

The Big Shift

Almost every day someone asks me: So, Dori, how do you think things are changing with consumers, given how things are changing with the economy?

I actually think consumer culture has changed much more than most business people realize or would like to admit. I also think corporate cultures have not changed nearly as quickly as consumer culture.

Yes, we all read the papers and the daily reports of bankruptcies, lost jobs and countless family crises. But are we, as marketers, truly feeling the fear, anger and uncertainty? Have we absorbed the disappointment, the stymied dreams, the lonely, lost and disenfranchised reality of this economic train wreck?

Marketers do have a sense that it's not the same game, but I'm not sure how many have fully grasped the extent to which the "new economy" is changing consumer values and creating a new consumer culture. I also don't know how many fully realize that these changes are permanent.

What I do know for sure is this: Corporate cultures have a long way to go before they catch up with the changes in consumer culture. The biggest hurdle is that most corporations look at all the pain and misery in the marketplace and fail to see the silver lining in it. The silver lining is that this fine mess we're in has brought about some serious soul-searching and changed consumer culture—for the better.

While the causes of these changes are undeniably *negative*, the effect is just as surely *positive*. There's real opportunity for forward-thinking corporations to tap into this positive energy and renew their bonds with consumers.

So, when people ask me how things are changing with consumers because of the recession, I see at least five major cultural changes that are here to stay. I also see enormous potential for corporations to align with those changes and make the world a better place.

Renewed Responsibility. As consumers, we are angry that our economy was brought down because of pure *greed*. The situation has left us vulnerable and we have no tolerance for business as usual. We're demanding that everyone take responsibility for their own actions. Companies that got themselves into this mess damn well better figure out how to get themselves out of it.

But the thing is, consumers are applying this same high standard of responsibility to their own lives as never before. We are bringing a renewed sense of responsibility to our personal lives, and we're applying it to ourselves, our communities, our nation and our planet. We have increased our expectations and our demands on the business world, and see less separation between the things corporations do and our personal lives.

Taking Personal Control. Where we once had faith in the system, the collapse of our financial infrastructure left us shaken, but not helpless. Our confidence may be shattered and old rules no longer apply, but this only strengthens our resolve to take back control over our lives.

We know that the government won't help us, Wall Street won't help us and marketers won't help us. So we're going to do it ourselves—or better yet, we will do it together.

We are a force to be reckoned with. We're knowledgeable, networked and motivated. We are our own best advocates! The internet and social networking allow us to get all the information we

Corporate culture needs to view consumer culture through a new lens.

need and we're going to make decisions based on our own personal morals and expectations. The balance of power now rests with consumers.

We Matter. We feel vulnerable, and in many cases, victimized. Sometimes we wish we could run away and start over, kind of like hitting a reset button. But we're not running away; we are facing the world on our own terms and finding joy in letting others know that they matter. We want to know we matter to others, too—that we made a difference, did good in the world, contributed and brought joy.

We want to trust *someone* or *something* on this quest, but we doubt that *someone* is a corporation or that *something* is a brand. We want companies to look us in the eye, bring that human touch and understand our realities. In today's economic circumstance, it is obvious to us which brands are truly our friends and which ones are only about capturing our dollars.

Pursuit of Meaning and Purpose. Money doesn't buy happiness: We've heard the phrase many times, but now it's no longer just a cliché. We're asking ourselves why we bought all of that stuff in the first place. Was it to give us a short-term lift? Was it to keep up with the Joneses? Was it just habit? Either way, we now know that buying stuff did not bring happiness or fulfillment because it didn't bring any real meaning to our lives.

As a result, we're volunteering, swapping free items and making donations. We've gotten a taste of what a meaningful experience brings to us and we want more! No, we *crave* more! We want to join something! So, whom are we going to look to for an opportunity to give or serve? Where do we expect to find personal values that match our own? Who is going to step up and join us on our journey to find meaning and purpose in our lives?

Re-defining Value. We used to demand to get as much as possible just because we could. But now we realize that getting as much as possible—the waste, gluttony, the excessiveness—had no real value at all. It never did! Even before the economic meltdown, we began to realize that “value” is much bigger than just “price.” The downturn just accelerated our acceptance of this basic truth. We've discovered the “upside” of “downsizing.” If we are going to super-size something, we are going to super-size the meaning in our lives.

Bringing incremental value to your products and services is not an option today. Our mindset and our values are going through an overhaul. The status-quo has left the room because we know the difference between *real* and *perceived* value. We're expecting not only better functionality from brands but also higher-level emotional attributes—such as human-level relationships and mutual benefit from common values.

A NEW LENS

There's been a change in values resulting in a cultural shift. Meanwhile, the gap between consumer culture and business culture is bigger than ever. Consumers are longing for authenticity and they are taking their future into their own hands to pursue lives infused with personal meaning. They feel a little lost and they're craving meaning and purpose in their lives, purpose that was leached out of their lives through their pursuit of material goods and lack of spiritual well-being.

Our biggest opportunity, as marketers, is to discover the *emotional truth* in our consumers' lives from which you can create a *deep soul connection* with them. It's not about numbers or data or bullet points; it's about heart and soul, about emotional intelligence, and it's about your personal, human caring.

This begins with bringing purpose and meaning to your own life and to your employees' lives. The sense of purpose and the passion that expresses will spread like a virus to your consumers.

As you read these words, your consumers are reevaluating their lives and redefining what is of value and what is not. This is a new era—an economic and cultural era. This time, the past does not predict the future because the *status quo* is gone, gone, gone. Throw away your research! It's a brand-new day! ■



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