



Marketing Messages

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Business tips on living in a post-materialism world

Have you ever heard the George Carlin comedy routine "A place for my stuff?" It's a very funny piece poking fun at how we collect stuff, why we value our stuff, and why we can't go anywhere without a scaled down version of our important stuff. The stuff Carlin refers to ranges from perceived necessities to the mundane. He highlights how this material collection of wealth controls our life. It's a funny and poignant commentary on our materialistic society.

Since I devote my columns to giving tips on how to improve your marketing efforts and ultimately sell more goods or services, I find discussions about a post-materialism marketplace fascinating. It requires you to juxtapose the thought of your marketing efforts in a marketplace facing a declining enthusiasm for consuming. A post-materialism marketplace doesn't mean consumers completely abandon their wallets, but it does mean they become more cautious and jaded, very demanding, and ultimately more resistant to marketing efforts. The early signs of a shift in priorities by consumers are out there. What are some of the signals? It's when consumers want more. Something more than stuff. It's when material comforts cease to provide the deep satisfaction people crave. Did I go off and spend the weekend seeking enlightenment at Banyen Books or on a retreat to Hollyhock? Not at all; although that would be a delightful diversion! Hints of discontent have been present for some time. As businesspeople that market goods and services, perhaps it's time we take a look at this movement and figure out what it could mean to our success.

The events of 9/11 and the subsequent "war on terror" have changed the very notion of how Canadians view themselves in this world. The line between the haves and the havenots and the unbridled consumerism of the west has never been more evident. Remarkably, the movement towards a post-materialism marketplace is likely in part the result of introspective thought and reflection on these world events. But there are other shifts happening which are changing the way the marketing game gets played. The revelations of rampant corporate greed and dishonesty at companies such as Enron, has sent consumers on a hunt for genuine companies. Ethics now have clout. Government scandals have lead to people placing their trust cautiously. Authority now gets questioned. Privacy legislation was enacted this year to protect people from unscrupulous marketers. Consumers are now getting respect. The fast food industry is facing the same examination the tobacco industry did as public health concerns about obesity rise. Slick marketing is pervasive in the fast food business and the advertising industry is going to face scrutiny. Consumers will transfer this quest for honesty and integrity to other markets.

Buy Nothing Day is a further symbol of consumer discontent. Conceived by Vancouver native, Ted Dave in 1992 at the local level and later launched internationally from the Pacific Northwest by Adbusters in 1996, it has grown to a worldwide celebration of consumer awareness and simple living. Observed on the Friday before US Thanksgiving, the busiest shopping day south of the border, participants are asked to spend no money on consumer goods for one full day. As frightening as the prospect might seem to retailers, the movement has grown steadily over the last 12 years and has made headlines around the world. The quest for ethical consumption has entered the consumer conscience and gone mainstream. Witness the growth of ethical mutual funds in the investment sector. The City of Vancouver recently voted to legislate "ethical purchasing" whereby items would only be purchased from suppliers where workers are paid properly and treated well. The city of Toronto and communities of Duncan and Nanaimo already have such legislation in place. Companies such as Starbucks, who sell fair trade coffee, are supporting consumer demand for ethical consumption. The popularity of the Dalai Lama's recent trip to Vancouver further reinforces a growing desire of many to work not just for the individual self, but for the benefit of mankind. And appearing in a direct corollary to big business and corporate greed, when it's been their core business principle for years, Vancity will donate 30% of their net profits back into communities through their Shared Success Program this year. These examples are a reflection of societal trends and consumer demand.

Consumer discontent won't stop people from buying, but it could affect their purchase choices. Product demand and profitability could be negatively effected. What might consumers want in a post-materialism marketplace, and how should your marketing efforts approach them? Here are a few things to think about:

1. Emotional benefits, like the desire for simplicity will guide consumer decisions.
2. Consumers will seek honesty. Honesty in advertising. Honesty in product delivery.
3. Integrity will need to guide all decisions. This market is jaded and demanding.
4. Making a connection with these consumers is important. They want to feel special.
5. Humour helps. When done right a good laugh is a great diversion from the more serious things in life. There's a reason why the movie industry pumps out more humour in times of trouble. It sells.

Although consumer discontent could represent a real threat to the marketplace, time taken to consider what consumers will want in a post-materialism marketplace is time well spent.

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