

2005: THE CONSUMER CONTEXT

MYRA STARK HAS AUTHORED THE ANNUAL "STATE OF THE CONSUMER" REPORT FOR A DECADE. THIS IS AN ANNUAL COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF THOSE TRENDS THAT SIGNIFICANTLY IMPACT UPON CONSUMERS AND ARE SHAPING THE VALUES, BEHAVIOURS AND DECISION-MAKING IN MARKET.



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Myra is a trend pioneer, who has made a career of researching and decoding cultural movements in the wind, and translating them into stimulus for marketing, advertising and new product programs.

This report concludes with a framework for understanding the major tensions of our time. Myra 's framework helps identify springboards of opportunity, which capture hearts and minds, and deeper resonances which will stand the test of time.

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If you were to look up each of these terms, you would have a sense of what's been bubbling up in the culture this year. Putting us in touch with what's happening is just what the trend sites on the web do so well, sites such as Cool News, Daily Candy, Trendwatching.com, PSFK, Iconoculture, trendcentral, Coolhunting, Google Zeitgeist.

Daily, weekly, monthly they identify a trend, give it a catchy, memorable name-Lush Life, Online Oxygen, Master of the Youniverse-and trace it across categories. Add to these sites, the monthly and annual surveys of trends-DYG Scan, Roper, Yankelovich, Trend Wire, Trend Letter, Research Alert-and you begin to realize the overload of information on trends now available.

Make no mistake. Trend sites and surveys are an invaluable source of what's happening in the culture. When this series, *The State of the Consumer*, began in 1996, there were no trend sites and far fewer surveys. Identifying trends was much harder to do. Now the only problem is the increasingly familiar one of TMI/TLT, too much information and too little time to digest it.

What this annual *State of the Consumer* does, in contrast, is identify and analyze the themes and values behind the trends affecting the consumer. It gets at the big patterns, values and themes underlying the trends and suggests their implications for branding, marketing and communications innovation.

In this sense, this paper itself is an example of what is being called 'Curatorial Consumption'. It aims to edit or curate the onslaught of trend data, to synthesize the 'trends in the trends' and lay out those that are intensifying in our lives today.

One of the guiding principles behind this year's *State of the Consumer* is the physics of human behavior: for every emerging movement, there is inevitably a counter-movement, be it concurrent or sequential in arrival. There are opportunities at both poles. This year the forces of polarization are particularly intense, with heightened conflict between the forces for change and the pull of stability.

The rest of the paper considers the manifestations this year of these fundamental tensions in American culture.



THE PHYSICS OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

The physics of human behavior are such that not everyone interprets and reacts to the events of the world in the same way. For each action and reaction, there is an opposite reaction. Popularity breeds followers, and as new ideas are adopted in our culture, those who seek to distinguish themselves from their peers are already casting about for their means of differentiation. And so ideas and values swing from one end of the pendulum to the other--sometimes sequentially, at other times simultaneously--with each swing acting as a propeller to the future. As anybody who has ever rowed in a boat knows, you can only move forward by dipping your oars on both sides of the boat. Without the movement and its counter-movement, you will spin in circles. It is the same with human nature.

We begin this year with the increasing polarization of America, an issue the election highlighted. John Sperling's new book, *The Great Divide: Retro vs. Metro America* is one of many attempts to make sense of what's being called "the culture wars." The divide is so great, Sperling writes, that "Americans live in two worlds. . . . Two nations, one rooted in the past, and one modern and focused on the future."

Certainly the evidence of the polarization about moral values is clearly reflected in the issues that divide the country: the place of religion in civic life, abortion, gay marriage, the use of stem cells in research, and the importance of so-called traditional values in general. DYG data reveals an almost 50/50 split between believers in an absolute morality and those who believe moral standards must be relative.

This division is also evident in consumption patterns: the popularity of the Hummer as well as hybrid cars like the Prius, for example. The presence of ethical and socially responsible investment funds co-exist with "vice funds" which invest in tobacco, alcohol and guns.

