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STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

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STATE OF THE WORLD

Transforming Cultures

From Consumerism to Sustainability

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“If we continue to think of ourselves mostly as consumers, it’s going to be very hard to bring our environmental troubles under control. But it’s also going to be very hard to live the rounded and joyful lives that could be ours. This is a subversive volume in all the best ways!”

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“This year’s *State of the World* report is a cultural mindbomb exploding with devastating force. I hope it wakes a few people up.”

—**Kalle Lasn, Editor of *Adbusters* magazine**

Like a tsunami, consumerism has engulfed human cultures and Earth’s ecosystems. Left unaddressed, we risk global disaster. But if we channel this wave, intentionally transforming our cultures to center on sustainability, we will not only prevent catastrophe but may usher in an era of sustainability—one that allows all people to thrive while protecting, even restoring, Earth.

In this year’s *State of the World* report, 50+ renowned researchers and practitioners describe how we can harness the world’s leading institutions—education, the media, business, governments, traditions, and social movements—to reorient cultures toward sustainability.



full image



extreme close-up

Several million pounds of plastic enter the world’s oceans every hour, portrayed on the cover by the 2.4 million bits of plastic that make up *Gyre*, Chris Jordan’s 8- by 11-foot reincarnation of the famous 1820s woodblock print, *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa*, by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai.

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From Selling Soap to Selling Sustainability: Social Marketing

Jonah Sachs and Susan Finkelpearl

Sixty years ago, Americans greeted the postwar era with a thrift-based value system that had gotten them through two decades of war and economic depression. Corporate industry, meanwhile, exited the war capable of producing more goods than ever. But with the soldiers they once supplied now back home, they needed a new customer base. If only industry could reverse the thrift-based values of the American people, then their ramped-up infrastructure could continue pumping out goods, which would be readily bought by willing consumers.

Enter Madison Avenue. Marketers responded to industry's challenge decisively, taking a dramatic leap forward in marketing sophistication. They rejected the typical fact-based approach of advertisements in favor of an identity-based, storytelling construct. The result? They created a radical reversal of thrift values and an explosion of consumerism that ignited in the United States in the 1950s and spread around the world. This became the era when people met the Marlboro man and came to believe that the cigarette someone smoked said a lot about who the person was. They embraced the idea of per-

ceived obsolescence, accepting that owning this year's model television was a sign of virtue even if last year's model was still working perfectly well. Before long, even cultural resistance had requisite consumable products, such as the Volkswagen (VW) Beetle.

As is clear today, Madison Avenue's success has had deep, unintended consequences, and sophisticated story-based marketing continues to drive its relentless growth. Yet the seeds of the current consumption crisis may also contain powerful solutions. If marketers were able to motivate a massive reorientation of cultural values and behaviors in relatively little time 60 years ago, can they do it again? Could a revolution in social marketing, where marketing principles are used to change social behavior rather than sell a product, drive a new set of values that would lead to the lifestyles and political changes necessary to confront today's ecological crises?

Certainly, social marketing faces major hurdles. In 2008, spending on advertising was estimated at over \$271 billion in the United States and \$643 billion worldwide. Today approximately only one in every thousand marketing dollars is spent on broadcast pub-

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lic service announcements that market for the public good—and only a tiny fraction of that is spent on sustainability issues.¹

But there are also enormous opportunities. Social marketing has a 40-year history of experience to draw upon, plus there are vast lessons to learn by observing traditional consumer marketing. The Internet has rapidly leveled the playing field in the media marketplace by reducing distribution costs and removing the barriers of traditional corporate gatekeepers who limited the broadcast of messages that ran counter to consumerism's values. And the emergence of social media has spawned a "viral" distribution model through which an inspiring message can move almost instantly and at nearly no cost through networks of mutual trust.

For social marketers to play a role in the transition from consumerism to sustainability, they will need to draw on the main lesson learned by consumer marketing in the 1950s: facts alone do not sell behavior change. Instead, people working to foster sustainable behavior must use storytelling to reach audiences on a human, personal scale.

Stories Change Behaviors

As social marketers craft a strategy for this critical next decade, understanding and harnessing the power of emotional storytelling may be their most important task. Table 10 outlines a few of the most successful product and social marketing efforts since the 1950s and describes how human-scale character and stories, as opposed to facts and product attributes, have built the most powerful brands and behavior change.²

Iconic, story-based campaigns do not simply shift the perception of a product or activity. To change behavior on the scale they do, such campaigns have to shift how millions of people see themselves and how they are defined by, for example, their choice of ciga-

rette, car, computer, or social behavior. But is it storytelling per se that makes these campaigns so successful?

