

The We Decade

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The first decade of the new millennium is over, but no one seems to have found the words to capture the essence of these past ten years. The Eighties, for all its self-indulgent excess, was known as the “me” decade, and the Nineties, with its exuberant growth, was often called the “roaring ‘90s.” But after all the turmoil of the 2000 election, the trauma of September 11th and the avarice that led to economic catastrophe, the decade just past apparently shall remain nameless. That’s kind of sad, but not entirely, because I believe the last ten years created the perfect climate for what is coming in the 2010s: *The “we” decade.*

It’s going to be an amazing ten years, a time when we put our personal interests in perspective, band together with our friends, family and neighbors and take aim at achieving a higher purpose.

When we look back on it, ten years from now, historians might trace the start of the “we” decade to the 2008 presidential election, and the winning campaign slogan, “Yes We Can.”

Regardless of how anyone feels about President Obama’s policies, or how his presidency turns out, there is no denying that his election was made possible by an unprecedented groundswell of “oneness,” of community and shared purpose.

Those with a lighter touch might suggest it has its roots in the phenomenal launch of the Nintendo Wii, a technology that broke down the barriers of gender and age, bringing people together to play videogames that sometimes doubled as both mental and physical exercise.

Many will certainly point to the rise of online social-networks and the advent of open-source innovation as a driving force of the power of “we,” as well.

I’d like to suggest that when the story of this decade is written, many of us will point to the tiny town of Albert Lea, Minnesota. As of now, most people have never heard of Albert Lea, even though it was featured on the *Oprah Winfrey* show.

THE ALBERT LEA STORY

Exactly one year ago, the AARP, in partnership with a health-and-wellness group called Blue Zones, selected Albert Lea as a test case for the idea that a community commitment to health and longevity could add a collective 10,000 years of life expectancy to its citizenry.

What makes this so interesting is that the project does not center on a diet-and-exercise program, which

Creating community and higher purpose will elevate our brands in the 2010s.

is the way individuals typically try to improve their health and well-being.

Instead, the AARP/Blue Zones City Health Makeover, as it is called, encourages changes in behavior that emulate the lifestyles of some remote communities around the world where people live to be 100-years-old ten times more often than in the United States.

The elements of such lifestyles are based on a global research project by Dan Buettner, and documented in his 2008 book, *The Blue Zones*. Did you know, for instance, that people who eat a handful of nuts four times a week live two to three years longer than those who don't? According to Dan, it's a fact.

Most of Dan's suggestions are simple behavioral shifts, such as storing snack foods in out-of-the-way places, keeping a bowl of fresh fruit handy, and serving food on smaller plates—studies show people eat 25 percent fewer calories when plates are reduced from 14 to 10 inches in diameter.

They extend to plating food at the counter instead of serving it family-style, and even include dropping friends who smoke, don't exercise and spend too much time snacking while watching television.

In Albert Lea, the goal was to build personal changes in behavior by engaging the community as a whole. A total of 18 initiatives were implemented— involving local restaurants that added longevity-promoting foods to their menus, and educational cooking classes at the town's Hy-Vee grocery store, for example.

Albert Lea's mayor, Mike Murtaugh, pushed through a walking and biking trail, added new sidewalks and hundreds of kids got together to walk to school instead of taking the bus.

Volunteerism is an especially important part of the Albert Lea project. Participants are encouraged to make a list of their interests and then figure out how to activate those interests to help other people. This notion of giving back not only enhances the "we" but studies also show that people who volunteer have lower rates of cardiovascular disease.

While the program was originally planned as a 10-month project, town officials are so pleased with the results that they say they plan to continue it. The project's greatest achievement, says city manager Victoria Simonsen, is "a new sense of connection in

our town, a mutual support system that we didn't have before."

What I found so astounding was that this project moved a whole town into action over an extended period of time. That it became a *movement* within the town is simply amazing. It happened for one reason above all others: It created camaraderie that changed behavior around something people had tried and failed to do on their own.

It unleashed the power of "we" and changed people's lives for the better.

Dan Buettner now plans to replicate Albert Lea's success in communities across America, and I wish him all the best in that endeavor. At the same time, he's building a brand—Blue Zone—that not only includes his book but also CDs and a product line sold via a website, *bluezones.com*.

As marketers, we can learn a lot from Dan's example. His approach certainly aligns with the guiding principles I've been writing about in the *Hub* for more than the past three years.

ME, WE, HIGHER PURPOSE

For me, it's all about how to create a *deep soul connection* with women and fundamentally change how they feel about our brands. It comes down to three things: "me, we, and higher purpose."

Taken together, these three ideas point to the future of marketing and endless opportunities for innovation and business success.

Me. First, we need to re-think the intensity of the relationship our brands have with women. Brands sometimes aren't thinking big enough about the role that they can have within women's lives. They focus on insight and what women want, but there are different levels of depth of what that connection can be.

So, the "me" is about getting to a deep, aspirational desire or need. It means transcending a rational, functional or even an emotional benefit, and requires digging for those subconscious drivers of behavior.

The goal is to find the one thing that's the trigger to an aspiration. That trigger needs to be relevant in her world in the context of her life, but also relevant to our brands. We must be able to own that, and it has to relate to our brands' core values and existing promises.

The magic of "me" can be found in a *deep dig*

Me, We, Higher Purpose!

