



Emotional consumption

About the quest for meaning and emotional connection in a time of abundance. Read about the four consumer trends that describe the advanced stage of self-realization that the modern consumer has reached

I see a future where consumption will take on an entirely new significance. A future that very much hinges on one thing – *meaning*. Yet, what do we really understand by meaning and how does this tie in with the future of consumption? Every underlying ‘meaning’ is unique to each individual; it shifts too from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not meaning in its broadest sense but rather as it can be specifically attributed at a given moment, in a specific context.

Viktor Frankl’s book *‘Man’s Search for Meaning’* is a brilliant example of this. It is both a window into the human soul and a guide to meaningful living. Frankl argues that *“man’s main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain, but rather to see a meaning in his life.”* Our fundamental drive, the motivational engine that powers human existence, is the pursuit of meaning. I personally believe that the quest for meaning will be one of the core drivers of our 21st century society, a society imbued with tremendous material choice and loaded with abundance. But how does this quest for meaning assert itself in practice in our fragmented and multi-faceted society?

Consumer Empowerment

We can safely say that we live in a world where mass consumption forms part of our everyday experience. Yet, this is a world where consumption carries a somewhat negative connotation. In fact, people often find ‘consumer’ an off-putting term and perceive the word as a derogatory. Does this mean that consumers have become less discerning? Quite the contrary. The global citizen is becoming increasingly pro-active, this citizen ponders and carefully selects, scrutinising the company or brand just as closely as the product. In the 21st century, the key drivers for customer-driven solutions are Empathy and Emotional Connection – reaching people in meaningful ways.

In a world where change is relentless, marketing now has to re-invent itself from the inside out. Today, understanding your consumer is about delving into their emotional, spiritual and psychological needs; anticipating future behaviours – targeting the heart, every bit as much as the pocket and position of the purchaser.

Emphatic Leadership

The single biggest challenge is how to manage and anticipate the needs of a new generation of consumers. More than ever, we now see a growing need for brands to embrace deeper human and conscience-led values. Talk show superstar Oprah Winfrey summed this up: *“Leadership is about empathy. It is about having the ability to relate and to connect with people for the purpose of inspiring and empowering their lives.”*

It is clear that we are entering a new age where value sets are shifting. Our *raison d’être* used to be: *‘I think, therefore I am’*. It then became: *‘I shop, therefore I am’*. In the future, our *modus operandi* will be: *‘I feel, therefore I am’*. We have already entered the Emotional Decade – emotional consumption rather than material need increasingly rules the day. This spurs context-led consumption driven by emotional responses rather than well-thought out rational decisions. Given the myriad of choices available to us, design powered by emotion becomes essential. Companies that offer desirable and emotionally engaging products will win out.

Emotional Drivers

I have mapped out four types of emotional consumption, identifying the key drivers influencing the future behaviour and lifestyle patterns of most western consumers. These trends are: *It’s not a job it’s a Lifestyle, Food for Thought, Fair Eco Sourcing and Mind Detox* – all linked to the key driver of emotional consumption.

Over the last decade we have highlighted the growing importance of products and services that consumers can relate to and feel involved with – even fall in love with. Now we see that empathy and emotion are impacting our lives around the clock – from work to social encounters and personal relaxation, from food to interiors and fashion. With this seismic shift in the way consumers want to do business, shop and live their lives it is essential to address them in a new and more engaging way. The key message is *‘refocus your brand – empower people’*. We have already witnessed massive growth in Empowerment Brands – brands that inspire, educate, illuminate and facilitate

“It would be possible to describe everything scientifically, but it would make no sense; it would be without meaning, as if you described a Beethoven symphony as a variation of wave pressure.” *Albert Einstein*

knowledge. In the future, these values will themselves become the core foundation, so brands and service providers need to integrate this approach without delay. Emotional values will become the driver and rational values the passengers. Understanding the consumer emotional landscape becomes critical when you want to create meaningful – and ultimately successful – products.