Writer and philosopher Joseph Campbell offers a compelling reason to believe that human-scale storytelling is key to opening people up to changing instinctive "tribal" identities and altering behavior. Campbell's views even imply that social marketing may have an advantage over product marketing in this arena.³

In his seminal work, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell presents a survey of mythology across broad cultural contexts and millennia and finds strong commonalities. He hypothesizes that human beings are, in fact, genetically hard-wired to see their world in terms of stories. And what's more, these stories are strikingly similar. They share certain archetypal characters like the hero, the nemesis, and the mentor, and they follow a plot of invitation to adventure, acceptance of that invitation, battle with the nemesis, and then return.⁴

What is of particular interest to social marketers about Campbell's theories is that the setting for these adventures is often a broken world in need of healing. What's more, the return involves the hero coming back to society with the wisdom to heal it. Seen through this lens, stories of a societal shift from consumerism to sustainability fit perfectly into humanity's pre-formed ideas of what a hero's journey is all about. A hero is someone who helps to heal society's ills.

Campbell's theories do not stop at saying that people respond to stories. He believed that stories motivate behavior and identity, which might explain the success of storytelling marketing efforts to change consumer activity. "The myth is the public dream and the dream is the private myth," wrote Campbell in describing how deeply people internalize stories and seek to place themselves as the heroes within them.⁵

In the field of public health, the power of

Table 10. Selected Successful Product and Social Marketing Campaigns

Product or Cause	Story-Based Campaign	Result
Marlboro cigarettes	In a series of windows into the life of a fictional American hero, the Marlboro Man, the campaign focuses on the man. The product is merely an accessory.	The Marlboro Man is one of the most familiar faces in the world and solidified Marlboro as the top cigarette brand for the past 40 years.
Volkswagen Beetle	A campaign that began in 1959 spoke frankly about consumer frustration with planned obsolescence and the Big Three car companies' branding puffery. Instead of targeting consumers' impulse to buy a car, it targeted their impulse for cultural resistance.	The campaign completely reversed Americans' perception of what had been seen as a "Nazi car." The VW beetle became the symbol of cultural resistance and 1960s culture. It is still one of the most analyzed and admired campaigns in advertising history.
Seat belt use	In 1985, the "You can learn a lot from a dummy" campaign introduced two charming crash-test dummies, Vince and Larry. The dummies showed viewers exactly what it looked and felt like to be in a car accident.	In 1986, 39 percent of drivers in 19 U.S. cities reported using their safety belts, compared with 23 percent in a 1985 study. The campaign was a significant factor among several that influenced this increase. The campaign also created political cover for mandatory seat belt legislation that eventually pushed compliance nationwide past 85 percent.
Apple computers	Apple's "1984" ad said nothing about computers and ran only once on television during the 1984 Super Bowl. It simply showed a lone rebel smashing through the Orwellian dominance of its PC competitor, laying the groundwork for Apple users to identify heavily with the brand.	<i>Adweek</i> called 1984 "the best ad ever created"; Apple II sales accounted for 15 percent of the market share in its first year. It was the beginning of a string of story-based campaigns that would make Apple one of the most identifiable lifestyle brands in history. Apple's more recent "Get a Mac" campaign has millions of Americans identifying so much with the brand that they repeat the mantra "I'm a Mac."
Raising awareness about over-consumption	<i>The Story of Stuff</i> took users into the 10-year journey of activist Annie Leonard as she explored where "stuff" comes from and where it winds up when it gets thrown away. Leonard's high-level analysis of the materials economy was boiled down to simple stories told on the human scale.	This movie, by Free Range Studios, quickly went "viral" on the Internet when it was released in 2007. Since then, it has been seen by more than 7 million people in 224 countries, translated into 10 languages, and featured in hundreds of U.S. classrooms.
Reduction in obesity in the United States	Morgan Sperlock's film <i>Supersize Me</i> showed viewers the disconcerting health and appearance effects on one man of eating nothing but McDonald's meals for 30 days.	The film was an enormous critical and commercial success. Shortly after the film's release, McDonald's removed the Supersize option from its menu. Source: See endnote 2.

