

Out with fear, in with hope

 By [Thomas Kolster](#)

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Despite a dire economic outlook for the world economy, I'm looking forward to 2012; it's going to be an exciting and positive year. Countries and companies alike might panic and turn their backs on sustainability, asking with a tremble in their voices: Is the well-being of people and planet really a luxury we can afford in these tough times?



The financial markets will most likely keep behaving like a teenage girl with nuclear-grade mood swings, regardless of reality. The markets are just oh-so-sensitive and yester-minutes green tech boom doesn't feel as right when oil and gas prices are low. But, there are reasons to be optimistic.

You simply need to reframe your perspective. During the Great Depression, former American president Franklin D Roosevelt said the famous words, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." These words brought hope to the American people and were the beginning of reform and economic stabilisation.

On the streets of our world capitals and outside the stock markets, I see proud citizens and consumers who aren't afraid; who dare to ask big, bold questions. From the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street and White Ribbons in Russia, there is force behind a movement that challenges the status quo, that dares to dream big even as the economy shrinks.

Here is a lesson to be learned. I'm certain that if your company pursues a positive, world-bettering strategy and asks big, impossible questions with great conviction - the economy is not the limit; it's your imagination. I see 12 trends offering exciting opportunities for businesses in the year to come - and if you dare to ask the right questions, a positive answer awaits!

1. Sustainability is here to stay

Sustainability is mainstream. This is maybe best illustrated by the Toyota Prius and its continuous appearance in one too many Hollywood movies, even mainstream romantic comedies such as *No Strings Attached* with Natalie Portman and Ashton Kutcher where the Prius takes home the laughs as the ticket to get laid the carbon-friendly way.

Recent numbers from NMI's LOHAS Consumer Trends Database 2011 and a 2011 Sustainability Survey from Ogilvy Earth Cape Town respectively confirm that consumers in all shades of green, from dark to light, now make up about 80% of the American market, as well as an estimated 91% of South Africans who want big brands to keep them up to date with the positive contributions they are making to society.

Consumers in general are looking for brands that can reflect their values; whether it is being greener, more responsible or healthier - and they are increasingly determined to vote with their wallet when shopping. What is your response?

2. Survival of the greenest

In the old marketing landscape, it was about being bigger, better and cheaper. But in 2012, if you can't tell your customers what you want to do for them and the planet, you might be wasting your breath.

This is best illustrated by the continuous fight to claim the greenest throne between arch-rivals Unilever and Procter & Gamble, and the same goes for Coca-Cola and Pepsi which, among other things, are battling to develop the greenest

possible bottle. In Denmark, where I am from, it's become a hygiene factor for some product categories such as milk and coffee to be organic or fair-trade - at little or no extra cost.

3. Together, we can go further

In recent years, brands have forged strong collaborations, not only with consumers and NGOs but also with their competitors. This is a trend that will be continuing.

In an interview I did with Nike's global head of corporate social responsibility, Hannah Jones, she cleverly emphasised the importance of collaboration, "...There is a time for competition, but when it comes to sustainability we see no conflict. These issues are far bigger than Nike. It will take the entire industry to render this current model of reliance on natural resources obsolete."

In 2011, I also saw how Vestas, the wind energy company, launched a label, [WindMade](#), stating the amount of wind energy used to produce a specific product. The label was shared with the rest of the industry, giving more attention to wind energy than any one player could have done alone.

4. This is not only about the planet; it's about humans, too

2011 really showed some widespread improvements in human rights around the world, especially in the Middle East.

And even though most companies still feel at odds with the subject, I'm sure that this will be an area more and more companies will be trying to catch up on, from the ugly face of child labour to gender equality in their work force.

5. You can't hide your missteps

As so many cases have shown in 2011, from governments to corporations -there is no longer anywhere to hide your missteps. A growing online population can more easily share the good and bad about companies and products and this can quickly turn into a screaming kettle of consumer pressure.

People want to be in the know and this is healthy for the marketplace, let alone democracy. Let that be a lesson for the elected leaders of South Africa and a full stop to the '[Secrecy Bill](#)'.

