

CLOSE-UP 3

Rethinking advertising's consumption economy

Justin Basini and Jon Alexander of Conservation-economy.org issue a rallying cry for the industry to change its approach

Something big is happening in the world. We're not talking about climate change – or at least, not just about climate change. We stand at a point in history where our society is beginning to wonder whether we can go on as we have been. The hubris of Fukuyama's "end of history" and Brown's "end of boom and bust" is becoming clear. Our economists are starting to look fallible; our politicians are praying that society does exist after all; and, yes, our scientists are telling us that the world can't sustain the way we're living at the moment – not to mention how we'll deal with it when there are another two or three billion of us over the coming decades.

Arguably, the response to date from our industry has been muted. We've responded to the recession by doing what we used to harder. The "sustainability" word has been seen as a new set of rules (don't "greenwash") and, at best, as a new opportunity (sell greener stuff), but really it's marginally adapted business as usual. Certainly, at an industry level, our luminaries are seeing little evidence of change. Mike Hughes, the ISBA director-general, was recently quoted in these pages as saying he had "no spontaneous awareness" of responsibility initiatives within the agency world. Such initiatives as do exist, in the final assessment, have been more about acceptability than sustainability.

Arguably, the stimulation of consumption has to date been a powerful force for good. Material standards of living have rocketed, at least in the western democracies. Marketing and advertising, in its broadest sense, has been a major part of this. Our industry, our insights, our techniques, the mass media have a massive impact; that's why we like working in them.

It's addictive to exercise our ability to influence and persuade the consumer. We play on basic human emotions and drives: avarice, greed and human pride are our tools. We can change perceptions to ensure that the new thing is more valuable than the old, the famous more valuable than the unknown, the more expensive the better. We want consumers to be dissatisfied because this drives consumption. Until now, we've been able to believe that we're doing good by doing this.

Some believe that technology will be able to save the day. That the 300 times efficiency gains that we

need will come from our human ingenuity and increasing scientific advancement.

Some think that there will be a global conflict over resources that will rewrite the world order and potentially consign the world's 13,000-year experiment with modern humanity as a footnote.

Others believe that we can manage a fundamental reassessment of what is important and start being creatures that conserve and protect resources and ourselves, rather than consuming with little regard for our impact. That our creativity and ingenuity can be harnessed in order to change our fundamental human behaviours and beliefs.

What if consumption was no longer a force for good and no longer the right thing to do? What would we do then? Would our industry still have a role? How would we reinvent ourselves in this new model?

Climate change sceptic or believer, it's impossible to deny that we are going to have to change something: the current equation simply doesn't balance. There aren't enough resources to continue our current rate of consumption so we most likely need to consume less. The resources that we are using are constantly degraded, even as we recycle, so we need to conserve them better. Health and well-being are under attack as we seek to produce more and more food to win in a competitive market place. Individuals and communities are turning in on themselves as we prize material possessions more than relationships.

The questions for the marketing, advertising and communications industries are many. What's wrong with an economy based on consumption? How do we develop ideas that move us into a new model? What might that new model look like? How do we use our understanding of humanity and our creativity to help people, brands and businesses go through what has the potential to be incredibly painful – but could also be incredibly exciting?

Many of us in the industry are deeply concerned with

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these questions, finding answers and reassessing the current and future impact of our actions. Much of the thinking around sustainability has been solid and progress has been made. But its focus, perhaps naturally, has been on adapting what we currently do, rather than fundamentally reassessing whether what we do is right or wrong.

Conservation-economy.org is an online debating chamber that we've created to ask and answer the bigger, fundamental questions. There are 12 of us who are founding contributors – there are no luminaries among our ranks, we are just a bunch of people working in the industry who are worried about our direction of travel.

We want to share ideas, resources and a passion for driving a new conversation. There is no party line. The range of views is wide, from those who think that the current model of big business and brands is broken and starving oxygen from solutions, to those who believe that getting businesses and brands on-board is vital to the solutions.

From product design to market research, from advertising to new

forms of economic measurement, a wide range of thinking will be debated. Contrasting views are vital since Conservation-economy.org and its ideas will "always be in beta".

Even the name itself is intended to provoke debate, not resolve it.

We've put together a wide set of resources to help answer some of the questions we're posing about

problems, solutions and the role of our industry. These resources are a collection of books, reports, videos, organisations and people who represent the best thinking available. As far as we know, the grouping of these resources in one place focused on our industry is unique.

If you're reading this, it's pretty likely that, like the contributors to Conservation-economy.org, you've benefited greatly from a consumption-based economy. You can probably take credit, in a small way, for driving up material standards of living, but if you, and as an industry, we, are to take the credit for this economic miracle, then we must surely also take responsibility for its negative impacts.

We believe all of us need to be asking the bigger questions about what we are doing, exploring answers together, and starting to define the role of marketing and advertising in new models. This transition will perhaps be humanity's greatest challenge. We believe that it's the responsibility of, and a huge opportunity for, our industry to lead through this challenge.

It is the marketing and advertising industry that has the creativity, skills and insight to understand and change human perception. Conservation-economy.org will help you, and our industry, decide what road to take as together we create the future. Whether you agree or not visit www.conservation-economy.org now, sign up to the feeds and help us ask and answer the big questions.

Something big is happening. Something that is going to change not only our industry but every industry – and in many cases is already doing so. Something that is going to make the advent of digital look like nothing more than a footnote in the history of marketing.

The relentless drive for consumption, the very economic basis of the marketing and advertising industries, cannot continue in its current form – it needs to change. This transition is happening now. Those businesses, brands and agencies that can create and lead to a vision of this post-consumption economy will be the winners. It's complex, it's fundamental and it's time to pay attention.

Justin Basini and Jon Alexander are the founding contributors of Conservation-economy.org

