



The Purple Planet

Sustainability x Marketing

It's hard not to be impressed by the sustainability claims of brands like Nike, Ikea and Apple isn't it? They, like many others, appear to be genuinely engaged in tackling the climate crisis.



Or could it be that the marketing world is so awash with greenwashing that we can't see the wood for the rainforest any more? I chose these brands without prejudice, by the way, as some of the most prominent representatives of the many whose bold claims invite scrutiny—perhaps yours is one of them?

There is always going to be a natural tension between the ideals of sustainable development goals (specifically, the 17 SDGs defined by the UN) and the commercial imperatives of brand marketing. In short, the former is about reigning back consumption and prioritising equitability, while the latter tends to encourage consumption and prioritise revenue. Unfortunately, a little digging will often expose some less palatable truths behind some of those rosy headlines: such as the extensive use of virgin, non-biodegradable synthetic materials in many manufactured products, the continuing exploitation of low-cost labour (and tacit support for the unjust political regimes that sustain them), or the racking-up of thousands of carbon miles of global shipping—not to mention the air, sea and land pollution generated upstream and downstream in the sourcing, packaging, handling and distribution chains.

'Time is running out; the planet is dying,' cry the sustainable development researchers. 'Aha...,' thinks marketing, '...we'll reposition our brand to capitalise on the rising consumer awareness of these issues and spin our environmental credentials to turn it into a win, win.'

But is this a battle marketing can win, or have we all left it too late?



“Marketing deserves to pay for blindly leading the world towards its inevitable oblivion”

In the red corner, then, marketing rehearses his moves. He’s motivated, above all, by his commercial impact and has a talent for finding clever new ways to persuade more people to buy more

products, more of the time. Remarkably agile and winsomely persuasive, marketing is adept at catching the public mood, shifting position with the times and satisfying customer needs profitably. This makes him tricky to beat—especially when he sometimes claims to be on the same side as his opponent: ‘of course, sustainability has always been one of our core values’, he quips earnestly. Ultimately though, marketing’s real mission is growth, growth and more growth. More sales, more share, more profits and hitting revenue targets are what shareholders pay him for, not meeting sustainability goals—‘that’s really a corporate coms ESG initiative isn’t it, unless it can be turned into a competitive marketing advantage and justifying a premium’.

Meanwhile, in the blue corner, ‘sustainability’ is mulling over enough research data and smart argumentation to defeat any opponent—if they would just stand still long enough and not keep deflecting. His greatest strength is his global understanding and capacity for theoretical reasoning—but this is often misinterpreted, even parodied, by marketing, who masterfully sifts out and polishes the tastiest soundbites for his own rhetoric, leaving behind the less palatable bits. Admiration gushes from fellow intellectual idealists, who nod approvingly as he flexes his references and bibliography in the face of a rival ‘whose relentless obsession with growth has led to the plundering of the earth’s resources and the pollution of the



planet, for short-term financial gains’. Marketing, he says, deserves to pay for blindly leading the world towards its inevitable oblivion.

This year, I have had the privilege of planting a foot in both corners of the ring to straddle both perspectives: as a marketing and brand strategy consultant, as well a university lecturer in Sustainable Development. At times I have felt like a double agent. But, the most interesting part has been coming to appreciate how these two seemingly contradictory perspectives



can not only be complementary but, together, can amount to far more than the sum of their parts.

At a lecture, given earlier this year by Lord Browne (the former CEO of BP), I was struck by his argument that, in the face of despair and hang-wringing by environmentalists, humanity has every reason to be optimistic about its future on the planet—provided we harness human ingenuity, work together and invest wisely in innovation. After all, the extraordinary human inventions that have enabled us to benefit from the highest quality of life in the history of the planet (the longest life expectancy, lowest child mortality, least famine and poverty, etc.) can surely help us overcome their seemingly intractable side effects—specifically environmental pollution and unbridled global warming. Impossible you might think? But, as Nintendo’s former CEO, Satoru Iwata, sagely put it: ‘innovation means to make something which people think impossible, possible’.

From the blue corner I could see how, from a rational perspective, there appear to be no practical solutions to the all pervading gloom. ‘We all need to buy less stuff, use fewer resources, repair and recycle more and live within the means of the planet. In other words we need to make radical, systemic global changes’. These seem not just implausible, but practically impossible. Yet this is just the kind of challenge that captures the imagination in the red corner. Marketing, and more specifically, the creative services that surround it, thrives on lateral thinking, clever ideas and hatching unexpected solutions to complex challenges. It was marketing minds that seized and capitalised on the potential for some of the most significant innovations of the last century including the

smartphone, the iPod, LEDs, the World Wide Web and the microwave oven*, none of which would have happened without the

imagination to see a novel function as the solution to a problem—usually one that had not yet been identified! Each changed the world by making what seemed impossible, possible.

What sort of lateral thinking might we expect? Well, this is, by definition, unpredictable, but it has already been suggested, for example, that if everyone painted the roof of their house white it would reduce urban warming by a couple of degrees and delay the onset of critical global warming by a decade or so. Furthermore, if we could all be persuaded to half our meat consumption and double the number of houseplants we keep, we could reduced greenhouse gases by 30-40% every year. If we stopped the manufacture of bottled water tomorrow, we would save 50m barrels of oil a year as well as preventing 38 billion plastic bottles going into landfill (enough annually to go around the earth 150 times). In fact, just committing to zero food waste would be enough to save anyone from starving anywhere on the planet. The potential effectiveness of any such ideas would, of course, have to be carefully evaluated by research from the blue corner.

Generating harebrained ideas, though, is still just the beginning. Persuading the world to adopt them is another matter. But this is where marketing plays to another of its strengths: it is supremely good at framing,

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simplifying and communicating the solutions to life's problems, then persuading us all to act on them. For example, if something absolutely, positively has to be there on time, we instinctively think FedEx. Need a break? KitKat. You've decided to invest in a nice watch as an heirloom for the grandkids? Patek Philippe is the brand you look after for the next generation. Need a dependable car? Well, if only everything in life was as dependable as a VW... You get the picture.

Could it be that novel solutions to our planet's looming sustainability crisis could be within our grasp after all. With constructive collaboration, the intelligent analysis of the blue corner, informing the creatively-inspired resourcefulness of the red corner, working in partnership with expert scientists, engineers and technicians, all properly resourced by national governments and NGOs, might all just deliver the game-changing innovation to save us.



Perhaps Lord Browne's optimism was well placed and the answer lies in combining red and blue perspectives to create the purple patch the world so desperately needs?

** IBM's 'Simon' Personal Communicator device was launched in 1992, but it was not until the marketing of the iPhone in 2005 that the smartphone took off. MP3 players had been around for years before Apple capitalised on its marketing potential by launching the sleek, user-friendly iPod in 2001. Oleg Vladimirovich Losev invented the LED in 1927, it was decade before someone found a use for it. Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web as a facility for university scientists in 1990, its eventual potential took years to fulfil. A radar systems engineer at Raytheon, accidentally discovered the cooking power of magnetron while he was experimenting with vacuum tubes, this subsequently led to the development and marketing of the first microwave oven in 1967.*

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