

Brand-building in the time of conspicuous conservation

 By [Mike Freedman](#)

18 Jul 2011

Joel the Tailor was in a dilemma. It was approaching the time of the Jewish New Year and his synagogue asked him to take out a half-page ad in their annual magazine. Joel had no problem with this; the synagogue was in a poor area and struggled to make ends meet. The ads from local tradespeople helped.

Some ads prominently promoted the advertiser, so his first effort was: "Be a Mensch in a suit by Joel the Tailor". Then the rabbi advised him that the highest form of charity is when the giver is not known. That was fine, but business was slow and where did charity begin, if not at the tailor shop - after all, no customers, no ads next year. He resolved his dilemma with his ad, which read:

"This space is donated by Joel the Best Tailor in the Mile End Road - anonymously"

Like to be recognised for doing good

While the story, told by my late father, may well be apocryphal, it resonates with a human truth - we like to be recognised for doing good.

On a larger scale, we have Foundations such as Ford, Bill & Melinda Gates, Oppenheimer. More modestly, the colours of our wristbands show the causes we support. The cause fast gaining global support is Saving the Planet - or at least saving our place on the planet and so Conspicuous Conservation is usurping Conspicuous Consumption.

Astute brand-owners are already taking advantage.

Predictably irrational residents of San Francisco, Prius & Bono

Solar panel installers in San Francisco are noticing a gratifying yet odd phenomenon. Sales of solar panels are increasing much faster in some areas than others - and the areas of greatest sales do not receive the most sunshine hours. Still odder, residents insist that their panels are installed on the side of the roof facing the street, even when that side receives less sun.

Social scientists see little mystery. Visible solar panels show you belong to the Conservation Tribe -and when that tribe reaches the early majority in an area (probably younger), most of us want and need to show we belong. There's no use having a badge if you hide it.

Toyota understands this. The brief it gave to the designers of Prius was: do not make it look like an ordinary car.

While there are dozens of hybrid vehicles available, Prius dominates. Why have a Ford Explorer that looks identical in petrol and hybrid versions, apart from a discreet, almost apologetic badge, when you can show the world your eco-credentials in a Prius? Hollywood folklore has it that the big stars buy a Prius or two for their staff to do the shopping, while they indulge in the latest supercar. The rest of us may never be Angelina or Brad, but we can be on a par with their children's nanny.

Bono shows he understands this, too, by co-creating Product Red. People judge how much you're worth by the colour of your American Express card. Green has waitrons taking pity on you, gold is for also-rans, platinum is a contender, black buys respect - until Bono persuaded Amex to introduce the Red card, where a portion of all sales goes to fight killer diseases across Africa.

Now you can display not your bank balance but your nature. You are conserving life.

Solar panels, the Prius and Product Red are the harbingers of change. As well as doing good, they contain what in advertising used to be called the X-factor. They tell stories, or still better, they encourage us to tell their stories.

Badger-friendly honey on the table tells a story about the bed & breakfast guesthouse you are staying at; the Biodiversity & Wine Initiative (BWI) label on a Chardonnay gives you fertile material for a dinner conversation about fynbos.

2C2

I like the idea of pens, paper and stationery recycled from plastic cups and Remarkable out of the UK is doing a good job in Conspicuous Conservation 1.0 (2C1). The problem is that Remarkable as a brand is not, well, remarkable. It will be a different story when Mont Blanc vies with Waterman & Cartier for the most stylish ex-plastic cup pens on the planet, having that Prius or Product Red touch that distinguishes them from their less eco-conscious cousins.

A recycled iPad may be a dubious proposition, but recycled iPad covers from Dior and recycled speakers from Bose earn a premium for chic ethics.

Conspicuous Conservation 2.0 (2C2) will bestow original design and high-value branding on the conservation movement, making it aspirational. Homeowners will agonise between the sleek Italian solar panels designed by Armani, the power of the BMW panels or the funky service providers that install Virgin. The likes of Frank Gehry, Tadao Ando and Philippe Starck will compete to design a fantastical forest of wind turbines, playing original compositions by Philip Glass to escapees from carbon-laden concert halls.

As a step towards 2C2, established brands flaunt their eco-credentials in increasingly clever ways:

- Tesco has wind turbines on the roofs of its supermarkets; other major chains investigate putting greenhouses on top of theirs.
- David Ogilvy said that outdoor hoardings should create a visual scandal and Net#work BBDO won a [Grand Prix at Cannes Lions](#) for Nedbank billboards that have solar panels and wind turbines to power adjacent schools.
- Coca-Cola Philippines partnered with WWF to create a billboard made up of 3600 Fukien tea-plants that will absorb over 20 000kg of carbon dioxide. The plants are in pots recycled from Coke bottles, with drip irrigation and organic fertilisers completing the eco-credentials.

Can we expect a parade of lush subtropical billboards lining the route from King Shaka International Airport to the International Convention Centre Durban welcoming delegates to [COP17](#)?

While some critics mutter about green-washing, big brands make consumers aware of the new agenda. Social media spread good stories, re-enforcing the effect - what other billboards from the Philippines have you heard about lately?

The chocolate cake test

The Marshall School of Business did the kind of experiment that you can only imagine in a Californian Business School. Three groups were left in a room with a large scrumptious chocolate cake, plates, utensils and water. They were told they could eat as much, or as little as they desired. One group was also told to think about the pride they would feel if they resisted temptation; the second group were told to imagine the shame they'd feel if they tucked in; the third were left to their own devices.

The pride group ate least; the shame group munched most. Because pride focuses the attention on self and success. Shame does the opposite, centring attention on the object of desire and failure. Anticipating pride makes us feel good, feel stronger. Anticipating shame makes us feel bad, angry, weaker.

This is the simple secret of Conspicuous Conservation. Make us feel pride, not shame. Help us show the world that we're the good guys. Resilient brands will do very well by doing a little good.

For more:

- Bizcommunity Opinion: [Why we need more Mandela Days](#) by Amelia Jones
- Bizcommunity Opinion: [Brand charity \(false ideologies not sold separately\)](#) by Matt Rose
- Bizcommunity: [CSI news in brief](#)

For More list updated at 1.55pm on 18 July 2011.

ABOUT MIKE FREEDMAN

Mike Freedman is founder of Freedthinkers (www.freedthinkers.com). We grow purpose-driven brands and repurpose places, from buildings to cities. He is the author of e-books on purpose & places. Contact Mike at mike@freedthinkers.com

- Purpose must come before profit... and before anything else too - 19 Sep 2017
- [2013 trends] Growing power, vulnerability of the corporate brand - 17 Jan 2013
- [2012 trends] Sustainability and beyond - 24 Jan 2012
- Divisions and dependencies - 10 Oct 2011
- The power of design - 12 Sep 2011

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>