

If We Choose to Believe What Emerson Didn't Say, Then We're All Doomed

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There's an interesting work of fiction to be written quite soon. Indeed, it's probably in draft already. It will chronicle, with all the imagination and persuasiveness of a George Orwell, the birth and turbulent development of The New Age of Abstinence.

Chapter I introduces us to a world crudely comprised of two blocs: economies that have long enjoyed the benefits of cheap energy and become addicted to them; and economies that are poised to enjoy those benefits for the first time and are damned if they're going to be denied them now. Neither bloc is in the mood for self-restraint.

For at least two hundred years, economic growth has been universally worshipped; in either practice or prospect. In their election manifestos, governments have boasted of their national growth rates as evidence of their competence to govern. A million private sector companies have set annual growth targets and celebrated their attainment. The only way to achieve such targets is through the encouragement of heedless consumer consumption: more people to consume and more consumption per person. Marketing has become an honoured discipline. Growth is good.

Such growth has suited the fortunate citizens well enough. Rising incomes have meant more independence, more choice, more comfort, less toil. There is universal expectation that such growth will continue indefinitely. Ever improving standards of living have become not just an aspiration but a right.

It's against this background, slowly and reluctantly, that world governments finally acknowledge the inevitability of fossil fuel exhaustion and the cataclysmic effects of climate change.

They also wake up to their responsibility to govern. Vast changes in human behaviour are urgently required. Governments everywhere on the bridge of state ring their alarms and call down to their engine rooms: "Hard Astern!" Consumption must be thrown into reverse gear.

A massive propaganda campaign is clearly called for. Encouragingly, in poll after poll, respondents declare themselves eager to live greener, leaner lives. Yet few actually do. When individual effect is puny and immeasurable, why, people ask themselves, should they voluntarily deprive themselves of all that they hold most precious: travel, choice, comfort and independence? So they don't. And the needle on the world's fuel tank jerks another notch downwards.

With persuasion having failed, coercion becomes inevitable: "It's for their own good, you know." A New Age of Abstinence is declared – to be enforced by a great raft of new legislation.

Predictably enough, the new laws are greeted by a new lawlessness. Selfishness becomes pandemic. The rich, as ever, find ways to live as they have always lived. Armed guards protect them from the frantic poor. As world populations multiply and water levels mount, the landmass shrinks: now bitterly competed for by food and agrofuels, each claiming more of the dwindling whole. Civil wars spread like bush fires. Day by day, as temperatures and sea levels rise, supplies of food and fuel continue to contract. The entire world is playing musical chairs. Soon there will just be the one chair left – and then the music will stop for good.

The End

The scary thing about this melodramatic scenario is that, although we remain comfortably confident it won't turn out like that, it doesn't unduly strain credulity. Given the facts that are now almost universally accepted, it could indeed turn out a bit like that. If demand continues to increase for the supply of rapidly dwindling and irreplaceable commodities, some parts of this fictional story seem bound to become reality. We may choose to disagree about when – but whether seems less and less a debatable issue.

Somehow, perpetual growth and heedless personal consumption will have to be re-examined and repositioned. And so will the function and practice of marketing.

Marketing, understandably, is seen as being indissolubly linked to the encouragement of consumption: after all, that's what almost all marketing effort has been directed towards. Virtually every marketing plan the world has ever approved contains growth targets: more volume, more share, more profit, more consumers, more consumption.

And it's because marketing is seen as synonymous with the encouragement of consumption, much of it increasingly thought to be improvident, that marketing could well be destined to become the villain of this story. Take the parallel case of juvenile obesity: a serious problem in many of the more developed nations. Though the causes are widely recognised to be multiple and complex, the obvious and immediate culprit to identify is marketing. So the banning of advertising of high-fat foods is the obvious and immediate step to take.

What we think

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Faced with the need to curb consumption, it would be politically very tempting for governments to demonstrate their decisiveness by first demonising and then emasculating marketing. There aren't a lot of votes in marketing and if you don't think about it too deeply, it seems to make sense.

In fact, of course, to penalise marketing through taxation or legislation would be not only wrong-headed; it would also compound our problems. It may seem perverse; but despite the fact that the great gods of growth and consumption are about to be challenged as never before, we're also going to need marketing as never before. It will just demand a greatly improved understanding of what marketing is and what marketing can do.

There can surely be no doubt of the need for wholesale changes in people's attitudes and behaviour. In our fictional fantasy, persuasion failed; in real life, it can't be allowed to. People's behaviour will change not because we're instructed to change but because we choose to change. And we'll choose to change only when we're encouraged to see, not just the penalties of failing to change but an alternative way of doing things that offers more than mere survival.

Marketing's proven value in stimulating invention has been allowed to fade from general consciousness. It urgently needs to be revived. That torrent of invention that first created the Industrial Revolution and then sprang from it now needs to be matched and then surpassed. With any luck, it's begun already. The human ingenuity that inadvertently created the mess we're in will have to get us out of it. And proper marketing will be essential both in creating the demand and spreading the word.

Ralph Waldo Emerson is widely believed to have said, "If a man write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap, tho' he build his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door." As it happens, there's absolutely no direct evidence that Emerson ever said such a thing – which is just as well since it's self-evident rubbish.

For the inventor of the better mousetrap, if both he and the world are to benefit from that invention, it needs to become known; its existence and its advantages need to be brought, quickly and persuasively, to the world's attention.

When inventive people know that there's a vast latent demand for new things; and when they know that, once they've been invented the world can be told about those things, they'll be inspired to invent. And just as importantly, companies and investors will be encouraged to invest. Who's going to invest in a new mousetrap (or a revolutionary new storage system for electricity) that's destined to remain forever undiscovered in the depths of a wood?

Most of the things that need to be invented probably haven't even been identified yet. The only certainty is that there will be thousands of them – and they'll range from the apparently trivial to the unimaginably immense. More attractive low-energy light bulbs will have their place; and so, with luck, will an affordable, functioning hydrogen fuel cell.

Meanwhile, a combination of fiscal incentives and disincentives, responsible reporting, and the occasional, inevitable man-induced human disaster will gradually nudge that mysterious consensus called public opinion into thinking quite differently about growth and consumption. As always, attitude change and behavioural change will occur not sequentially but in parallel. So those new inventions, and those new developments of existing technologies, as one by one they're revealed and promoted, should find an increasingly receptive public.

Nobody knows how much time we still have but few seem to think it's anything but urgent. And one thing we know about good marketing and communications is that they can greatly accelerate the pace of change.

If the pessimists are right, at least that's something to be grateful for. ■

