

Lessons from the Future

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As Chair of the IPA DM Futures Group, I became increasingly aware of the responsibility that we have as an industry, which is one of the reasons why I established a Sustainability Working Party at the IPA. In parallel to exploring and actioning real initiatives, we were also mindful of the need to learn about emerging trends, technologies and consumers.

In my talk tonight, Lessons from the Future, the focus will be on the most influential consumers of tomorrow.

So without losing a minute, let me take you on a journey to, well, the future. For this, I'm going to ask you to close your eyes and use your imagination ...

Are you ready? Right, you're climbing on board your personal time machine, settle in and 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, blast off ... you're hurtling into 2009, 2012 ... past 2015, through 2018 ... to the year 2020 and as you reach it, you slow and come into land. Now (pause) open the door, step out and take a look around.

- What sort of world have you found?
- Look at the landscape ... what strikes you immediately as different ... or the same?
- Wander through the *city* ... what can you see, what can you smell ...
- Now head out into the *country* ... how do you get there, what can you hear ...
- You reach the sea ... what do you touch, taste ...
- I'd like you to take one item back to the present with us that represents what's happening

Okay, time's up, you have to hurry back to the present: clamber back in your time machine, turn on the engines, lift off and ... you're hurtling through 2018, 15, 12, 9 ... to right here, right now.

Now, I'd like to you pick up the pen and card that was on each of your chairs and draw the picture you've just seen of 2020. You don't have to be an artist – I'm looking for a naïve drawing of the environment you saw ... a metaphor for how it made you feel ... perhaps the item you brought back ... what struck you as you wondered around.

(A few minutes was given to do the exercise)

You've just done the same exercise that we asked a group of 16 year old consumers to do and, a week later, a group of Marketing Directors.

The Dreamery, which is Proximity London's innovation lab, ran a Dreamstorm with each group: one, tomorrow's consumers; the other, today's marketers.

To be really challenging we recruited 16 year olds who have already taken leadership positions in their schools and communities, particularly on green initiatives. Today they might be on the 'green committee' at school, leader of the 'river clean up' team in their community, or a member of their local youth council ... but tomorrow they will be writing the news headlines, voting on legislation, setting up lobbying groups, and putting their money where their mouths are ...

They're the consumers of tomorrow most likely to influence the sustainability agenda over the next 10 years ... and we used the output from their session as stimuli for the next session with the Marketing Directors of four of our client companies, all big national corporates.

After all, 'Sustainability' is something of a buzzword in the marketing press. Some marketers see it as a looming threat, many hoped it might be a fad, a few may still in denial. Others see it as more of a public relations challenge, confused at the press' criticism of their green efforts as 'greenwashing'. Yet

there *are* farsighted marketers – many in this room - who see it as a competitive advantage and have already evolved, or in the process of evolving, their corporate strategy to leverage it.

Increasingly, by Anthony, John Grant and the IPA among others, we are reminded of our responsibility not only in reducing the environmental impact of our activities operationally, but also our potential as agents for cultural change in creating, promoting and facilitating sustainable consumption.

At Proximity London, we believe that with imagination and innovation, this is more than a duty of care, it's an opportunity to profit with a clean conscience ... as emerging alternative business models open up new markets, revenue streams and even value propositions for the future.

So let's see how our two groups – of Marketing Directors and young consumers - compared in our Dreamstorm sessions ... What intrigued us was how differently or similarly they would see the future. What sort of questions the youth would put to the marketers who would shape their world over the next decade. And what innovations each would imagine for a greener world in 2020.

This is what we learnt.

Please hand your Pictures of the Future to Laura and Kirsty as they pass – and thank you for adding yours to our Future Gallery.

We had a hunch that the youth would have an idealistic vision, taking 'green' for granted and expecting a green world as their birthright. In contrast we anticipated that the Marketing Directors would have an apocalyptic vision of doom and gloom in a world more concerned with green notes than green issues.

Our hunch was too simplistic – pitching young against old: rather, there was a mix of both among both groups.

(A few examples were shown)

Here a Marketing Director who sees a sunny picture of a bright future, productivity and unity of people in a multi-cultural Babel ...

... and that sense of hope is shared by this 16-year old who sees signs of global companies joining together in smart initiatives which will save the world.

Contrast that with this youth's vision of humanity as a tortoise, moving too slowly to evade the tide of climate change that inevitably overwhelms it ...

Ironically, this sense of gloom is mirrored in my own picture of London as a city overrun ... with our capital reaching the population density of Shanghai.

And that's shared by another Marketing Director with this imaginary news headline in 2020 announcing an exhibition in the Natural History Museum entitled: *'Icebergs – what were they?'*

What emerges is not *two generations* separated by their vision of the future, but rather individuals who have as many commonalities as differences, and those are not predicated on age, technological literacy or cultural background – but rather by whether or not they personally believe people will compromise, change and adopt the alternatives required to make the world a greener place.

But let me put that insight into other words: you're potentially looking not at the warring 'us and them' generations at two ends of the spectrum in say 1968. Instead 40 years later, you're looking at individuals who whether 40 or 16 find themselves along a continuum of feeling more or less the mantle of responsibility, faith in humanity and sense of empowerment.

The potential that exists now that didn't then is of 'partnership. For our purposes between marketers and the youth market.

And if that was a truth beginning to occur to us on seeing the two groups' pictures ... it was reinforced by the next exercise.

We paired our 16 year olds up and allocated to each pair one of our clients' brands; they were tasked with exploring that brand as homework before the session both online and offline ... then we gave them the opportunity to put their questions on film to the relevant Marketing Director. They saw it as their chance to challenge these shapers of brands and culture

The point of the questions isn't to delve into the answers. What is more relevant is for us to explore what they reveal about the kids' perception of brands? And of our responsibility as marketers for their future?

These are kids who are marketing savvy. They're looking behind the labels ... They're questioning marketers' priorities. They understand the role of research in unlocking possibilities. In gauging the carbon footprint of a brand, they're aware of their role as consumers but hold brand owners to be answerable for the process behind the product, from transport to market to recycling after use. They believe the professional *is* personal and are willing to wager a directors' "green tax" that marketers can be motivated to play their role ... they even look beyond the veneer of online image making and praise one particular brand NOT because it has an emotionally appealing claim, but rather specific goals outlined and updated regularly so that real change can be measured.

These are not the words of the 'hippy' generation, or even the 'X' generation ... but rather the 'Why' generation, as 'The Ecologist' magazine has written about in their latest issue.

And they ask their questions with a willingness to partner brand owners and be part of the solution.

As the next activity bore out.

In the youth's Dreamstorm, we paired up the kids to brainstorm blue-sky ideas for 'sustainable' initiatives these brands might potentially implement in the future.

We fed these ideas into the Marketing Directors.

Many confirmed initiatives that were already in place were indeed steps in the right direction. Others reinforced discussions that are already being held within their companies. And some simply took their breath away – fresh stimuli for future initiatives.

Whilst I'd love to show them to you, I've been asked not to share them ...

What I think we got out of Lessons from the Future initiative is:

- It was fascinating to connect with the youth and it revealed some powerful insights about what they think of sustainability issues, how they perceive our brands and what their expectations of us are;
- It reminded us of the benefits of connecting with each other as marketers, and inspired us to continue the process of incubating 'green' ideas for each of our brands;
- Indeed, we realised our collective power to create change and the potential value of developing an actionable sustainability initiative as a *consortium*.