

channelUNO

trends and other interesting things from around the world

Going Up In Smoke?

Normally when we at UNO get on our soapbox its because we want to share our thoughts on a topic that is in someway connected with design. Since Channel UNO came on air our content has come from the usual suspects and a few oddballs have been dragged up, scrutinised, applauded, jeered or just noted for future reference. Over the last ten or so years the almost imperceptible flicker of global warming has grown to

become an inferno. Anyone who has seen Al Gore's documentary piece, 'An Inconvenient Truth', or who has been anywhere near a TV in the last few years would be aware of the trend that has been mapped with regards to climate change and the impact this will have over the coming years and decades. The threat of impending catastrophic changes to the world we know has demanded a response.



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Channel UNO is not normally quite so doom laden but just like every Hollywood blockbuster there will be heroes and villains in this piece and the ending could very well be a bit of a nail biter. You could also be wondering at this stage, 'what on earth has this got to do with design?', the truth of the matter is that design, along with almost every other facet of our society does have a great deal to do with our current situation.

We as communicators have shaped products that now lie in landfills all over the world, the energy used to create them, ship them, retail them and market them has contributed to this current ongoing situation. It would in fact be hard to find anyone who wasn't in a position to throw some pretty big stones from the window of their glass house, except perhaps for a few of the remaining indigenous tribes, most easily recognised by their "I told you so" expression.

The other growing buzz has come from the use of the word sustainable; this has been used to coin such terms as 'sustainable growth' and 'sustainable development', giving rise to a little confusion. The former means that we can go on growing and expanding infinitely and the latter means that we can improve our situation infinitely. Except for a declining



WalMart show their multi-layered approach to sustainability

number of economists, the idea of being able to continue to grow world markets forever from a finite amount of resources has few believers. However, the idea that we can improve our situation indefinitely is arguably vague enough to allow numerous interpretations, all hinging on the definition of development.

We have been talking actively with our IDP partners from around the globe on this topic. We as designers, could just turn around and

blame clients for being overly greedy and forcing us to do things we didn't want to do, but the 'I voz only following orders' excuse has been used before and people didn't buy it back then either. An alternative is to get positively involved and be a force for change. It is also rapidly becoming the only alternative. Governments and big blue chips have started responding to this demand, either in the form of legislation or in the setting of new targets to lower their carbon footprint. This is another

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term that we will continue to hear more frequently as the humble carbon atom becomes vilified and our footprint signals not some imprint on an idyllic beach but our heavy flat footed impact, leaving only flattened earth and a squashed bug.

As I mentioned earlier, we have been talking with our global partners and we have recently started to highlight some of the innovations in the market, specifically in the area of product and packaging. During this period we researched our local markets to check for signs of this new thinking and it was interesting to note the companies involved and consider whether there was a common connection between their markets, their product or if there was an external factor such as legislation which had driven them to create a 'more' sustainable product.

First off the rank is WalMart, not because they created the first ripple but because they have the scale to make a wave. The wave being, 100 million Americans shop there every week producing a turnover of nearly 350 billion US\$ of which nearly 84 billion US\$ is profit. WalMart has now set a new target for itself and by direct relationship its suppliers. "Sustainability 360", is the new initiative and CEO Lee Scott, when referring to the scale

and impact of the plan states that it "takes in our entire company - our customer base, our supplier base, our associates, the products on our shelves, the communities we serve. And we believe every business can look at sustainability in this way. In fact, in light of current environmental trends, we believe they will, and soon.". One of the first measures that was quickly introduced off the back of this was the new packaging scorecard, where WalMart plan to work with suppliers to reduce packaging by five percent by 2013 - an effort equal to removing 213,000 trucks from the road, and saving approximately 324,000 tons of coal and 67 million gallons of diesel fuel per year. He also talked about the company's goal to develop partnerships that help suppliers run more sustainable businesses and factories.". Earlier I mentioned heroes and villains and WalMart have been badged as both. What they are definitely doing through their sheer scale is driving a new momentum for change and innovation in the way that we develop products for market.

WalMart are not just a force in the US, the ASDA supermarket group in the UK are part of WalMart and have also made some strong pledges regarding their own carbon footprint. The UK is a complicated and mature market, there is legislation driven nationally and



Starbucks have over 5000 coffee shops in 37 countries, so there's a lot of ground coffee that goes to waste in each store every day of the year.

That was until they hit on the initiative to repack the old coffee grounds into the original foil bags, and leave them on display for consumers to take home, free of charge.

The packs are re-labelled, explaining how to get the best from the bag: either feed nitrogen loving garden plants, or combine with other garden compost to balance the nutritional value.

also federally from Brussels, as part of the UK's membership of the European Union. The market is densely packed and competition is high.

ASDA's much bigger competitor is the Tesco group, who over the last few years have been under almost daily assault by the press and the government on a number of social issues. Their lack of concern for rural economies, their harsh treatment of farmers, bully boy tactics with suppliers, irresponsible labelling and merchandising, and by far my favourite, although not really relevant, is they were recently condemned by consumers, press and the UK government for selling a pole dancing doll.

