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Response to Gail Whiteman 2000. "Sustainability for the Planet: A Marketing Perspective"

Getting a Purchase on Social Values: Further Commentary on Sustainability, A Marketing Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Successful marketing of sustainability will proceed apace when we confront, and deal directly with, our social values. The tools are at hand.

KEY WORDS: advertising, environmental responsibility, social change, social values.

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"Sustainability for the Planet: A Marketing Perspective" by Gail Whiteman (1999) succinctly identifies and discusses all of the main issues related to "selling" the idea of sustainability through mass media. To take Gail Whiteman's ideas further, it would be useful to elaborate on the philosophy behind her observation that "attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about behavioral control all influence consumer and corporate action."

Social values do indeed influence social behavior. People who work in the advertising profession intuitively know this. They are creative people, often closely aligned with the arts, and the arts have everything to do with value. Although the nature of value is a mysterious thing in itself (Why does a painting by Matisse or Tom Thompson have such impact?), the creative people in advertising are attuned to those same values. Their job is simply to assign "value" to products and services in the marketplace and then maneuver the buyer into making a purchase.

This kind of manipulation takes advantage of a variety of overt and latent desires on the part of the consumer.

For example, our society places a high value on mobility, comfort, power, convenience, and prestige. By painting a beautiful picture of an automobile in pristine surroundings, with no noise or traffic, advertisers focus those values toward a particular brand name car. The inverse is also true. By repeatedly placing a new image in public view in a flattering way, the object or activity associated with that image gradually captures our attention and interest regardless of its initial value (pet rocks, hula hoops). In this second example, it should be noted that people place a certain amount of value in novelty and silliness. What ties both examples together may be that all human and social values are latent within our creaturehood. Which of those latent tendencies becomes actualized is largely decided by social agreement, culture, and the (dis)temper of the times.

This is the crux of the challenge facing scientists and environmentalists who want to bring about social change. How do we assign "value" to the notion of environmental responsibility, thereby affecting the basic "attitudes, feelings and beliefs" that modern humans have about the earth?

To begin with, we need to recognize that, in retreating to the comfort, power, convenience, and prestige of modern life, we have allowed ourselves to fear and loath the earth and the forces of nature. Changing this will no doubt require a conscious decision, and that decision will involve releasing ourselves from our fixations long enough to acknowledge what most normal people feel in their bones: the earth is our spiritual and physical home and must be protected. As daunting as this may sound, I would suggest that the means are at our fingertips.

This may be difficult to recognize, because those means have been appropriated by the advertising industry, and therefore have become associated with all the deception and banality associated with merchandizing and profiteering. Nevertheless, advertising employs three very basic communications principles.

Appeal, the first of these, hooks the attention to create a receptive mood. Sexual imagery is a common appeal device, but others engage interest in such things as humour, guilt, refinement, and power.

Clarity, the second principle, is the way an idea is framed in terms that can be easily understood and absorbed by the mind for later reference.

Repetition, the third and most important principle, is, for lack of a more delicate metaphor, the hammer that drives in the nail. Without repeated exposure, especially in today's world, the mind simply does not retain the information. Furthermore, repetition can make up for shortcomings in clarity and appeal. Who has not found themselves humming a radio tune they detest?

Using these same principles, an idea such as *environmental responsibility* can be given a high public profile, or the merits of *chlorine-free hemp paper* can be repeatedly promoted. The next step is to redirect our society's enormous wealth toward the support of such communications strategies.

RESPONSES TO THIS ARTICLE

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LITERATURE CITED

Whiteman, G. 1999. Sustainability for the planet: a marketing perspective. *Conservation Ecology* **3**(1): 13. [online] URL: <http://www.consecol.org/Journal/vol3/iss1/art13>

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