BIZCOMMUNITY

Make and market stuff that matters

By Anton Ressel

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By 2050, it is estimated that the earth's human population will be 9.07 billion. 62% of the people will live in Africa, Southern Asia and Eastern Asia - numerically this is the same as if all the world's current population lived in just these three regions. In addition, another 3 billion will be spread across the rest of the world.

Africa's population alone is expected to nearly double by 2050, from 1 billion to 2 billion people. Imagine the strain on our already stretched food supplies, water, sanitation, waste disposal, arable land, natural resources...the list goes on and on.

With this somewhat sobering thought as a context, I would like you to think about whether the products you make are designed to add to, or alleviate the pressure on our global ecosystem? Have you considered not just the birth of your product, but it's inevitable 'death' as well?

The Price of Progress

As the global population continues to swell and advances in medical and health technology to extend the lifespan of those already on the planet, an inevitable outcome will be an increase in the production of manufactured goods, cars, clothing, electronic appliances and other 'stuff' to clothe, transport, amuse and entertain all these billions of people. Another inevitable outcome will be an ever-increasing challenge to get rid of all this 'stuff' when it has served its purpose or outlived its usefulness.

Already, the landfills of the world are groaning under the strain of yesteryear's VCR machines, Walkmans, cassette recorders, TVs, mass-produced toys, plastic bottles, boogie boards, toothbrushes, prams, disposable nappies....how will they possibly cope with double the load in less than 40 years time?

The short answer is, they probably won't. It is a safe bet that dealing with the waste produced by over 9 billion humans is going to get ever more difficult, damaging to the environment and certainly more expensive. More surplus waste and redundant products to process will require more people, trucks, petrol, incinerators, electricity, land - deserts, seas and wilderness areas alike will be under constant pressure - and most importantly, more money. From purely a business perspective, designing products that a) have a long and useful lifespan, and b) are easy to dispose of when the time comes, makes excellent sense.

Reduce, Reuse, Remain in Business

So what does this mean for you, here and now in 2012? How will the inevitable and relentless march onward of the human

race impact how we design, manufacture and consume products ten years from now? Twenty years? Fifty years? Renowned journalist and publisher Henry R Luce said "Business, more than any other occupation, is a continual dealing with the future; it is a continual calculation, an instinctive exercise in foresight. " In this instance, I would hazard that the future of consumerism, and in particular how that will impact on design and manufacture, is less about foresight and more about common sense.

As the world gets more crowded, space to store all our stuff will get scarcer and thus more expensive. Costs to get rid of our stuff once it has outlived its usefulness or reached the end of its lifespan will soar, from simple refuse removal and disposal fees to recycling taxes similar to our current crop of 'sin taxes' on products like cigarettes and alcohol. The money to deal with all our surplus stuff has to come from somewhere, and usually that means Joe Public.

An inevitable outcome is a move towards a minimalist lifestyle, in sharp contrast to the rampant excess and consumerism of the '80s and '90s. People will buy less, but they will buy things that have meaning and are made to last - or else to bio-degrade or be recycled easily and inexpensively. They will also buy useful and functional things more readily than pure décor or novelty products. Trends will come and go, but an increasing non-negotiable will be products that add real value to life.

Simply put, if you want to be in business 50 or 100 years from now, design stuff that has meaning, is functional and can be re-purposed or recycled when its time has come. The throwaway culture we have embraced for too long is coming to an end and a new era of conscious consumption is surely around the corner. Be ready for it.

ABOUT ANTON RESSEL

Anton Ressel is an experienced business development consultant, mentor and SME specialist. He is the Senior consultant at ED and CSI specialist agency Fetola (www.fetola.co.za), a winning mentor on the SAB Kickstart Entrepreneur Competition, and a published author across multiple publications. His passion is helping small businesses become big ones. Follow @antonres on Twitter.

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