1. It's not a Job it's a Lifestyle

Today's lifestyle patterns are time-starved and fragmented. People are swept up in this vortex whilst they struggle to search for a meaningful life. Our future consumer is a seeker, a worker and an artist. We now choose motivational and emotionally rewarding priorities for both our work and personal lives ... perhaps a short-break luxury holiday to help balance a busy lifestyle. We see the emergence of so-called Yuppies (Young Experimenting Perfection Seekers). Unlike yuppies, their aim in life is not to collect worldly goods, but as many experiences as possible.⁽¹⁾

More and more companies now offer motivational work schemes. A pay-reward could be a weekend's space training in Russia with VIP treatment, private transfers and English-speaking personal guides. The goal – to spend a few minutes in a huge IL-76MDK rocket, experience zero gravity and a space flight in your very own custom-made astronaut suit. The price tag: £5,700⁽²⁾

Or should you already have that million stashed in the bank why not spend it on something meaningful? A study recently published by the Financial Times pointed out that wealthy people are more likely to find happiness through scuba-diving or going to a concert rather than through buying that Ferrari. Material goals may even prompt deep dissatisfaction with life and provoke mental disorders such as paranoia. By contrast, spending money on experiences rather than possessions, such as walking the Machu Picchu trail in Peru, seemed to make people happier, provided their basic needs are satisfied⁽³⁾

2. Food for Thought

On-the-move-consumption has become such an integral part of our daily lives that, when it comes to food, there is a renewed need for ritual and tradition. Traceability is essential as every aspect involved in preparing and enjoying a meal: the taste, the smell, the textures, the sourcing of the ingredients, the cultural significance, and of course the emotional value. Meaningful meals are the new slow food movement.

The table setting and the meal presentation have almost become as important as the food itself. “Marije's food projects affect your whole being, even on a subliminal level. She creates total experiences. What counts for me is the experience of eating and everything that goes with it.”⁽⁴⁾

We aspire to eat better and more wholesome food, with some even said to be addicted to healthy living. Television programmes such as “You are what you eat” have become so popular that nutritional adviser Dr. Gillian McKeith's book of the same name is now a UK bestseller. Corporate nutritional responsibility has become the new buzzword. Ironically, while we try to embrace the principles of ‘less is more’ and back to basics – manufacturers are still working to invent more and more products. This surfeit of choice causes more products to be left on the shelves and we throw away more than ever. We are very greedy when we go shopping and our eyes are often bigger than our stomachs. In addition, we are so obsessed with sell-by dates that we often throw away perfectly good food. Around one third of the food grown for human consumption in the UK ends up in the rubbish bin. UK government and food industry statistics show that each adult wastes food to the value of £420 each year.⁽⁵⁾ Even more shocking is that it all mounts up – Britain throws away £20bn worth of unused food every year – equal to five times our spending on international aid and enough to lift 150 million people out of starvation.⁽⁶⁾ A study from the University of Arizona indicates that a shocking 40-50% of all food ready to harvest never gets eaten. That is 50% of food going to waste.⁽⁷⁾ A statistic that should alarm an industry that is struggling to achieve greater efficiency in order to rescue earnings.

3. Fair Eco Sourcing

Increased concern and insights into the impact of global warming have given rise to eco-sensitive consumption. Fair sourcing represents the first vital step towards building a new sustainable world where ethics and eco principles set the standard. We have already seen the first signs of this in Asia where Arup are designing and building a string of ‘eco-cities’ for the Chinese authorities – self-sustaining urban centres each on the scale of a major western city. These eco-cities are seen both as prototypes for urban living in over-populated and polluted environments and as a magnet for investment funds into the rapidly growing Chinese economy. The eco-cities are intended to be self-sufficient in energy, water and most food products, aiming for zero emissions of greenhouse gases from their transport systems.⁽⁸⁾

"Refocus your brand
– empower people."

