have your finger on the pulse of the thirteenth tipping point - the world inside our heads. If you choose to you can become a powerful force for change, tuning into the values shift now underway and translating it into a whole new conversation about our relationship with Earth, a new dialogue between organisations and consumers, and an entirely new pattern of demand.

Unless human consciousness evolves in this way there's no way we'll avoid the other tipping points. In my view, it is the task of our generation to radically transform the purpose and culture of the organisations and institutions that shape our world. To help and encourage them to stop being part of the problem, and become part of the solution. And what better place to begin than with the storytellers: the people who narrate and mediate our way of life?

All of this calls for professional courage. A huge gap persists between what we as individuals may know and accept privately, and what we're prepared to acknowledge publically in our professional lives. When salaries, careers, client accounts, advertising revenues and all the rest depend on our silence, speaking up for what is right is not the most convenient professional choice, and so business, marketing and media interests continue to interact in ways that distort our view of reality and sustain the slow-motion response to the global crises.

Perhaps what our children and future generations need most from us right now is to break the silence that keeps the status quo in place. We have to stop leaving our personal values and concerns in the lobby, and find the courage to bring them into our professional lives, so that our work, our workplaces and our organisations can become agents of change. An enormous responsibility rests on the shoulders of the present generation. You and I and the

work we do today will determine the shape of life on Earth for generations to come - whatever we do. If you want to reconcile your professional ambitions with the need to make a meaningful difference, this is the moment of reckoning.

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