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THE FUTURE OF PRINT AND THE CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABILITY

Donald Carli

THE DEVIL: What is the use of knowing?

DON JUAN: Why, to be able to choose the line of greatest advantage instead of yielding in the direction of the least resistance. Does a ship sail to its destination no better than a log drifts nowhither? The philosopher is Nature's pilot. And there you have our difference: to be in hell is to drift: to be in heaven is to steer.

George Bernard Shaw, Don Juan in Hell

Purveyors of print media products and graphic communication services must address the challenging issues at the nexus of commercial opportunity and sustainability. In the words of David W. Orr, “The overall challenge of sustainability is to avoid crossing irreversible thresholds that damage the life systems of Earth while creating long-term economic, political, and moral arrangements that secure the well being of present and future generations.”¹

Sustainable graphic communication requires the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental stewardship and social equity in combination with the effective exchange of visual information. The challenges of commercial opportunity facing print call for leadership, urgency, and direction. However, the challenges of sustainability require more. They require creativity, collaboration, restless inquiry, and thoughtful

consideration of the very purpose and nature of graphic communication in every encounter we have with paper and print.

The challenges of sustainability present both purveyors of print and the buyers and specifiers of print with a “crisis of opportunity.” As one of the world’s largest and most influential industries, the graphic arts is likely to face a growing array of challenges and opportunities that are directly related to sustainability.

Charting a course for the future of print media presents the most significant challenge facing graphic communicators and their suppliers. Key aspects of a sustainable course must address print’s positive effects on the natural environment and the quality of human life while delivering sustainable economic growth. On a more practical and immediate level, the contributors, producers, and consumers of journals, such as *Moebius*, need to consider both the lifecycle impacts of the materials as well as the printing and distribution processes employed in producing the printed artifact in their hands. Where did the matter and energy in this journal come from? Could the fiber, minerals and polymers in your hands have been produced in a more sustainable manner? Could there have been a better way, a more sustainable way for *Moebius* to meet the needs it serves today without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same? How might future issues address the challenges of sustainability more fully in both form and in content?

The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) has released a series of brochures outlining the critical ethical and professional issues encountered by designers and their clients. The series, entitled “Design Business and Ethics,” examines the key concerns a designer faces in maintaining a successful practice and speaks directly to the protection of individual rights, including a guide to print design and environmental responsibility. According to Rick Grefe, Executive Director of the AIGA,

Social responsibility has economic and environmental dimensions. This broad perspective is often described as a commitment to “sustainability,” which has become a term-of-art for advancing economic activity while ensuring that we can sustain our activities in a sometimes fragile world without harming the future’s potential. Showing respect for these consequences is no longer a fringe issue. Businesses are driving this agenda, and designers must learn to be trusted advisors on responsible communication techniques to serve clients effectively. ... It is critical to the designer, as a trusted advisor to business on communication and positioning issues and as a crafter of design artifacts, that the profession also make these issues mainstream in its thinking.²

There is mounting evidence that vendors and suppliers of graphic arts products and services will be required to address the challenges of sustainability in the years ahead due to changes in demand among buyers, designers, and specifiers of print. Over two thirds of the respondents to a recent survey of over 1900 publishers, creative profes-

sionals, and graphic arts professionals in North America conducted by Nima Hunter Inc.³ said they expect the importance of corporate social responsibility and environmental factors in the print-related purchasing decisions of their organizations to increase over the next five years.

Sustainability is also becoming a mainstream corporate priority among Fortune 500 companies. Socially responsible investment funds and indexes that employ sustainability performance ratings now represent in excess of two trillion dollars in holdings. The influence of these funds is rising as they are rapidly moving from the margins to the mainstream with the advent of funds like the Vanguard Calvert Social Index (VCSIX) and the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI). As a result, a growing number of Fortune 500 companies have appointed Directors of Sustainability and are publishing voluntary sustainability or corporate social responsibility reports.⁴

CEOs at companies like Procter & Gamble, Ford, Unilever, and Pearson PLC see sustainability as a challenge, but not as a cost burden. It is seen as the key to top line growth, competitive differentiation and the creation of value. They see the growing populations in developing countries as markets that can and must be served, but they realize that these markets can only be served if they re-think and re-invent every aspect of business. C.K. Prahalad explores the topic in his recent book *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*. According to Prahalad,

Countries that still don't have the modern infrastructure or products to meet basic human needs are an ideal testing ground for developing environmentally sustainable technologies and products for the entire world. Furthermore, multi-national corporation (MNC) investment at the bottom of the pyramid means lifting billions of people out of poverty and desperation, averting the social decay, political chaos, terrorism, and environmental meltdown that is certain to continue if the gap between rich and poor countries continues to widen. Doing business with the world's 4 billion poorest people, two-thirds of the world's population will require radical innovations in technology and business models.⁵

According to a recent report by the World Bank the Earth's population will stabilize at 10 billion by the year 2050 and about half of them will live in today's developing countries. Half a century of 5% annual growth will most likely provide incomes of \$4,000 per capita—twice the level in middle-income countries at the turn of the century—so people will still aspire to higher incomes, but desperate poverty will have been vanquished. However, a shadow looms when we realize that this scenario would entail a 25-fold growth in output and potentially huge increases in pollution.⁶

The Stone Age didn't end because early people ran out of stones; tools made of bronze were just more effective in meeting people's needs than rocks were. By the same token, graphic arts industry leaders should be less worried about stimulating demand—it will be there. They must also do more than reduce costs and automate current

processes. Serving the needs of the billions of people in the developing world with essential graphic communication products and services will require creating new methods for the design production and delivery of print media based on new materials, new manufacturing processes, and new approaches to “dematerializing” and “servicizing” graphic communication products. If print production professionals and supply chain managers are to rise to the challenges of sustainability, systems thinking will be required and greater investment in interdisciplinary education and training.

The graphic communication industry cannot afford to drift in the winds of change, nor can it afford to steer in familiar directions favoring only economic growth and productivity achieved through outsourcing or the automation of existing processes.

Addressing the issues of supply and demand at the nexus of commercial opportunity and sustainability presents leaders in the graphic communication industry with a host of new opportunities to re-invent the ways in which the industry packages knowledge and goods for human consumption.

- Opportunity for those who see graphic communication as a force of nature with proven world changing power and influence.
- Opportunity to increase the value of print as well as the volume of print.
- Opportunity to create new fortunes and a sustainable future for print.
- Opportunity to design, produce and distribute knowledge and goods in ways that consider their total lifecycle costs and measure their quality-of-life benefits.

Whether you choose to lead or to follow this “crisis of opportunity” will offer bounty to those who seek the line of greatest advantage...and hell to pay for those who do not. 

Notes

1. “Four Challenges of Sustainability” (2003) David W. Orr, The University of Vermont Spring Seminar Series - Ecological Economics
2. A PDF version of the “Guide to Print Design and Environmentally Responsibility” by written by Donald Carli and published by the AIGA and the Institute for Sustainable Communication is available for download from: http://www.sustaincom.org/PDF/SustainablePrint_AIGAx.pdf
3. “The Greening of Print” (2004) Nima Hunter Inc.
4. “Towards Transparency: progress on global sustainability reporting 2004” (2004) Certified Accountants Educational Trust for the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants. See: <http://www.corporateregister.com/pdf/TowardsTransparency.pdf>
5. <http://www.changemakers.net/library/temp/fortunepyramid.cfm>
6. “Greening Industry” (2004) World Bank. <http://www.worldbank.org/research/greening/cha7new.htm>