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Ed Gillespie, creative director and co-founder of Futerra

What This Means to Your Brand

With everything changing, is it time for brands to panic? Not at all – this change is an opportunity to be creative, to engage with consumers and show them the value of your product or service.

The key is to anticipate legislation and social movement, and to proactively create solutions to society’s and the government’s concerns. Take retailer John Lewis’s reworking of the wartime Make Do and Mend guide – the new edition, released this summer, engages with the government’s and consumers’ environment-related and recession-fuelled worries on waste. As John Lewis’s target customers ‘weave thrift with quality on a daily basis’, says managing director Andy Street, the hope is that they will come to the high-street favourite for quality once they’ve saved money elsewhere. The New Prohibition Era doesn’t just usher in a chance to communicate differently with consumers in an intelligent way. It’s also a time to design better goods that appeal to this new mindset.

For brands to succeed in this new world order, they will have to become eco, ethical and wellness champions. Brands should also put a significant amount of time and consideration into their civic credentials – and be seen to do so. The result should be a clear, defined CSR standpoint.

‘Like Marks & Spencer’s Plan A, the point is to have a position – to be bold and to say what you stand for,’ Hunter says. This should then be communicated effectively and transparently through clear labelling. It should be a rallying cry that informs and inspires greater efficiency, from shop floor assistants to store design, from logistics to working practices.

This must extend from energy efficiency to material efficiency. Avoid being, as Philippe Starck recently described himself, a ‘producer of materiality’, by reducing packaging, reusing and retrofitting; where possible, eliminate physical products entirely. Provide service-led solutions rather than products.

Embrace labelling. Give consumers the social value and eco-prestige they crave. Help consumers make easy decisions, as Molson Coors has done with its 99-calorie bottles of Carling lager and its single-unit bottles of C2. The drive towards eco-friendliness shouldn’t be presented as unsexy or purely about the environment. Take Yello Strom’s savings meter: it is deliberately positioned as a way for savvy consumers to combat high energy costs; the ecological benefits are hardly mentioned. Take Tesla Motors, which has shown that electric vehicles don’t have to be boring.

‘Helping sustainability shouldn’t be a one-dimensional, morally correct experience,’ says Ed Gillespie, creative director and co-founder of Futerra, a communications agency specialising in sustainability. ‘It should be experientially exciting and socially glamorous.’ It can even be artistic and poetic. After US president Barack Obama’s legislation restricting full-colour advertising for cigarettes, Pentagram partner D. J. Stout produced cigarette packet designs that embraced the aesthetic value of black and white text and imagery. Instead of seeing the prohibition as a straitjacket, Stout saw it as an opportunistic guideline.

Brands that acknowledge the social and environmental concerns of consumers today, and address these in an economically compelling, solution-oriented package will, we believe, be seen as creative and desirable. Those brands will thrive in the New Prohibition Era.