This division between traditionalists and modernists, between beliefs in equality, personal freedom and self-fulfillment versus beliefs in authority, filial obedience and self-discipline is not, of course, confined to America. It is, in fact, being played out in the world at large.

As a result of the combined forces of economic globalism and technological

interconnectedness, change is sweeping the world. For many people in less developed countries, cultural modernization is a threat. "A global atmosphere," writes Iconoculture, "of social and cultural uneasiness is emerging as indigenous institutions, rituals, customs and beliefs are challenged."



OUTLOOK: LOOKOUT

The Forces for Change vs. the Pull of the Past

We all share the world we live in and the events that play out before us. Yet, people perceive the world and react to their view of the world in different ways, embracing the forces of change, or retreating to stability and the pull of the past.

When people are asked what they are concerned about, the same issues appear in survey after survey: the war, terrorism, the economy, the rising cost of health care, the state of "moral values" in this country (increasingly over the past decade) and crime (decreasingly over the last few years).

According to Roper and DYG, fears around terrorism eased somewhat in 2004. The DYG Scan proclaimed that "the year of fear is over" for consumers, although Americans still recognize that the world has become a much more dangerous place than it was a few years ago. While uncertainty connected with the threat of terrorism and the search for security are still present in the consumer's mind, Roper's *Public Pulse* finds that "the ongoing threat of terrorism" is becoming "something of a routine." It's not that has gone away; rather we are learning to live with it.

Consumer confidence about the economy rises and falls: is the recovery a real recovery or a jobless recovery? Concerns about job losses and outsourcing have risen this year; inflation is beginning to appear on the consumer's horizon. The sharp rises in health care costs are a major concern.

Two issues that emerged over the past years are also high on the list of consumer concerns: identity theft and what's being called the "epidemic" of obesity, particularly among children.

Melting Pot Lifestyles

To understand this polarization we have to consider the incontrovertible evidence that America is becoming a diverse society. Founded on the premise of equal opportunity for all, our very values have encouraged a common ambition, regardless of ethnicity, race or religion. Ethnic diversity--the biggest demographic trend of all in America today--as well as diversity in family structure, and in gender are the norm today. This cultural *mélange* is a growing fact in most of the developed regions of the world.

Sam Roberts' book, *Who We Are Now : The Changing Face of America in the Twenty-First Century*, chronicles this growing diversity. We're all aware of the multiculturalism of America , the explosive growth of Hispanics for example. Roberts traces similar diversity in changing family structure such as the fact that in 1960, 88% of children lived with both their natural parents, now only 68% do. The growth and acceptance of single parent households is another example.

What has happened along with the increasing diversity is that attitudes have

been slowly changing as well. A majority of the country-59%--now believes "having greater diversity of lifestyles and expressions" is a good thing. Nilewide, the newsletter of marketing, research and advertising analysis, recounts that global brands have a particular role to play at this time. "Global brands can be part of a conversation among people of different nations due to their shared symbolism." Such brands can be powerful forces for "accommodation."

For instance, 55% of Americans are more accepting of gay relationships than a decade ago, if not same sex marriage. In 1986 only 26% felt homosexual relationships were acceptable; the figure is much higher now and television shows such as *Will & Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, *The L Factor*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* attest to this tolerance as does the spread of adoptions by gay parents.

Traditional Anchors

Yet diversity represents change and Roper data tells us that one half of the country feels it's difficult to keep up with the amount and pace of change happening in America. Certainly one pattern these issues form is that of a division between traditionalists and modernists. Almost half-48% of Americans-- according to DYG, want "a return to more traditional principles and old-fashioned lifestyles."

In spite of the reality of a more inclusive and diverse society, the country now contains traditionalists who feel too much change is taking place and look back to traditional ways for guidance and inspiration

The whole Retro trend is, of course, an attempt to anchor one's self, to root one's self with the community of the past. This year has seen the growth of scrapbook stores, the return of classic cocktails, the popularity of vintage sneakers and heritage tourism. Civil rights tourism and heritage tourism generally have been particularly strong this year. It is a sign of the times that American Express is behind the drive to restore and preserve the lunch counter where the civil rights movement began.

