

## Is Sustainability a Unique Position?

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We are entering a new, socially responsible millennium. This is a genuine shift in consciousness that is beginning to reach critical mass. We see minds all over the world uniting around the idea of creating healthy lives and a healthy planet. Large corporations are responding quickly and in some cases, leading the way.

So, what will it look like in each industry as social and environmental sustainability become merely an entrance fee for doing commerce? What will change when most companies are touting a commitment to social responsibility? How will businesses respond when this exciting new wave has hit the shore and become common?

A recent worldwide study by GlobeScan shows that high tech, news media, food and beverage, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, clothing and apparel are currently perceived as the most socially responsible industries. Many industry leaders from carpet manufacturing to utility companies are beginning to make drastic changes to their business models. Nearly every large company has a new marketing initiative that addresses some aspect of corporate social responsibility. It is invigorating to imagine a healthier future and healthier business as everyone jumps on the sustainability bandwagon. But what is next? We need to ask ourselves a few challenging questions.

BP anticipated the shifting mindset in the Nineties when they made a dramatic change to their image with the Helios logo and the tagline “Beyond Petroleum.” They have actually managed to maintain authenticity as a green-minded oil company, stating they are “leading innovations in cleaner oil and gas.” They are unapologetic about the oil industry and have no intention of abandoning petroleum or focusing solely on renewable alternatives. Yet they are interested in expanding past their current offerings. Their commitment is to be performance driven, innovative, progressive and green. As a result, BP ranks in the top 15 brands perceived as the most socially responsible in a global cross section of the world population as measured by GlobeScan.

Is it possible for another oil company to challenge this position in the future? Is any rival demonstrating the same dramatic vision and if so, what is BP’s lead-time? If anyone attempts to challenge BP’s position, how long will it take to gain credibility?

Chevron has already launched a well-produced campaign around the idea of “Powered by Human Energy.” It will be interesting to see if they will be able to demonstrate this new focus through corporate-wide innovations. If they cannot, their messaging will obviously backfire. If they fail to do it in a manner that is radically unique from BP, they will not move beyond a “me-too” position. They will not only be unable to lead, they may not even be able to compete. It is tricky to figure out how to respond to the current mindshift and yet remain authentically unique.

The Aveda brand was formed with a natural focus. It did not require a makeover as the healthy lifestyle mindshift grew. They understood that demand for “Natural” would increase in popularity and viewed sustainability as a responsibility of the corporation. Their commitment to sustainability is a core value and is not limited to the environment. Their idea of sustainability involves everything from corporate culture, transitions to organic farming practices and the natural health of the end user. Aveda is not banking on “Natural” alone. What they add to their sustainability position is

an experience of aromatic luxury.

As the healthy mindshift influences this industry, is it possible to sustain and grow their market share with the brand experience they currently have created? Will anyone care if already 89% of their raw ingredients are certified organic? Which part of this complicated sustainability message will be interesting to an evolving target market at any given time?

Aveda's latest brand equity study in 2006 revealed that 91% of US hairstylists are highly aware of the brand and 81% believe the brand is authentic. They have created excellent brand equity in the minds of their target and should congratulate themselves. The question looming now, as the market floods with copycat branding from competitors, is how will Aveda's messaging need to evolve?

The answer to all of these questions for both companies is rooted in the truth that there will always be a need for authentic differentiation beyond sustainability that resonates deeply within each target. Any unique position must be derived from the heart and soul of a company when addressing the current mindshift. These questions should start with asking how the soul of the company has changed, how it has shifted along with the culture, or whether or not it has changed at all?

There are no shortcuts. This is a bold shift in the foundation of our cultural thinking. It requires most companies to take a new, concentrated look at how they might be changing or why they aren't. With a value shift of this magnitude it may be necessary to re-evaluate the company's soul. It is certainly important to understand the genuine desires of every audience, not merely the desires they can articulate on a questionnaire, but the unspoken choice drivers as well.

Here are a few questions companies can challenge themselves with:

- What role will your company play in the life of your employees, partners and target audience?
- Why is the world a better place with your brand in it?
- Is your company being brutally honest with itself?

No business wants to be left behind. It's clear that those who haven't begun adapting to their audience's desires will be playing catch up for years to come. Even those who have already begun to participate in the current mindshift have no rest in sight. The good news, however, is that we thrive on constant change and competition. That is the nature of business for our time in history.

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**Shari Burk, Brand strategist at Pivot Lab, is helping to lead the way for organizations to respond to the shifting mindset of their audience. Let us know if we can be of further assistance. You can contact her at [shari@pivotlab.com](mailto:shari@pivotlab.com) or e-mail [info@pivotlab.com](mailto:info@pivotlab.com)**