

Marketing And Happiness

BY JESVIER KAUR

Marketing has a brilliant track record for tapping into greed, envy and selfishness in order to motivate people to buy and consume more and more things. US professor of sociology Juliet Schor points out that, "Growing numbers of people now believe that holiday homes, swimming pools, travel abroad, really nice clothes, a lot of money and second cars are symbolic of a good life."

Yet, despite having more things, better health and higher pay, we are not any happier. There's considerable data in the US and the UK that shows happiness hasn't increased since the 1950s despite people having better living standards and higher incomes. Some people (though admittedly likely to be more educated and affluent) are questioning and rethinking what 'the good life' is, out of a concern that current and future generations' happiness is being compromised through the unsustainable burden human activity is placing on the planet.

Recent work (by UK professor of philosophy Kate Soper) shows these people gain greater happiness and satisfaction by making better choices for themselves and encouraging others to make better choices too. These people are not activists on the fringe; they're mainstream people fed-up with the treadmill of trying to keep up with ever-increasing living standards.

Maintaining those living standards is increasingly a source of anxiety and concern as they see its impact on the environment and how it's affecting their own and future generations' quality of life. So they're taking action by opting to cook instead of relying on fast-food, by walking or cycling instead of driving, and by buying organic, fair-trade and environmentally friendly products instead of highly processed and resource-intensive products. They're consuming differently now to gain more enjoyment for themselves in the present as well as protecting enjoyment for others in the future.

While there's no doubt many of us get pleasure, delight and even fulfilment out of buying things, there's a problem when it's at the expense of quality of life for ourselves, other species and the planet. Products ought to nurture life not suffocate life. There's a growing realisation that there's nothing pleasurable about the stress and pollution caused by traffic congestion; the exhaustion and health risks caused by increasingly longer hours in sedentary work; or even having what we eat and drink be policed through government regulation. US professor of marketing A. Fuat Firat sums it up well when he says, "...humanity has come to serve the economy instead of the economy being in the service of humanity".

That some people are rethinking the good life seems to me to be an opportunity for marketers and researchers to also question and rethink what makes 'good marketing'. Marketers and researchers connect with people in a way no one else does. We spend our time

digging around to find out what really matters to people. Marketing has a huge influence on shaping our attitudes and behaviour. It has the power to change how people consume by helping people make better choices in what they buy, use and dispose of. By supporting people to consume differently, marketing and research can help improve the quality of life for both current and future generations; and ultimately it can foster greater happiness and satisfaction. This means marketing and research can actually be a change agent.

Of course marketing and research can't do this in isolation of corporate culture and practice. The companies behind the big brands in particular also need to think differently. They have enormous reach and resources, and therefore have the power to initiate change. They decide what products to make available, how, where and to whom. Their messages heavily influence the choices people make.

We have to begin somewhere and I believe it's time for marketing and research to insist companies adapt and change. Those who say the low uptake of environmentally friendly products by mainstream purchasers indicates people aren't interested are missing the point. People want to make more responsible choices, however they're forced to work very hard and go out of their way to search and sift for products that are a better choice. It's the job of marketing and research to lead people there – to make it easier to make better choices. This, I suggest, leads to happier customers and ultimately 'good marketing'.

Perhaps a problem with marketing and research is that it is too introspective. To think differently marketers and researchers could consider the bigger picture and look beyond their own disciplines to the arts (rather than the sciences). It is, after all, a failure to consider the bigger picture that is compromising quality of life. New debate in philosophy and sociology, for example, has far more to offer towards what makes 'good marketing' than traditional marketing and research.

Reminding ourselves of what's important might also be useful. Social surveys identify the big seven factors affecting happiness. They are: family relationships, financial situation, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom and personal values. Interestingly, most of these factors focus on the quality of our relationships. We are inherently social beings. Instead of fostering greed, envy and selfishness, maybe marketing could foster care, trust and compassion.

'Good marketing' is about creating products that make people's lives better. This makes for happier customers and ultimately, I suggest, happier marketers and researchers.

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