CONSPICUOUS VS. CONSCIENTIOUS CONSUMPTION

The Things of This World and the Claims of the Inner World

One of the patterns that characterize the consumer world of 2005 is the tension between the pull of the things of this world and the claims of the inner world. This tension has been characteristic of America since the founding of the country, when settlers were drawn both by the search for religious freedom as well as the desire for success in the new world.

What's happening today is the intensification of both these claims.

The Things of This World

While no one could deny that America is a consumption society, a number of recent books place consumerism at the heart of American culture from the earliest days. T.H. Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* claims that the colonists' experience as consumers was crucial in the development of "new and effective forms of

social action" that led to the revolution.

The lure of the things of this world has been intensified by a number of factors, chiefly the explosion of choice and the upscaling of America .

The anthropologist, Grant McCracken, has built his trilogy of books- *Plenitude*, *Transformation* and *Commotion* -around the "constant difference making" that has been characteristic of America since the '50s. He calls this "plenitude," and sees it as the defining feature of the consumer world.

Instead of three network channels, the average home has over 100. Instead of just a few shampoo brands, there are hundreds. And the "difference making" never stops: first herb tea, then green tea, now white tea.

The cable shopping channels as well as the shopping magazines, *Lucky* and *Cargo* for men testify to the appeal of this explosion of choice.

This abundance has, of course, strengthened the consumer's pleasure in the things of this world while, at the same time, turned choice itself into a problem. A trend this year is the concern with managing choice so it doesn't overwhelm-curated or edited choice. The trend is reflected in the marketing literature: Gregg Easterbrook's *The Paradox of Plenty* deals with the issue of whether choice actually brings happiness.

There are now more people with more money in America . Levels of affluence rose in this country throughout the 70's and 80's. The percentage of the population in the U.S. earning between \$60,000 and \$200,000 doubled in the last thirty years.

The result that has been what the *Harvard Business Review* in "Selling to the Moneyed Masses," called a "new mass market"-the affluent market. "Mass affluence is upon us," says the trend newsletter, *Growth Strategies* . A new book, *Mass Affluence* , by Nunes and Johnson, considers the implications of this redistribution in U.S. income, a result of rising incomes and the two-income family. Yes, the middle is disappearing and the gap between haves and have-nots getting wider, but a whole new affluent market has opened up.

Mass affluence is not only affecting the new class, but has seized the imagination of consumers as a whole. America has been the upscaled, luxury democratized.

So many of the trends this year across categories are a result of this luxury fever:

- Designer, high fashion or premium tier food. The Food Channel's newsletter, *TrendWire*, highlighted the growth of gourmet takeout and personal cooks this year;
- Excess or the bigness trend. Outsize houses, outsize cars, outsize luxury appliances for the home; outsize jewelry -bling rings, watches encrusted with diamonds, "jean jewelry," piling on of "grandmother jewelry" brooches, the return of fur. This year, according to an article in *The New York Times*, has also witnessed the emergence of luxury gift wrap, outsize packages, expensively wrapped. A recent ad for Barney's reads: "Gobs of

Gold, Mounds of Jewels;"

- The sub-premium niche or the Starbucks phenomenon. Affordable luxury items in all categories: "bridge" lines in apparel, buying fractional shares in a plane, time share vacations, premium prices for the coffee experience.

Intensification of acquisition marks America today, but the forces pulling consumers in the opposite direction are also growing in intensity and mainstream presence.



Claims of the Inner World

Many of the other major trends characteristic of consumer life today are also a consequence of this search for a life with meaning: the emphasis on family and relationships, the mainstreaming of spirituality, the concern with moral issues, simplification.

The importance of family and relationships built all through the 90's and intensified after 9/11. The value of balance—having time for family and relationships—has become a trend of Gen X men as well as women in general over the past few years. The extension inclusion of pets as family is another manifestation of the desire for emotional connection through family. This year has seen Doggie and Me Yoga classes, for example, as well as luxury spas for pets.

