



Marketing Messages

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A look at five key social trends that are changing the marketplace in Canada

At the American Marketing Association annual Vision conference, I had the pleasure of meeting Mike Lipkin, President of Environics/Lipkin, a research firm that tracks societal trends in Canada. He spoke of five major social trends, which will transform Canada over the next 10 years. These trends have serious implications for anyone in marketing, since they represent the context in which customers are making decisions. These forces are shaping the way people think, act and buy. The research is based on interviews with 50,000 Canadians over the last 20 years.

Trend #1: Apocalyptic anxiety. Driven by terrorist activity, war, major upheavals in business and government scandal, this trend manifests as anxiety over changes that appear beyond an individual's control. People feel threatened by forces they don't understand. Companies that protect the best interests of customers will do well. Be honest in all your dealings. If your marketing makes promises make sure you deliver. Customers will only deal with whom they trust and that trust must be earned. People with elevated levels of anxiety tend to be short on patience, so an emphasis on excellent customer service would be prudent.

Trend #2: Aversion to uncertainty and complexity in life. People have an increasing desire to keep their life simple and predictable. They crave stability and feel exhausted and intimidated by complexity. In 1996, 33% of Canadians were attracted to risk and complexity. In 2002, that had dropped to 19%. This massive 42% negative shift is very significant. Businesses, which keep things simple, will have the greatest appeal. Deliver a simple clear message in your marketing. Make your product or service simple to use and simple to understand. Be a place of comfort. You need to be seen as representing certainty in the face of a chaotic world. The rise of the coffee culture is linked to this trend. A good cup of coffee represents a small pleasure, a certainty, and a predictable comfort in the day. Starbucks, Tim Hortons and Delaneys may all appear to sell coffee and treats, but what they really sell is a predictable experience and a break in a complex day.

Trend #3: From individualism and idealism to conformity and exclusion. People feel they are being excluded from the promises of life. The gap has widened between the "haves" and the "have nots". Many feel a lack of individual purpose. They feel safer conforming as part of a large group. There is a loss of individual control. In 1996, 44% of Canadians felt in control of their life. In 2002, only 27% did. Businesses that champion and empower the individual do well in this environment. Witness the growth of career and personal coaching. These professions encourage the individual pursuit of an ideal.

Trend #4: From duty and obligation to hedonism and happiness. There is a collective desire to escape uncertainty. People are struggling to regain happiness amid their increased stress. They want to focus on themselves and take a break. In 1996, 45% of Canadians were strongly committed to duty and obligation. In 2002, only 25% expressed this sentiment. Canadians today are working less out of a sense of duty and obligation and more with the objective to take time to play. For employers, this is a heads up that your workforce is loyal to themselves first and you second. Businesses who can be positioned as the answer to the escape mentality will do well. Think travel, spas, entertainment and dining out. Local arts organizations such as Vancouver Opera and The Playhouse market their season subscription products as a personal treat, an escape and something to look forward to. They understand it is about more than just entertainment.

Trend #5: From personal development to personal survival. Many feel they don't have the energy to invest in themselves anymore. They know personal development is good but they feel run off their feet. Because they feel less hopeful about their ability to change their circumstances, they function on survival mode. Canadians' commitment to personal development slid from 39% in 1996 to 18% in 2002. If you're in the business of selling professional association memberships or adult learning, this trend likely manifested as a decline in participants over recent years. The good news is the trend is slowly reversing as people are demonstrating increased desire to reach out in 2003/04. Personal development competes for time and we have less of it to go around. This may explain the popularity of executive MBA programs at Royal Roads and City University, which trumpet flexibility as a primary feature to working adults.

These trends represent a distinct departure from the way Canadians felt 10 years ago. If your marketing strategy or business model seems to be floundering, you should review it in light of these trends. It's a changing world. You need to change with it.

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