

## “Sustainable Consumption and the Modern Brand”

*Anthony Kleanthous*

Allow me to put forward a basic argument:

That the system of production-consumption relies entirely on natural resources and services in order to function. We are using these resources quicker than the earth can replenish them, and polluting at a rate that it cannot cope with.

That products and services have enormous environmental, social and economic impacts, most of which result from the way in which they are consumed, used and eventually discarded. (For example, 90% of the carbon emissions from a load of washing are caused not by manufacturing and supplying the washing powder, but from heating the water; 81% of carbon emissions during the lifetime of a car happen after it has left the forecourt.)

That consumers are crying out for more “sustainable” products, services and brands. However, most will not pay significantly more, or trade performance, quality or style for environmental performance. At the same time, they are willing to change their behaviour – and switch to more sustainable brands – if helped to do so.

That businesses can help consumers to make this switch through a variety of means, including lower prices, better service or superior product design. The key is to improve customers’ experiences of the brand, then to give them the means to recommend it to others.

That businesses need to edit and influence consumer choices so that consumers get more “value” with less “stuff” (e.g. the move from vinyl and hi-fi systems to iPods and their Internet-and-PC-based distribution and management systems; this is sometimes called “dematerialisation” or “de-coupling”). This will allow them to deliver against the “triple bottom line” of financial performance, social performance and environmental performance.

And alongside that, I’d like to introduce a number of key concepts including:

**The importance of values (as opposed to value).** These are key to unlocking apparent dilemmas for both business and consumers, particularly with respect to social and economic questions (e.g. importing products from developing markets vs. supporting local suppliers). Marketing has a key role in ensuring that brand values are aligned with both corporate values and wider social ones.

**“Choice editing”:** the removal of “unsustainable” choices from consumers. (Marketers often have role to play in this through such things as product design briefs, brand portfolio management, and distribution.) This is often the most effective way of: reducing the life-time impacts of products/services; raising consumer awareness of sustainability challenges; and prompting other, more sustainable consumption/lifestyle choices. Once consumers have changed behaviour, it is important then to tell them how they have changed and to congratulate/reward them for it. This creates complementary uplifts in both supply and demand for sustainable products and services; a recipe for sustainable commercial success.

**“Choice influencing”**: active efforts on the part of businesses to bring about more sustainable consumer behaviour. Established methods include: advice on appropriate washing temperatures for washing clothes; advice on how to make one’s car more efficient (e.g. by inflating tyres); food labels and on-pack claims (e.g. organic, free range, air freighted, “natural”, etc.)

New techniques often emerge from a systems-based approach to problem solving, and use both choice editing and choice influencing. They take advantage of trends that might previously have been regarded as a threat, such as the rise in consumer influence over brand reputation (due largely to the emergence of social media).

Here are some examples to demonstrate this:

- The development of “sustainable” brand platforms (such as Unilever’s “Real Beauty” campaign for Dove)
- The development of new market segments (such as Green Tomato’s “eco-taxis” in London)
- Working in partnership with others influential in the system, such as government, NGOs, investors, competitors, etc. (e.g. Philips’s work on replacing incandescent lightbulbs with new-generation low-energy ones; The Portman Group’s efforts to self-regulate the alcohol market; The Forest Stewardship Council’s widely adopted standard and label for sustainably-sourced wood.)
- “Sharing” (sometimes referred to as the shift from products to services). For example: car clubs in cities; services enabling consumers to rent designer clothes and accessories for short periods; Interface’s shift from selling “just carpets” to a package of “carpet services”, comprising design, leasing, fitting, cleaning, maintenance, replacement and recycling.
- “Co-inventing”: a new approach to innovation that harnesses the knowledge and power of enthusiastic consumers (sometimes called “pro-amateurs”) to improve quality, efficiency and product performance (e.g. eBay, YouTube, Linux, Lego.)
- Measuring, managing and reporting key impacts, including progress against specific targets (e.g. CO2 emissions) and including for marketing (e.g. by using Noughtilus - [www.noughtilus.com](http://www.noughtilus.com)).

I began the presentation with a summary of the main impacts and consequences of inefficient and inappropriate consumption patterns, including ones that we have already begun to witness, such as:

- Climate change (which also contributes to other problems, below)
- Mass extinctions and loss of biodiversity (30% since 1973) (both intrinsic value and value to the system of production-consumption, e.g. through the pollination and cultivation of food, the absorption of atmospheric carbon, the breaking down of toxic waste, etc.)
- Lack of proper access to fresh water for millions of people
- Gross inequalities between the richest and poorest consumers (in terms of their access to ecological services and natural resources, and of their quality of life)
- Social upheaval and conflict (as a result of the above)

In return for these stresses, I would point out that, whilst consumers have more money to spend than they did in the 1970s, there has been no corresponding hike in “life satisfaction”. A range of studies – including two conducted by the speaker on behalf of WWF-UK – have shown that sustainability can restore this link, enabling brand owners to offer more “fulfilling” products and services, for longer. This has become possible thanks to an explosion in public awareness and concern over environmental and social issues (such as climate change, GM and child labour) and rapid advances in sustainable design and technology.