

Nobody cares about sustainability

 By [Thomas Kolster](#)

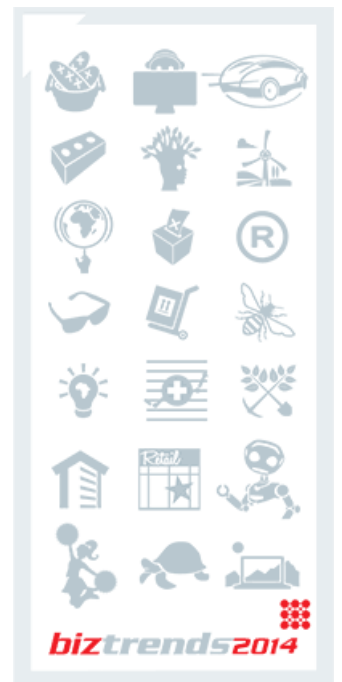
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I hear that statement often when I'm doing a talk or presenting to a group of marketing directors. It's often delivered as a defiant outburst or a sarcastic mumbling, "Our clients don't care about sustainability!" or, "Our clients won't pay more for sustainable products!"

Not to be pedantic, but I think the same could be said about a lot of the same companies' marketing (and products) in general. It's (still) all about framing the right story to the right target group at the right time and place. And in that way, telling a sustainable story is really not that different from your typical whimsical, singing dog commercial is it? If there ever was a time for that?

What you should do more in 2014

1. Get sustainability integrated in the core of your brand and business like Nike's Better World, small-upstart Fairphone or Patagonia's commitment to being a benefit corporation (B-Corp).
2. Be collaborative and never be afraid to ask for help like Starbucks' "My Starbucks Idea" or, look at the fashion industry committing to rid our clothes of toxic chemicals through the toxic pledge.
3. Do more goodvertising (advertising with a purpose) like Engen's Fire Blanket Calendar.
4. Try new collaborative business models and a vivid sharing economy like Capitec's Swapping Mall or BMW's DriveNow.
5. Embrace transparency like online reseller Honestby.
6. Encourage guilt-free-consumption like Woolworths supporting sustainable fishing.
7. Increase energy and resource efficiency like Patagonia's beautiful ads that tell consumers, "Don't buy this Jacket".
8. Innovate sustainably like Nike's Flyknit shoes or entrepreneurs GravityLight.
9. Don't think in terms of Corporate Social Responsibility - look for new possibilities and opportunities like Kraft Foods with their Tiger biscuits.
10. Ask yourself, what world-bettering difference you can make for your customers, your industry, your community, your stakeholders or your country. Look at Chipotle challenging industrialised food production with commercials like Back to the Start and Scarecrow or Unilever's Lifebuoy soap brand making a big difference for hygiene globally.



Tell them

You need to tell people why product sustainable is worth more than product run-of-the-mill and more often than not, people are willing to pay the price. Often they cannot afford not to. For the have-nots, saving resources and being smart about making ends meet; sustainability is part of everyday life.

I was in Mozambique recently and visited a hairdresser who had one bucket of water for all her customers for a whole day. One bucket of water! It's about putting your sustainability story in that context. When US supermarket chain Walmart launched their program to fight food deserts (a perfectly apt name for low-income areas where supermarkets rarely stock healthy, fresh food, but rather fast-food and processed foods), they made a difference for the community and were even endorsed by first lady Michelle Obama. Has your advertising ever been endorsed by the president or the first lady?

Don't create wants, meet needs

You should think about how you can deliver the right products or services that meet needs instead of creating wants. Suddenly, you'll see exciting new business opportunities, blue oceans waiting to be conquered.

Consider Kraft Foods, which is known for pushing rather silly products like squeezable cheese from a bottle. It recently started selling 'Tiger Biskuat', nutrient-enriched biscuits in Indonesia with the goal to help fight nutrient deficiency. For the hard-working mother with six children whose husband works hundreds of kilometres away, this makes a life-changing difference for the future of the family and their wellbeing.

The mega trends dwarfing even the whitest smile

The time has run out for most of today's marketing stories as we're faced with bigger problems than having the whitest, brightest smile. It's about turning your brand from being part of the problem, such as selling fatty, salty food, which ultimately damages communities (and the customers you're dependent on) to being part of the solution. Take a look at the mega trends that are about to rock our world:

- Rapid population growth and urbanisation
- Water scarcity and resource shortage in general
- Climate change
- Economic development
- Education gaps
- Acceleration of equality and human rights
- The increasing divide between rich and poor

Does your brand have a say in any of these mega trends, and if not - could it?

Despite this, most marketing directors seem busier hunting the newest micro trends like exciting apps, QR codes and SEO-mechanics. Is that ever going to build relevance and long-term growth?

Unfortunately, short-term thinking and goal setting puts us in a Catch 22 situation - there's never enough time to reap the rewards of doing good.

South African brands, however, have an unprecedented insight into these mega trends. As a country faced with these challenges daily, it's an opportunity to better understand and tell these sustainable stories not only at home, but also to connect with people globally.

The South African dream

I see a lot of conscious advertising coming from South Africa, willing to comment on the bigger picture and connect with these mega trends rather than the marketing of yesteryear and its 'shop 'til you drop' messaging.

In the 20th century, the former colonial powers were the all-powerful storytellers (as well as the inventors of modern day advertising), sharing their recipe for happiness and prosperity or as the US would call it 'The American Dream', but maybe South Africa has the power to tell stories closer to the reality of the next century and the mega-trends facing us and future generations? Maybe 'The South African Story' could be one where it's not the survival of the fittest, but survival for all?

Beauty never lasts

I believe the brands that succeed in embracing this new reality and problem-solving attitude will be the winning storytellers. It's about removing yourself from the beauty contest of incremental differences and watered-down USPs and forging a new, honest way forward.

A recent study from Havas' Brand Sustainable Future found that two thirds of consumers didn't care whether the majority of brands survived or not. Let's just think about that - they really couldn't care less if you're around or not. The stories you tell yourself in the boardroom about loyalty and commitment; how true are they? All the heritage, all the trust - in this new brand reality, they mean nothing.

What this study reveals is a fundamental difference between the stories brands are telling people (and themselves) and what people *really* want to hear and see from brands.

The right story, told right

Maybe you're telling the right story, but you're just not telling it in the right way? Do yourself a favour and take three minutes out of your day and watch Rainforest Alliance's commercial Follow the Frog - and tell me if they're not telling it the right way?

Essentially, dear marketing director or advertising exec, if you show care towards people, people will care about you. That's the blunt answer to your, "Nobody cares!" outburst and may I add: it pays to care.

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ABOUT THOMAS KOLSTER

Thomas Kolster is the author of *Goodvertising* (Thames & Hudson 2012; (Goodvertising.info; Facebook), founder of the Goodvertising Agency (Goodvertisingagency.com) and the world's first collaborative communication platform dedicated to sustainability: WhereGoodGrows (Wheregoddgrows.com; Facebook). He hails from Copenhagen, Denmark, and has spent some time in South Africa. Read more at thomaskolster.com, email Thomas at hello@thomaskolster.com, and follow @dogoodvertising and @thomaskolster on Twitter.

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