The mainstreaming of the Simplicity movement is another example of the claims of the inner world. The success of the magazine, *Real Simple*, the popularity of the *Simple Abundance* series of books testify to the hold of this trend toward paring life down to the essentials.

Another indication of this search is the growth of both religion and spirituality in America today. Roper goes so far as to label this movement a "religious revival" and its data supports the conclusion that "religion and spirituality are mainstream activities in America ."

Of course America has always been the most religious of all western democracies: 79% of Americans declare that they believe in God. However, there is much evidence to support the mainstreaming of this trend during the year: the strength of the religious evangelical vote in the election, what *Research Alert* calls the mainstream retailing of religious and Christian books, the publication of *Glorious Appearing* this year, the latest in the *Left Behind* series, the presence on the best seller lists of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, and *The DaVinci Code*, Mel Gibson's movie, the proliferation of religious portals on the Internet.

Even games have been affected by what DYG calls "conspicuous religiosity": the new Trivia game is called Do You Know Your Bible? Comic books, too, have appeared this year with religious themes embedded in contemporary stories. This year has also seen Ultimate Christian Wrestling in which wrestling alternates with group prayer.

While religious attendance may not have risen significantly, spirituality is also, as Roper claims, a mainstream activity. The American brand of mix-and-match spirituality, combining some traditional religious beliefs with elements

of eastern beliefs in meditation, yoga, and centering, is intensifying as the popularity of Oprah's magazine testifies. Storefronts advertising spiritual healing services have appeared in American cities such as Boston this year.

Another indication is the emphasis on morality and ethics. *The Futurist* comments that "more and more conversations are taking place about values." The growing criticism of unethical company practices, the demand for transparency and accountability, the appearance of columns such as The Ethicist in *The New York Times* continue to be important this year as is the demand that companies be socially responsible citizens. *The New York Times* recently highlighted on the first page the important role that cause marketing is playing this year in retail. Ethno-chic clothing which uses sustainable ingredients is a current example of social consciousness at work in the apparel category.

Although there are some consumers who are completely anti-consumption and others totally deaf to the claims of the spirit, most consumers try to accommodate both aspects in their lives. Brands do not, therefore, have to choose sides on this tension. Rather they must acknowledge the balancing act that is characteristic of consumers today.

The emergence of the values of style and design in America over the last few years is an indication of how consumers manage to accommodate both sides of the tension. Virginia Postrel claims in her book, *The Substance of Style*, that it's not only the abundance of stuff that marks contemporary life, but it's the abundance of well-designed, aesthetically pleasing stuff that is clearly a reflection of the upscaling of America.

Consumers have become open to aesthetic claims—to color, to fluid form, to objects that convey warmth and emotion and carry nostalgia. These are claims of the inner world expressed through material objects. *American Demographics* says, "It hardly takes a futurist to see that design has (re) emerged as a major force in American consumers' lives." Style, *The New York Times* points out, "has become so important it is now considered a social value." The Institute for the Future calls style and design a prime "driver of economic growth."

Another example of how consumers balance these opposing claims lies in the redefinition of luxury that is taking place today. *Trading Up: The New American Luxury*, by Silverstein, Fiske and Butman, identifies the phenomenon of consumers trading up or spending more on luxury goods in one category even if they have to sacrifice in another. What's behind this phenomenon, the authors claim, is that consumers are now looking to luxury items for emotionally satisfying experiences.

Style/ design are crossover values, pointing to a way that consumers can satisfy the claims of the world and the claims of the spirit. Similarly the redefinition of luxury infuses the things of this world with the claims of the inner world. Brands can take a lesson in how they can help consumers live in the intersection, accommodating both claims.

LEADING WITH OUR HEARTS AND HEADS **Emotion and Collaboration vs. Logic and Control**

Emotion and Collaboration

The social research firms all agree that Americans are searching for a more meaningful life than one defined solely by acquiring the things of this world. They are seeking a higher level of emotional connection than a life defined by materialism alone can provide.

