

# Purpose to Power

**I**t seems that the economy has created something of a split personality in the American consumer. On the one hand, everyone is hunkering down, in survival mode, trying to hang onto their jobs and spend as little money as possible on as few items as possible.

Most marketers have moved quickly to align themselves and their brands accordingly, slashing prices and offering all kinds of incentives to get people to spend what little money they have.

On the other hand, there seems to be a countervailing trend at work, as well. Because people have less money to spend on material things, they are re-discovering their interest in finding a higher purpose in their lives.

In some ways, Barack Obama's election mirrors this dichotomy. There is little question but that the economic collapse sealed his victory. But it's important to remember that before he was embraced as America's economic savior, Barack Obama was already winning the election as an agent of change.

Obama defined "change" in various ways during the campaign, but he made the concept of "community service" a key part of his message. This made sense for him personally because he got his start in public service as a community organizer. But the fact that this idea resonated with so many voters suggests that they were also seeking greater purpose in their lives. In this way, Obama wasn't creating a vision of "change" as much as he was reflecting it.

Now that he's president, Obama has moved swiftly on both fronts. He's created an economic stimulus program intended to provide basic security for the American people. He's also expanding AmeriCorps

and the Peace Corps to include a Classroom Corps to help underserved schools and a Health Corps to serve in the nation's clinics and hospitals, for example.

## THE VALUE OF VALUES

Time will tell whether the Obama agenda succeeds, but it's interesting that he is pursuing both basic economy security and higher purpose simultaneously in the public sector because we are not seeing a comparable kind of initiative in the private sector. In fact, we're often seeing just the opposite.

Too many brands have succumbed to the short-sighted view that all anyone really cares about is a low price. While it's true that everyone appreciates a good deal, it's just as true that, by itself, a low price isn't very satisfying. Usually it means some trade-off on quality, convenience and service.

In some cases the low price comes with a dose of deception, such as when ingredients are cheapened or less product is packed into the same-sized box, at the same price (or higher). In other cases it lays bare the reality that the product was over-priced to begin with, a truth that ultimately breaks whatever bond of trust might have existed between the brand and the consumer.

However, other brands are succeeding by taking it up a notch or two. As noted in this issue of the *Hub*, McDonald's is winning by returning to its founding principles of quality, cleanliness, service and value.

The McDonald's example actually pre-dates the current economic circumstances, having been in the works for about six years now. While the success is laudable, it still falls far short of truly reaching consumers at a higher level and adding meaning and purpose to their lives.

At least McDonald's hasn't followed Pepsi's example, which is all about co-opting the Obama

Serving your  
consumers  
means reaching  
for higher  
ground.

image and identity while completely ignoring the substance of his message. There's been a lot of press about Pepsi's new logo, which bears a striking resemblance to the Obama campaign logo.

Pepsi has played this resemblance to a fare thee well—blanketing Washington D.C. during the Inauguration with billboards and distributing backpacks, hats and jackets with their new logo and the message, “Yes You Can.” This is disappointing because Pepsi had a great opportunity to create something with meaning, but instead defaulted simply to cashing in on an image.

If only Pepsi had coupled its image campaign with a drive to engage people in a way that enriches the community or world at-large, the effect would have been so much more meaningful and lasting. The benefit to our communities probably would have been exceeded only by the benefit to Pepsi.

#### BEYOND CAUSE MARKETING

The idea of wrapping brands in a higher purpose is not new, of course. Usually this takes the form of some kind of marketing overlay or “cause marketing” promotion that is short term and perhaps lacking in sincerity. Far less common are examples of brands where the higher purpose is built right into the brand, where it is part of its very reason for being.

Of course, it's now become fashionable to say that, given current economic conditions, we can't afford to be interested in issues of the environment and sustainability or any of the other causes that seemed to be so urgent such a short time ago. It's acceptable to assume that consumers don't have the time or the money to care about such things anymore.

Or is it? If it's true that Obama's ascendancy is at least partly a combination of economic turmoil and a quest for higher purpose in our lives, why shouldn't marketers also pursue consumer relationships on that basis? As President Obama himself put it:

*“When you choose to serve—whether it's your nation, your community or simply your neighborhood—you are connected to that fundamental American ideal that we want life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness not just for ourselves, but for all Americans. That's why it's called the American dream.”*

If that's true for the American people, then why isn't it also true for American brands? It's time to recognize that serving your consumers should include also serving a larger purpose, possibly the same kind of community or national service that Barack Obama has made a signature of his political brand.

What if Microsoft had offered business software to young hopefuls in inner cities and rural towns... would it have had to lay off workers?

What if Saks Fifth Avenue had donated what it couldn't sell to help dress women for job interviews... would it have had to slash its prices?

What if General Motors had helped senior citizens with transportation to and from the supermarket... would it have had to close Saturn?

What if, instead of creating value meals, Starbucks donated its new instant coffee to members of Congress (maybe they'd wake up).

We all know how important it is to have insight to be successful as marketers. At this most critical moment, having that insight is more important than ever before. The greatest insight right now is not that people will buy your stuff if you just keep cutting your prices. It is that, more than ever, people are feeling a greater sense of responsibility.

People feel a sense of responsibility to themselves, to their families and to their communities. They expect the same from the products they buy and the services they use.

This is so huge that it would be a mistake to think of it as just another trend. It is a cultural shift that runs deep and is so powerful that the only safe assumption is that it is not going to go away.

The only remaining question is what we, as marketers are going to do about it. Because if we don't do anything, we're screwed. ■



**DORI MOLITOR** is founder and CEO of **WomanWise LLC** ([womanwise.com](http://womanwise.com)) a WatersMolitor Company, a hybrid consultancy-agency specializing in marketing brands to women. Dori can be reached at [dmolitor@womanwise.com](mailto:dmolitor@womanwise.com) or (952) 797-5000.