

“Goodbye Consumer – Hello Citizen”

How America's new administration and economic crisis is
re-calibrating the consumer mindset.

by Patt Cottingham

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The New Citizen Brand Mindset

Just yesterday when credit was oh so easy you could build credit card castles out of the dozens of plastic credit cards that would arrive each month in the mail. Houses forgot how to be homes providing safety and security, and turned into leveraged lending machines. And so we all went out and bought our "stuff", some of it necessary – most of it not. Or as the late comedian George Carlin said, "A house is just a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get more stuff." Somewhere in the back of our collective American psyche we felt uneasy we knew we couldn't just be consumers of "things", or Wall Street bankers risking our trust for their greed, or high rolling billion dollar Ponzi schemers giving a whole new level of meaning to "shock and awe"

In Barack Obama's inaugural address he called on citizens (not consumers) to remake America. Declaring, "Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America," Our American brand recovery can only be fully realized when we can shift from the "consumer" to a "citizen" mindset. Wasn't there always something offensive about being called "consumers" anyway? Is consumption the only thing that we the people contribute to our nation? The days of “unconscious consumerism” have all been spent. So goodbye consumer – hello citizen. The Obama administration is calling for a lot more engagement from all Americans in re-building America. The administration’s new site <http://www.recovery.gov> is where citizens can go to learn about, share, and see state by state with a great deal of transparency the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in process.



The times are summoning us to wake up and participate in making the choices that will collectively move America forward into a stronger more sustainable future. The re-branding of the American mindset from consumer to citizen will take some serious focus on all our parts. It takes a lot more work to be conscious and engaged in citizenry, than consumerism.

And what will citizens want from their brands? Transparency, accountability, trustworthiness, and sustainability, are the new markers for all brands. There is a huge opportunity for brands, in the face of the economic crisis, to establish an unwavering relationship of support. To communicate in “real speak” and offer information, products, and services on websites and social networks to help people through this time.

The movement from the narrow consumer model to a citizen model opens up a whole new field for brands to connect on. It is a cultural shift that Americans appear ready to embrace as we saw in the election of Barack Obama to president. What products and services would Apple computer offer, with their "Think different" tagline if they were selling to a citizen model of purchaser? How could Adidas, with their "Impossible is nothing" tagline use that to connect to American citizens during this time of great challenges? Or Timberland's "Make it better" tagline that is calling for a more sustainable future through products made transparently and responsibly. With the citizen model brands will be able to tap into the deeper feelings of American's collective love of country, protection of it's natural resources, new awareness of the responsibility to the next generation, and the grit to overcome any and all obstacles.

In the new citizen model brands will have to consider the following in the immediate near term and look down the road in how to engage a more conscious electorate with their brands.



Saving Beyond Our Means

For now we need to save rather than spend. We need to look beyond our incomes alone and also look at our behaviors as a means to our saving ends. There is already evidence that we are getting this message. In the second quarter of 2008 American's personal savings account spiked to almost 3% after almost four years below 1%.

Greg McBride, senior financial analyst at Bankrate.com, states, "If American consumers are less indebted, live within their means and have more money in savings, they are better positioned to spend on a sustainable basis for years to come. As painful as that is economically in the short run, these developments will better serve us in the long run."

Our brands can help us see simple behavior changes that keep more of our income, in our pockets. Dixie offers an "on the go" coffee container for people looking save by making their coffee at home rather than buying it out. A \$2 cup of joe x's 223 work days per year is \$446. x's two working parents = \$892. A simple enough behavior shift, but when multiplied by other behavior changes, can add up to a significant difference

in savings citizen by citizen. Perhaps a little less money for Starbuck's and Duncan Donuts but then again more money for brands like Maxwell House, Mr. Coffee, Coffee Mate, and Splenda.

Brands can also serve citizens by offering relevant information with free branded content on how to save water, energy, fuel, time, the environment, food budgets, etc. If we are not going to squander our resources brands and citizens can learn to be co-partners in responsibility.



goodbye



hello

Culling Credit Card Creep

When did credit cards creep over the line of sanity into wallets designed to hold upwards of 20 credit cards? It now seems so "consumer retro", doesn't it? As painful as the tightening credit crunch is the necessary culling and cutting up of credit cards across kitchen tables is the new saner reality. Between January and September 2008, credit card debt increased \$37 billion, pushing past an astounding \$975 billion. Living within our means, means dialing down expectations and buying only the necessities for now. And, when credit does open up again continuing to hold true to a more responsible citizen mindset in our purchases. The credit card lite brand wallet is simply what the new conscious "citizen" needs. The 3 credit cards "tops" version won't get us into trouble or keep us up at night wondering how to make the payments. That alone makes it worth its weight in relief.

Spendvesting

And when we return to spending, we have to learn how to do so a lot more wisely. Which means basically spending more on things that will give us a return on our investment. Like weatherproofing our houses, putting solar panels on our roofs, changing our light bulbs to Compact Fluorescent Light Bulbs (CFLs). Any thing to do with furthering our education, a college degree or any continued learning classes. Buying a hybrid car or putting in a sustainability garden in our backyards, rooftops, or neighborhoods.

In 2008 there was a surge in vegetable seed sales across the country. The Burpee & Co brand, the nation's largest seed company, sold twice as many seeds than in the previous year. Half of the increase was from novice gardeners who inundated the hotline in Warminster, Pa., with questions about basics of soil acidity and seed starting. A sustainability garden is an very good spendvestment especially after the initial outlay of money and sweat equity. Most of our grandparents had backyard vegetable gardens. They were the original spendvestors.

Sustain Ability

What is the ability of a brand to build in practices that will sustain its value to citizens? Does the brand have a responsible next generation philosophy? Does the brand have concrete green practices that go far beyond just "green washing"? Can it be counted in times of uncertainty? Ah, and here's a new one. Does the brand have a "less consumption strategy"? Are the products, and services that the brand offers more about quality rather than quantity. Is what you are selling of true value? Is the brand willing to trim its product line or services to make it a less consumptive? In the new citizen model less is more. Especially if the scaled back product and service offerings are really well thought through, and if the cost to quality ratio is very good. Brands also have to send the message in everything they do that they are aware of the need to be highly discerning about what they put out in the world. That if they are going to ask people to part with money, especially in tight times, that the exchange had better exceed expectations.

Free Things Are Good

This is a great time for brands to find something to give to people in the way of a product, service, or information for free. Kashi recently offered a package of it's new frozen entrees for free. The promotion was so successful that they ran out of free entrees, not surprising in these rough times, and now offer a \$2 off coupon. Being generous right now is really appreciated. What can a brand do to lift people's spirits when times appear bleak? Can you find a way to make people laugh, offer them advice on reducing stress, give them an amazing recipe that won't break their budget, give them a simple tip that is incredibly valuable?

Keep In A Two Way Communication Loop

Social networks can be amazing in keeping a two way conversation. What do citizens purchasers need, what are their concerns? What will make their lives easier? What do they need more information on? Digital content can be delivered easily and effectively across social networking sites and on brand websites. Keeping in an ongoing conversation with people can greatly enhance your understanding of what products, services, and information are the most relevant for the times.

The movement to a more responsible, engaged citizenry of purchasers will build a stronger foundation for the America's recovery and future. Brands that support this new more conscious space with relevant products and services will create a dynamic, sustainable relationship with their citizen customers.

*Patt
Cottingham*

Patt Cottingham is a brand communication strategist living in the US

Patt Cottingham/USA
www.genuineimprints.com
www.workforcetobrandforce.com

001-201-612-5533

threeft2@gmail.com