archetypal storytelling has gone well beyond theory and has proved to be effective worldwide. Beginning in the 1970s, Mexican tele-

vision executive Miguel Sabido began to practice Entertainment-Education (E-E), which spread public health messages by embedding

them into soap operas. Sabido's shows influenced audiences by encoding health behaviors into the interpersonal dramas of three types of role models: positive, negative, and transitional. These models map closely to Campbell's archetypes of the mentor (the source of wise behavior), the nemesis (the antithesis of the mentor), and the hero (the initiate who must choose the correct behavior).⁶

Viewers of Sabido's E-E shows were expected to identify closely with a transitional character and, by seeing that person make good choices about sex, marriage, and family planning, believe that they too could make positive behavior changes.

because of hearing the radio drama *Twende na Wakati*. Similar results have been documented in an analysis of 39 family planning communications worldwide between 1986 and 2001.⁷

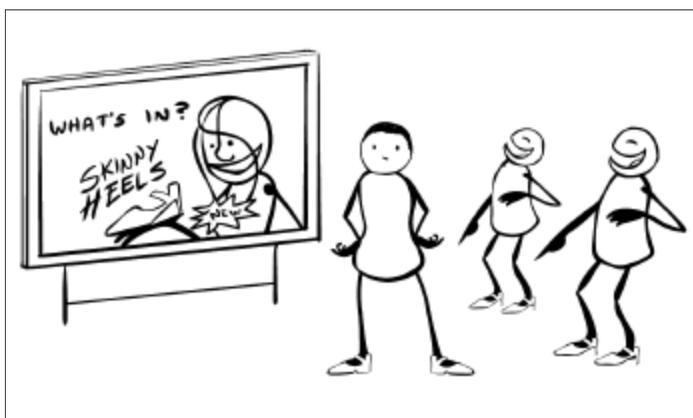
Few Stories Address Climate Change

Although social marketers have had some stunning successes in harnessing the power of stories, when it comes to the most pressing environmental sustainability issues, the lesson has not been applied adequately.

A survey of the Web communications of the "environmental G8," the foremost international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) addressing climate change, reveals an approach that is still heavily devoted to the facts of the climate crisis, its dire consequences, and current policy proposals to address it. Emotional appeals that aptly reflect the reality of visitors' lives and concerns, as well as the frames through which they receive and evaluate information about the crisis, are sorely lacking.⁸

A recent study by the Yale Project on Climate Change and George Mason University's Center for Climate Change Communication signals that the time for a fact-alone approach has past. Seventy percent of Americans already believe climate change is a problem and 51 percent view it as a serious problem. With the public recognizing the need to address climate change, NGOs must shift gears to inspire action, not merely persuade people that climate change exists through a barrage of facts.⁹

Moving beyond facts and information alone is critical because when it comes to taking action, humans tend not to be rational actors. In the wake of the 1970s energy crisis, researcher Scott Geller demonstrated this when



Courtesy: Free Range Studios

The online movie *The Story of Stuff* reminds viewers how marketers use emotion to sell their goods.

In the years since its launch, E-E has been adopted into radio plays, animations, reality dramas, and even mobile phone programming with consistently demonstrated success well above other forms of public health education. For example, in South Africa the weekly drama *Tsha-Tsha* drew an audience of 1.8 million. People exposed to the show and with good recall of its plot reported significantly higher rates of HIV prevention practices, such as abstinence and safe sex. And a study in Tanzania found that 40 percent of new family planning users at government clinics came in

he exposed research participants to three hours of slide shows, lectures, and other educational materials about residential energy consumption. The result? Participants were more aware of energy issues, understood more about how they could save energy in their homes, but failed to change their behavior.¹⁰

Fortunately, there is a dawning realization among social marketers and the scientists whose work they support that facts alone are not enough. This was captured perfectly by activist Bill McKibben in describing the work of NASA scientist James Hansen: “I think [Hansen] thought, as did I, if we get this set of facts in front of everybody, they’re so powerful—overwhelming—people will do what needs to be done,” McKibben told the *New Yorker*. “Of course, that was naïve on both of our parts.”¹¹

Today, McKibben and Hansen are key evangelists of the Internet-savvy, story-based campaign known as 350.org, which seeks to cast the climate crisis in terms of the health of a single organism. As its Web site explains: “We’re like the patient that goes to the doctor and learns he’s overweight, or his cholesterol is too high. He doesn’t die immediately—but until he changes his lifestyle and gets back down to the safe zone, he’s at more risk for heart attack or stroke.”¹²

Based on the patterns of success seen on Madison Avenue and Mexican soap operas and on the predictions of Joseph Campbell, this shift to campaigns like 350 is desperately needed in order to see the mass behavior shifts required for a sustainable future.