With public opinion at such a low-ebb Tesco have countered by introducing a host of new measures designed to reduce their overall carbon footprint. This includes converting 75% their distribution fleet (1500 trucks) to a 50/50 biofuel blend, the creation of a new labelling system that will show whether a product has been air freighted and also the total carbon footprint of all products in store. These measures were also in response to the massive commitment made by Marks and Spencers, the pillar of the British retailing establishment, to become carbon neutral within 5 years.



Putting the Saint into St.Michael

Although now removed from M&S, the St.Michael sub-brand was used widely by M&S for decades. Over the last 10 or so years Marks & Spencers fortunes have wandered erratically as their position as the UK's favourite retailer has been undermined by increased competition from the supermarkets from below and from more specialist chain stores and the revival of

department stores. Over the last 18 months or so things have started to get a little brighter, but their new commitment to quality and more recently the environment has given a definite shine to the halo.

The new plan, the 'eco-plan', will look to make M&S completely carbon neutral within 5 years, will see the expansion of ethical trading, stop using landfill, introduce more recyclable products as well introduce more recycling points within store, utilise recycled PET bottles in polyester garments sold within store as well as work with and support suppliers who introduce more sustainable practices. Stuart Rose, the CEO of Marks & Spencers, when questioned over their new 'eco-plan' said, "We don't have all the answers but we are determined to work with our suppliers, partners and government to make this happen. We will become carbon neutral, only using offsetting as a last resort. We will ensure that none of our clothing products or packaging needs to be thrown away". He also voiced the opinion that "doing anything less is not an option."

M&S was advised on its new environmental policy by former Friends of the Earth director Jonathan Porritt, who referred to the plan as "raising the bar for everyone else - not just retailers but businesses in every sector."

From small acorns

A number of these innovations and practices have been used before but by small brands that have had as part of their DNA an ecological gene that has influenced all their products and their development. Patagonia, the outdoor fashion company, manufactures its fleece garments with recycled PET in the same manner as M&S. The use of hybrid or bio-fuel based vehicles is growing as is the use of easily recyclable materials. The seeds that these much smaller companies planted have no doubt influenced the thinking of these larger companies, and many of them are now reaping the rewards. AVEDA, the upmarket beauty brand has shown its altruistic side by promising to share any new sustainable practices with all, even competitors.



Aveda find beauty
in egg box pulp fibre

At the coalface

So with all this love in the air, do suppliers feel warm and cosy in the relationship or is the downward pressure from retailers giving a few bruises. The big promises of re-



Reducing cost and carbon footprint through clever use of design and materials.

tailers more often than not are directly connected to the nerve endings of suppliers who have to meet these new obligations. For the fortunate ones who bought the right equipment or who have more flex in their product the changes may not be too alarming, for those who need to re-invest in equipment, R&D or who get an air freight label tagged to their produce, the future may be more uncertain. The knock-on effect of some distant or home-grown legislation may very well hurt exporters as the logistics of moving goods across the planet raises its carbon

footprint beyond the acceptance levels of retailers and consumers. The introduction of specific taxation of higher footprint goods to contribute to carbon offsetting has also been discussed, so companies may need to adopt different strategies for import and export as well as considering what ingredient in their product make-up is contributing the most to their carbon footprint.

Packaging is already under the lens and the terms 'life cycle analysis', 'cradle to grave' and the slightly more bizarre

‘cradle to cradle’ will creep into the everyday jargon of product specifiers as it gains importance in the product make-up.

The culture of disposability and in-built obsolescence will need to be addressed, this is already the case in a number of countries with the ‘Extended Producer Responsibility’ model, which essentially means the polluter pays. This model puts the onus firmly on the manufacturer to either pay for or design out any environmental impact that their product may cause. This is also a model that we have used with a number of our clients where we have reduced the

raw material component, or improved the shape to reduce transport costs, or worked with sustainable materials to create a point of difference within the category, in all these cases it showed that there was a better solution.

Asking the right questions

At the beginning I put the position of design as that of accomplice, but the picture doesn’t have to remain that way. Design as an industry is fragmented across many professions, largely driven by market forces or in some cases like web design by new technology. At the moment UNO is a rare breed, we have a number of cross discipline

designers rather than a number of designers from different disciplines. The benefit of this approach, and forgive me if you pick up on some missionary zeal here, is that we are able to work across those boundaries to offer solutions at the start of the product development process. To us this is crucial as most of the key decisions such as the selection of the pack including material and shape are made. This is the point where good design input can deliver the most benefit, improving efficiency and reducing waste and encourage reuse, reduction and recycling. It is at that point in the product’s life cycle that decisions can be made to minimize the environmental impact of the product. The application of a nicely designed label at the end point can increase brand recognition, communicate product benefits, visual appeal etc, but as far as sustainability goes it is of less use than a plaster on a wound.

This is our channel for airing opinions; a few of ours, our International Design Partnership friends and if you’ve got some, yours. Our aim is to start a few fires, kick a few tired ideas into shape and stir up a healthy debate on what we see around us.

If you want to join in the debate or introduce a friend to the channel then you can mail us at the newsdesk@uno.net.au



One quarter of the people on earth do not have access to clean water. Belu was launched to clear things up. Every bottle you drink gives someone clean water for a month.” The Belu plastic bottle was the first PLA bottle to be produced commercially in the UK, and can be composted within 12 weeks.

The website www.belu.org takes consumers through the production and recycling process from cradle to cradle.

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