ME: Fulfills a deep, aspirational desire

- ◆ Rethink the intensity of the relationship you have with your “citizens”
- ◆ Enrich her life
- ◆ Show her how she matters
- ◆ Create a relationship with her that transcends rational and functional benefits

WE: Fulfills her sense of belonging

- ◆ Provide the emotional intensity to create a movement
- ◆ Create a sense of oneness with other stakeholders
- ◆ Join together in shared ideals and values
- ◆ Move the relationship beyond “us” and “them” to become “we”
 - For brands to do this we’ll need to get ourselves into a “we” mentality
- ◆ Include advocates in everything we do
 - Let the consumer drive the movement
 - Be the enabler, not the center of the conversation

HIGHER PURPOSE: Fulfills her desire to leave a legacy by making the world a better place

- ◆ Move beyond a sterile transaction to achieve higher purpose and meaning in her life
- ◆ Look for people, ideas, brands that she can intimately trust
- ◆ Transform her community, society and the world at-large

with the consumer, while also understanding where our brands fit in that world. I call this the *emotional truth*—that one, single, subconscious, emotional trigger that’s most relevant to our brands in her life.

The more relevant the emotional trigger is, the more intense the response is. When you find that trigger, you’re going to enrich her life in ways she probably hasn’t even articulated, but that will impact her in a very big, positive way.

Most important, we convey to her that she matters. So much branding activity is one-way, which is a huge mistake. We know from our research (“Stand By Me,” *The Hub*, Nov/Dec 2009) how desperate she is for recognition in today’s world of disappointment, uncertainty, and mistrust.

She’s really in a place where she needs to know she matters. That is a huge opportunity for any brand. She’s our consumer: What are we doing to make her feel like she matters? When we connect with women at “me,” we’re letting her know she’s appreciated.

We. The “we” is about fulfilling her sense of belonging. She wants to have a feeling of one-ness, a feeling that she’s part of something larger than herself—both with other people as well as with a brand. We can accomplish this by joining together in shared values and shared ideals.

This is a big shift for marketers because it moves the relationship beyond “us” (the brand) and “them” (the consumer) to become “we.” Most marketers think in terms of doing something *to* the consumer. It’s more about doing something *with* her.

But if we want her to join us, we have to begin to see ourselves as equals. We need to evaporate the gap between “us” and “them.” We need to get to a place where we are at one with her, working toward the same goals, and sharing a sense of being part of something we—and others like us—care about.

This means making sure that we’re including our advocates in everything we do. If we first find this place where we are connecting with her at an aspirational level, and we also stand for bringing that sense of fulfillment to her, then we can let her drive the movement and be active within it.

As the brand we become the enabler of the conversation, not the center of the conversation. That is a real leap for marketers because we have always believed we control the conversation. But now we need to blend into the background because that’s a key part of this sense of belonging.

In fact, the consumer is not in the middle of the conversation, either. It is the idea—the sense of fulfillment—that’s in the middle of the conversation and we are all equal in moving that forward.

Doing so requires patience. We have to give up control, stop thinking about ordinary business issues and think about the benefits we’re bringing.

In the end, this creates the strongest kind of loyalty because we are standing for something she wants to belong to and be a part of.

Higher Purpose. Having a higher purpose fulfills her desire to leave a legacy by making the world a better place. This is a fundamental desire and it’s only grown in recent years. Women today are desperately seeking ways to find greater meaning in their lives.

Part of this comes from the many disappointments of the last decade and uncertainty in her financial future. She is looking for people, ideas and brands that she can trust, intimately. She is open to joining with brands that are transforming communities, society and the world. Brands that care.

When I explore these emotions with women, I ask them what they dream about, what they care about, what they worry about, and what they stand for. When I ask these questions, the age or demographic profile doesn’t matter—the importance of the world we live in and making it a better place comes up over and over and over again.

She wants to feel that she’s left a legacy that says she made a difference in the world. And she’s looking for places she can do that.

If we can help her fulfill that desire, she will want to be part of it. She will reach a higher purpose and fulfill a deep need for meaning in her life.

The deeper the “me” is and the stronger the “we” is, the more powerful is our ability to achieve higher purpose. They’re linked and it’s all based on an *emotional truth*. In Albert Lea, the emotional truth is “vitality.” So, ask yourself, what is the emotional truth for your brand?

CREATING CULTURAL VALUE

Few brands are asking the most important question, and even fewer have begun to answer it. Many are solely focused on “me”—in fact, most invest heavily in gaining insights into how their consumers think or behave.

A good number try to capture “higher purpose”

in some fashion, but usually this manifests itself as a short-term promotion based on one kind of cause or another. Often, it’s not aligned with the brand or company or mission.

Even when the cause is directly linked to the brand, the effect is weak because it is not linked to “me,” much less “we.” As a result, it is not sustainable, which is what made the Albert Lea example so compelling.

It was the sense of “we” that ignited the human connections within the town as a whole. It created engagement, interaction and support.

The Albert Lea experiment worked because so many people became invested not only in the quality of their own lives, but in the lives of everyone else around them. The higher purpose was about increasing the quality of life in the town, all centered on a common interest in longevity, health, vitality, happiness and connectivity.

The lesson is that, as marketers, we can’t stop at “me” and we can’t just skip to “higher purpose.” We need to do the hard work of “we.” Only then will we truly align with the hearts and minds of our partners, our consumers.

It all comes down to what I like to call *cultural value*. This works on an individual level—enriching her life by bringing intangible benefits that are derived from relationships with people, ideas and things that bring higher purpose and meaning to her as an individual. It feeds her sense of identity, which is the “me.”

This, in turn, feeds her relationships, which is the “we.” And it feeds her values, which is the “higher purpose.” When our brands bring cultural value, they have the potential to transform communities, society and the world at-large.

That’s exactly what happened in Albert Lea, and we can make it happen with our brands, too—not only during the “we decade” but for many decades to come. ■



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