In the travel category, for instance, the emphasis on the experiential is behind the growth of adventure travel, learning vacations, volunteer vacations, gourmet retreats, food tourism and agritourism..

In 2002, Professor Richard Florida identified what he termed a new class-the Creative Class. It is made up of people who work with ideas and create content: writers, scientists, engineers and architects, among others, amounting to about 38 million people or more than 30% of the workforce in America . Its values include creativity, individuality, self-expression, diversity and an experiential lifestyle. This class is driving one of the trends in America today-- the shift from the acquisitive to the experiential-that is a result of this yearning for meaningful emotional connection.

Leading with our Heads

This approach has emerged in response to the increasing complexity and uncertainty of the world as well as to the proliferation of choices in every area of consumer life. It puts a premium on simplifying in order to reach a decision and move forward. It speaks to the consumer desire for control. It values certainty and forcefulness, even at the cost of closing options. It's all about outcome, it's a 'let's just do it' approach.

Perhaps the clearest example this year is Donald Trump on *The Apprentice* saying, "You're fired."

In the retail world, there is the rise of stores like Bed, Bath and Beyond or Home Depot which bring together all available choices in a category in one location in order to simplify the act of shopping.

Home Depot is trying the same approach in order to enter the real estate market. It offers a DIY version of selling your house and dispensing with the complexities of a broker. For \$12.95 you can buy a sign for your front yard and a photo and listing for the current five million users of Owners.com.

ME VS. WE

The Individual vs. the Group

The tension most central to American culture is that between the desires of the individual and the demands of society. Commentators on America from Alexis de Tocqueville in the early days of the Republic or Frederick Jackson Turner on the frontier to sociologists like David Reisman in *The Lonely Crowd* or, more recently, Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone*, have seen both the drive for self-reliance and the need to connect with others as motivating forces in American life.

This tension is being redefined in 2005 by the trend most responsible for the accelerating change occurring in our society: technology. We are at the beginning of a period when technology is both enhancing the power of the

individual and facilitating the interactions between people.



The Quest for Individuality

The great benefit technology is placing in the hands of the individual is control. People are trying to exert control over all areas of their lives from social morality to health and emotional well being to work. Iconoculture highlights a trend it calls "Control Freak" and finds "consumers on the prowl for total control of all aspects of their lives-from the environment to safety to wellbeing." Similarly, PSFK has identified a trend it calls IDividualism

While the need for control is basic to human beings, it has intensified because of many factors: 9/11 showed Americans how little control they have over their safety and increased the desire to take charge over those parts of their lives which they could; the erosion of trust over the past two decades in institutions, government and business, most recently in pharmaceutical companies with the withdrawal of Vioxx and Celebrex; the withdrawal of services as business increasingly threw consumers on their own-ATMs instead of tellers, voice mail and PCs instead of secretaries, 401Ks instead of pension plans

At the same time, technology was increasingly placing control in the hands of consumers. The Internet delivered the ability to find and retrieve vast amounts of information and empowered individuals to make their voices heard on web sites and blogs. Google's decision this year to digitize the volumes of the Oxford library points to a future of even more control for individuals. In an article in *Forbes*, Kai-Ichi Enoki, one of the pioneers of the mobile web, looks forward to the centralization of power of voice and data and text in mobile phones and sees them "as personal controllers for anything humans come in contact with."

Empowerment through technology taps into that most American of myths: the belief that individuals can change their lives. It is, of course, a particularly potent myth for a country of immigrants.

J.Walker Smith of Yankelovich Partners writes "we have become a self-inventive society where people believe they can be whatever they want to. People now take for granted that if and when they want power or control, they are entitled to it."

The hero of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* created his identity through things like his expensive clothing and his home on the waterfront of Long Island. Brands have always borrowed the power of this myth to reach consumers who then use brands to create the self. This myth is behind the makeover shows on television such as *Trading Places* or, this year's clean' shows-*Clean House*, *Clean Sweep*, *Mission Organization*-appearing on cable.

