On Marketing, Sustainability, Pessimism...

Jon: I'm tired of advertising, and to be completely frank, I'm tired of marketing. The entire infrastructure for corporate marketing has arisen from a desire to convince the public that they need more, faster, better, now. We keep talking about sustainability, but we—and I include myself in this, as I work at a consultancy that makes “things”—keep producing more stuff, and keep thinking about ways to sell versions two and three and four of the same stuff to people who don't really need it in the first place.

What are we doing?

Richard: Change of such great magnitude doesn't happen overnight. Some of the marketing you are tired of, which describes what companies are doing to address sustainability, might suggest otherwise, but...

Of course, the making of “things” won't go away, but the nature of those things can promote sustainability, as reflected in our cover story. Also, the way your organization responds to clients who want you to make things for them can increase sustainability, as reflected in the Designers Accord (described in our May+June issue). Indeed, I think you can be proud that the accord was born where you work—frog design.

The Designers Accord is a very important effort, and I was pleased that Adaptive Path provided some time on the program of its April 2008 Managing Experience conference to describe it. Most of the attendees of that conference do not work at consultancies, but all sorts of companies can adopt the accord, and management personnel are obvious candidates in terms of people who can get that done.

Jon: I'm a bit of a pessimist about things like this, and I just can't help but recall the number of conversations with clients who are either overwhelmed with greenwashing—they want everything to be packaged as green, even if it makes no sense—or who simply won't listen to sustainability talk until it affects their bottom line. That seems to be the theme to the entire sustainability discussion, at least as it unfolds in the United States. The Fortune 500 and the people that buy their prod-

ucts—and the culture that embraces bigger, better, faster—won't make a definitive move to sustainability until they see the personal, demonstrable, and financial reason to do so. It's shortsighted, but it's also reality.

Things like the Designers Accord, and the few products we've highlighted in the cover story, are certainly steps in the right direction. I'm still concerned, however, that the marketing rhetoric that wraps the entire discussion is so obtuse that the “lay consumer” will simply tune it all out, the bad and the good, at once.

Richard: Perhaps some answers are embedded in some of the other articles in this issue. Michael Graber writes: “Today's consumers don't trust top-down messaging; they can see the seams—and the holes—too easily.” With companies increasingly enabling participation with, and open interaction about, their products and brand, consumers are challenging that top-down messaging. Companies are starting to pay attention.

Apala Lahiri Chavan argues that there are “rich opportunities for value-added solutions that lie in the gaps between cultural ideal and cultural practice.” The gaps to be discovered that have the greatest tension—the greatest strain—will increasingly be about sustainability, and companies will eventually respond.

I can see Hugh Dubberly adding a fifth design learning curve in a future version of this issue's On Modeling forum: sustainable design quality as the next important field of competition.

Jon: That's an interesting extension on Hugh's argument that quality overturned production, and innovation overturned quality; perhaps sustainability will overturn innovation. Of course, if that's true, it paints it as just another business fad. I hope it's not cliché to say that this may be too important to be transient.

Richard: I think it's an extension of a different argument, but I can understand your pessimism. Just don't tell Richard Seymour about it [1]!

—Richard Anderson and Jon Kolko

[1] See “Optimistic Futurism,” *interactions*, May+June 2008, 52–54.

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