Social Marketing Meets Social Media

For most of the past 40 years, social marketing distribution has occurred in a uniform way. Whether messages were made available through radio, television, or print, the dominant approach until a decade ago was the one-to-many broadcast model.

Today that model is quickly being overtaken by a many-to-many “narrowcast” model that is made possible by the Internet. In this new world, messages travel through personalized social networks. As each audience member handles the message, he or she may comment on it or even alter it. Effective social marketing has become not just about creating great stories but about sparking great conversations out of which great social change stories can arise.

To understand how powerful social marketing efforts might move around in this new media landscape, it is important to first understand the basics of social media today:

- Social media refers to a new crop of Internet tools and content, where anyone with an Internet connection can publish text, images, and video easily through Web sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr or with tools such as blogging and podcast software. Once published, others can interact with the content by commenting on it, integrating it with other content, sharing it, or rating it.¹³
- Social media tools and users are growing exponentially, so that today online forums are no longer only for ardent Internet users. Facebook alone boasts 250 million active users. About 70 percent of these individuals live outside the United States, and the fastest-growing Facebook demographic is people 35 or older.¹⁴
- Social media are redefining people’s core social networks. A recent Pew study found that people’s networks are more geographically dispersed, mobile, and varied thanks to the Internet. The study goes so far as to say that social media are changing the traditional orientation of human behavior.¹⁵
- Social media content is among the most trusted sources of information for Americans today. Sixty million Americans said information shared on the Internet has helped them make a major life decision, and 90 per-

cent say that they trust the recommendations of their networks over any other form of communication (such as advertising).¹⁶

What are the inherent opportunities here and how will this enhance or diminish the power of stories to create social change?

First, social media amplify the public's appetite for and access to human-scale stories. For instance, after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the 2009 Iranian presidential elections, Twitter allowed thousands of authentic individual stories to flood out of countries that previously would have repressed or controlled the message. In the past, China's government had buried stories of natural disaster, leaving little space for public response. After the Sichuan tragedy, the unfiltered stories of heartbreak generated 1.5 billion yuan (\$208 million) in relief donations from Chinese citizens alone.¹⁷

Similarly, after the Iranian elections, marchers in Tehran were joined in solidarity around the world by demonstrators in Washington, London, Islamabad, Sydney, São Paulo, and dozens of other cities. These story-based social marketing efforts harnessed social media both to spontaneously disseminate key information and to create dramatic results that would not have been possible using the broadcast model.¹⁸

Second, social media do not remove the need for traditional "tribal" identities; they create an even deeper need for them. The Pew study showed that all this incredible new technology has not fundamentally changed the size of social networks. People still tend to interact in small "tribes" of about 35 "close ties." These close-knit communities, however, are no longer necessarily held together by geographic proximity or traditional markers of social status. Thus the tribes need new identity-forming concepts and behaviors to hold them together.¹⁹

The group 350.org has taken advantage of this by organizing a global protest at the micro-

social network level. By early September 2009 its highly successful social marketing campaign had signed up over 1,700 groups in 79 countries to create actions before the Copenhagen climate talks at the end of the year. The organization did not provide top-down instructions for how these networks should behave. Instead, it offered a sort of social and identity glue that the networks eagerly embraced and used to further the organization's cause.²⁰

Third, social media can offer a natural advantage to social marketing over product marketing. Because these networks are made up of permission-based communications, it is difficult for people to "advertise" to each other without breaching natural social taboos. On the other hand, social groups tend to welcome education and values-based messages. Thus, despite having smaller budgets, social marketing campaigns will likely move more quickly through social media.

Now Is the Time

Return for a moment to the 1950s, a turning point in the evolution of the consumer-based society. The marketing revolution that helped reverse cultural norms so swiftly can be seen as a small miracle—a miracle to learn from and perhaps repeat. It is true, of course, that the stakes are much greater and the hurdles to cross in terms of behavior and political change seem much higher. But this is not the 1950s, when television was new and a handful of players dominated the media landscape. This is 2010, a time of exponentially greater connectivity, free information flow, and dramatically lower distribution costs. By combining the key lessons of marketing's past with the opportunities of today's social media revolution, social marketers armed with the power of storytelling have the chance to create another great shift and move the world toward a sustainable future.

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