However it is the surgical makeover shows like *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* that reveal most clearly how technology is empowering consumers to change themselves.

Sam Hill in his book on trends, *60 Trends in 60 Minutes*, calls this Bionicism-replacing body parts with artificial one: knees, hips, shoulders, heart valves, tooth implants, breast implants, pacemakers. Bionics draws on biological, electronic and mechanical systems to enhance human performance. Of

course the drugs that also enhance performance such as Viagra or Provigil, the new pill that counteracts the need to sleep, are also ways to empower individuals. Bionicism blurs the distinction between human beings and artificial ones.

Other trends in this pattern of individual empowerment that are prominent this year are Smart Objects, Co-creation and Customization.

Smart Objects -the enhancement of human ability delivered by intelligent machines. Smart cars and smart appliances are already on the road and in kitchens. This year has seen:

--Orvis's line of clothing called Buzz Off which gives the wearer the power to repel insects. The technology behind this kind of smart clothing is already used by pants manufacturers to create stain repellent clothing; around the corner is intelligent clothing that can monitor health and deliver data on heart functioning. New Zealand has made a smart wool that can heat or cool the body.

--A new caller ID phone with photographs of the person calling which is used to enhance the memories of people with memory loss, as is a pill box that alerts the user when it is time to take medication (AARP Bulletin).

-- Adidas' smart shoe that automatically adjusts to an individual's weight, speed and the running surface.

-- An augmented bar code in supermarkets that gives customers the ability to track the history of the food item back to its origins and a high-tech leg brace boot called Bleex which enables people to lift extremely heavy loads (*The New York Times*).

-- Smart fruit that can monitor ripeness and spoilage is around the corner.

Co-creation. Technology is making it easy for people to express themselves, to create content.

--Trendwatching identifies a trend it calls Generation C for content-the explosion of content on the web generated by consumers. The Pew Internet and American Life Project notes that 44% of US adult internet users have created content for the online world in the form of posting pictures, creating websites, writing or responding to blogs.

- Easy content creating tools gave consumers this year the ability to create political ads and easily post them on the web.

--At Trekshare.com travelers post opinions on the travel site as they can at recipes and bookstore sites.

Charles Leadbeater's book, *The Pro-Am Revolution* emphasizes how accessible and inexpensive technology has led to the growth of pro-ams, professional amateurs. The Internet has permitted amateurs to train themselves and collaborate with people all over the globe, achieving professional expertise (*The New York Times*).

Customization -putting one's unique, personal stamp on a product, a badge

of one's own individuality.

--It's easiest to see this in clothing-customizing jeans using a Land's End kit or wearing little animal dolls on handbags. But customization goes far beyond apparel: from customizing the ring on a mobile phone to customizing education through Home Schooling or charter schools.

--The iPod, increases the control of what music an individual can hear when and where.



The Pull toward Group Identification

The need to connect with others, to belong, is the other side of this tension. Many factors increased the intensity of this need. The events of 9/11 shocked people into realizing the importance of relationships with family and friends, but all through the '90s the great demographic shift was taking place that increased the number of single households compared to those married with children. Three-quarters of adults were married thirty years ago; now only just half are (*60 Trends in 60 Minutes*). In addition, the search for a meaningful life also focused people on relationships with others.

In his new book, *The Trend Commandments* , Larry Samuels traces some of the contemporary manifestations of this yearning for community: the growth of minor league baseball and family reunions, public art, particularly the figures of horses or cows painted by artists and sold for charity, the one book/one city movement when a community reads and comes together to discuss the same book. What we are experiencing, Samuels writes, is "a renewed celebration of public life and spirit."

However, communications technology, with the ability to connect with anyone, anywhere, at any time, has facilitated the consumer's ability to satisfy a primal need for connection and belonging. Sam Hill, in *60 Trends in 60 Minutes*, calls interconnectedness "the single most important trend" of our time.

Trendwatching labels this trend Online Oxygen-the online universe becoming a necessity of life. Access this year became easier from more places outside the home and office with the growth of "hot spots," WIFI enabled connections in airports and cafes and bookstores. One third of all Americans online now have a fast connection, a 50% increase in one year.