Despite a major shift in the way we think about rubbish in the West – there is still a long way to go. In the UK, the wheelie-bin culture is finally being replaced by a series of kerbside collections for paper, metals, plastic, bottles, clothes and garden refuse. This is, however, having some unforeseen consequences. Most of Britain's plastic and paper is now being sent to China or India for recycling and the huge transport distances this entails are pushing up greenhouse gas emissions. Soon too, under new EU legislation, all electrical equipment must be recycled, which has led to fears of another 'fridge mountain' of goods awaiting recycling^[1]

4. Mind Detox

In a society made toxic at every level through over-consumption, 'The luxury of Empty Space' is a concept central to people wanting to experience the power of now. We increasingly cite a quiet place for meditation and reflection, as the number one 'must have' for our homes, part of our inner quest towards purifying our mind, body and spirit. Cleansing, a practice for body and soul, infuses people with spiritual energy through encouraging them to lose track of time and their cares. In an increasingly fast forward world, we are choosing to visit retreats in an attempt to hold on to our sanity. All we want, it seems, is peace, quiet and a space to be alone.^[2] Spa Fusions are western spas which draw their inspiration from a number of global healing traditions. Again, Asia highlights some interesting trends towards a more sane world. Ayurveda ('the science of life') is offered on the Indian National Health Service in conjunction with more conventional medicine. It promotes Ayurveda combining the practice of yoga with meditation, dietary advice and herbal medicine. According to Dr Suraj Dubey, Ayurveda is based on the theory that prevention is better than cure and the therapy treats the whole person: mind, body and spirit.^[3]

Emotional Brands

So what will future consumption actually look like? All shoppers will become guests. The idea is to create an emotional connection between the brand and the customer – hoping that the 'guests' will want to purchase a token that takes them back and reminds them of the friendly feeling they had during that experience. Archetypal emotional brands include Apple, Starbucks, the Tate Modern and the British drinks company Innocent – all renowned for their ability to connect emotionally with consumers. These brands are not just intimate with their customers; they are loved by them. This goes to prove that people seek out emotional and empowering experiences and don't begrudge paying a premium when the encounter feels right.

Apple design is people-driven and brings an emotional, sensory, inspiring and educational experience to computing. Visiting one of Apple's flagship stores is a truly empowering experience. The world's most visited art museum, London's Tate Modern, has also forged an emotional connection with visitors. Their aim is to remove people's preconceptions or expectations and to allow them to experience art in new contexts. By having themed book stores, late weekend openings,

hosting educational events and a destination restaurant and bar – they invite you to experience culture and art with family and friends in inspiring and stimulating settings. Starbucks set out to create 'the third place' and became known for their philosophy that 'putting people before products just made good common sense'. They have also promoted their relationships with farmers – selling fair trade coffee beans for you to make your Starbucks coffee at home.

The Innocent drinks company was started by a group of friends who gave up their daytime jobs to pursue a different path. They wanted to deliver quality products – whilst making a positive difference to the world. Their fruit smoothie, branded with a humorous slogan, costs around £2, significantly more than competing products.

Emotional brands have three things in common: Firstly they project a humanistic corporate culture and strong corporate ethics, characterized by transparency, sustainability, support for good causes and community involvement. Secondly, they have a unique and inviting visual and verbal language, expressed in both design and advertising. Last, but not least, they have established a 'heartfelt connection' with their customers by building trust and/or establishing a community around their product.

Conclusion

As stated at the outset, I believe that consumption will take on a whole new significance and that our understanding of consumption will fully integrate the emotional dimension. In western society, we have reached a very privileged state, our basic material needs are taken care of. This allows for a very advanced stage of 'self-actualisation' where we now see ourselves as a work-in-progress. Because we live longer, we have more time to think about our personal narrative and why we are here – engineering who we really want to be.

It's not a job it's a Lifestyle, Food for Thought, Fair Eco Sourcing and Mind Detox all centre on emotional consumption but in very different ways. Emotional Consumption is foremost about people whose outlook on life is focused on meaning rather than materialism. These are the cultural innovators – people already carrying forward the values of the next generation, whether through seeking out life experiences, their preference for traceability, quest for inner meaning or fair sourcing. When I say that I believe the 21st century will be about reaching people in meaningful ways then this also represents a future that I will be looking forward to. Some people may point to terrorism, war and natural catastrophes, but I am convinced that a positive and visionary outlook are the key ingredients for a better future. The future is not some abstract place we are going but a real one we are already creating.

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