6. Think sustainable and social innovation

Yes, even though it's become a buzzword like the halcyon days of The Web, where the magic words 'Internet Startup' could get any investors' dollars out of their pockets, social and sustainable innovation are about to get sexier in 2012.

Just recently Adidas, under its Reebok brand, reaffirmed its commitment to make a US\$1-dollar shoe for the rural Indian market - both supporting local jobs and making footwear available for the poorest.

There's no better way to prove your commitment to a better world than to launch world-bettering products and services - and may I add, if your current market is slowing down, maybe it's time to look for a new one?

7. The more you give, the more you get

Brands keep queuing up to show a little care towards causes, consumers, but also each other.

Last year, Chevrolet in Columbia funded an education initiative towards mostly uneducated taxi drivers; VW South Africa shared their ad space with local NGOs, supporting [Volkswagen's BlueMotion](#) technology product claim. After building the greenest data centre in the world, Facebook shared its learnings with its competitors. For free.

It's all about giving a little back. In fact: self-sacrificing is self-serving. At the end of the day, the more you give, the more you get back.

8. Power to the people

Social media will continue to drive change, as Nestlé felt when it encountered pressure to stop using palm oil or as Volkswagen Europe felt when more than half a million people encouraged change in a Greenpeace campaign, which encouraged Volkswagen to turn away from the [Dark Side](#) due to its opposition to key environmental laws (a biting reference to its new Passat ad).

Smart marketers have changed practices, such as Pepsi with its Refresh project - collaborating with consumers for greater good. It's not about technology; it's about powering human change.

9. Go for anything with R

There's more to mindful consumption than generic recycling campaigns and in 2012 "R" will stand for even more: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Repair and Reimagine, to name a few.

Last year the outdoor clothing company Patagonia (known for its environmental commitments and, in some respects, one of the most radically environmental mainstream clothing brands), launched a [Common Threads Initiative](#) in order for its customers to get the longest possible life out of their products, before the final option: Recycling.

It also asked consumers in a print campaign from late 2011 to think twice before buying any of its products. A headline in one ad read: "Don't buy this jacket."

How far can you take the letter R in 2012?

10. Always look on the bright side

In a world full of depressing economic foresights and a global climate problem that has run amok, consumers don't need fear-mongering, but rather friendly backing, encouragement and support. Already in 2011, signs of a more positive angle were showing; maybe the most high-profile effort was Coca-Cola's Happiness initiative; aimed at promoting a positive view of life.

If the world is about to end, why do anything? It's about bringing consumers along for the ride, showing them the roadmap and encouraging them to take the steps so they feel they are making a difference (together with your brand). It's time to see some positive encouragement!

11. Don't be afraid of Green Washing; be afraid of Green Nothing

In 2012, once again we will hear the rabid cries of green washing from a wolf pack of climate saints, but don't let them scare you away from beginning a sustainable journey.

My best advice to you is being honest in your approach and, if you fail, at least you tried and can learn from your mistakes. The worst you can do is not green washing, it's green nothing.

12. Stand out

No other industries come close to the car industry when it comes to creative advertising initiatives to green their houses. Yes, there's more of a point to prove in the category as green messages (and actions) become a hygiene factor, but your average brand also needs to sharpen up.

In 2012, as the competition for a voice in the responsible market place becomes more fierce, creativity is the single biggest differentiator.

Sadly enough, NGOs especially are faced with more challenges to have their causes recognised and fundraise for their efforts, perhaps due to an explosion in their numbers in recent years.

13. You can do it!

In 2012, we need positive change that expands beyond short-term wins, but offers a long-term solution. In this new year, I'll wish that more brands and more agencies would realise that the old communication models need a freshening and that there's a better way to engage people than talking about being bigger, better and stronger.

The recipe is simple: Show genuine interest in people's lives and their concerns - and ask what you can do to make a difference, even if it at first sounds impossible. Why else should people care about you, if you don't show them that you care?

That's what sustainability is all about - securing a world that's not only better for you and your family, but better for all of us.

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