Internet networking facilitating connections also exploded this year: Friendster, MeetUp, Orkut, Tribe.net, all the electronic dating services, blogs and online communities grew up around special interests of all sorts.. Instant Messaging among the young is now so popular it has its own form of Spam-Spim.

Sony's Everquest2 brings millions of players together in an online fantasy world. MoSoSo (Mobile Social Softwear) connects people through their phones using a location-based software so friends always know where others are.

Research interest in the networks we create on and off line has led to the prominence of Social Network analysis this year. Recent books such as *The*

Wisdom of Crowds and Howard Rheingold's, *Smart Mobs*, have focused on the need for marketing and advertising to depart radically from their concentration on individuals and look at the importance of tribes and of word of mouth, the way tribes communicate.

There's a lot written about the "new consumer" and the new medium. What's new about the "new consumer" is the degree to which technology empowers and enhances, as well as the consumer's interest in connectedness. The new medium in which to connect is, of course, the online universe. This set of factors demands that brands forge a new relationship with their consumers based on cooperation, conversation and community.

J. Walker Smith of Yankelovich Partners calls this new model "concurrency marketing," in his new book, *Coming to Concurrency: Addressable Attitudes and the New Model for Marketing Productivity*. He argues that marketers "must align their interests with these now independent consumers."

Cooperation between brand and consumer, conversations between the two, the formation of communities of users around the brand, all suggest new roles for brands and new stories about themselves for brands to tell.

One certainly is the brand as an avenue of learning, an information provider and editor/curator.

Another is positioning the brand as a smart object, focusing on the ways in which the intelligence in the brand enhances consumer control. Closely related is how the brand can aid in self-creation.

Another is allowing both the brand and the consumer to be co-creators. To do so requires that brands recognize how the value of self-reliance has been transformed by technology. This means opening the brand up, letting consumers customize and create content.

Still another is the brand as community facilitator. People choose brands because they wish to make statements about themselves but a critical part of that statement is the brand community in which they place themselves. Brands acting as facilitators help open communication and access to others in the brand community.



"BRANDS AREN'T SIMPLY IN THE CULTURE, THEY ARE THE CULTURE"

The implications of this polarization for brands are potentially sweeping. As Andrew Zolli writes in "Rip, Mix, Brand," an article in *American Demographics*, brands "aren't simply in the culture, they are the culture." As such, how could they not reflect this basic division showing up throughout our culture?

Zolli writes that brands have assumed a new role in our culture: no longer do they just represent economic value, we now expect them to be "stewards of human meaning," as well. How else explain the escalating public demand for corporations to be responsible citizens? If brands are, as he claims, one of the "central meaning-making institutions in many people's lives," why should they remain unaffected by the culture wars?

In a *Fast Company* article, "The Good Brand," Linda Tischler writes:

Perhaps the most significant and ominous development in recent branding history is the emergence of Mecca-Cola, the ideologically-driven brain child of rabidly anti-Zionist French entrepreneur Tawfik Mathlou. The tag line in ads for the Cola is "No more drinking stupid, drink with commitment."

Brands do both reflect and create cultural values. And they make statements-cultural, social and in a time like this, political statements about their users. Differentiation based on these values actually will perform a kind of buffer against competitive activity, insulating your users by providing them with the values they seek even if the performance is not measurably differentiated.



PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: A FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE

Each movement and its counter-movement stem from a fundamental tension at the heart of human behavior, and because of this they have rich potential as springboards for new brands, products, marketing programs and communications strategies, each desiring to capture the hearts and minds of the population today, as well as have the strong underpinning to resonate deeply with people for years to come.

These tensions promise to play a more prominent role in the year or two ahead.

- The forces for change vs. the pull of the past.
- The pull of the material things of this world vs. the claims of the inner world.
- The pull between logic and control vs. emotion and collaboration to light the way ahead.
- The pull of one's own individuality vs. the pull of a group identification and mores.

**Myra Stark
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