

It's Time To Re-Brand Climate Change



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Strong brands are a Holy Grail in marketing because they create long-term customer loyalty. But there is a dark side to branding too, and its impact on climate change has been profound.

Those of us who worry about climate communications spend a lot of time questioning how to frame the issue for public consumption. Is global warming just an environmental issue? Would people find other frames—public health, national security, economic competitiveness, or social justice—more relevant to their lives? Would embracing these frames help people engage?

As Americans, our collective sense of urgency about the environment is not very high. So, the reasoning goes, using different frames might lead to more productive, less polarized ways of talking about the issue.

They might, but they might not go far enough. All of the alternative frames share a core brand position in common, and this brand is creating conflict.

Strong brands work by linking companies with values that are part of a person's identity. Brand associations need to seem appropriate to the companies they represent, but the values themselves have little, if anything, to do with a product's attributes.

For example, Nike earned a 50% market share by recognizing how many of us imagine we have the fortitude to take that lonely pre-dawn run down a quiet road. Nike's shoes won't run for us, and we might not actually get out of bed, but we identify strongly enough with those values to make Nike number one in running shoes.

Brands live in popular culture too, as part of our shared identity. Prince might have had a tough road making a hit out of "Little Red Lumina." But the words "Little Red Corvette" evoke a tapestry of images that tells a story.

The dark side of strong brands is that they are competitive, and you either love them or you don't. Where are you in The Great Mac vs. PC Debate? Products rarely evoke such strong passions, but our personal computers do.

I think it comes down to the bite out of Apple's logo. That proverbial bite got us thrown out of Eden, but it also gave us the autonomy to create our own lives. The bitten apple is a symbol for the inevitable tension we feel between the discomfort of alienation and our love of freedom. Where do you come down? You love Apple and hate Windows, or the other way around. It's hard to be neutral.

The same psychology applies to climate change. Beneath all of the framing options, the climate brand is fundamentally identified with government intervention. Advocates on both sides of the issue seem to agree that climate change hinges on government. Is this good or bad? No question ignites a values conflict faster in today's hyper-partisan discourse. You either love regulation or you hate it.

From the left, government intervention looks like the only means "the people" have of coercing responsible behavior out of self-interested corporate pirates. From the right, government intervention is an affront to the American Dream that drives "the land of the free" toward socialism.

In his book, *The Greatest Hoax*, Sen. James Inhofe calls the climate issue and the U.N.'s sustainable development program a scheme to establish a world government. We're not talking about science anymore—we're talking about values.

Who is right? As the saying goes, when you pick up a stick you pick up both ends. If you want to end the argument, put the stick down. After all, we just might agree that a certain amount of regulation is necessary to get things done, and a certain amount beyond that is oppressive.

In reality, we live in the middle; it's the brand values that push arguments to the extremes.

Fortunately, brands are fictions, not facts. Nike's shoes won't make you "Just Do It" anymore than a Mac will make you more creative, or a PC will take you home. Nylon, silicone and aluminum are not values; they are value neutral—and so is climate change.

Climate change evokes thoughts of government intervention today, but it could mean something different tomorrow. Getting there will take more than picking a new frame, however, because the proposed alternatives are still government-centric. The underlying values conflict would not be resolved.

It will take a complementary brand that reinterprets what climate change means to us.

Americans of all stripes rally around grand projects when our common interests and shared ideals are at risk, and when new opportunities inspire the imagination. This is beginning to happen at the grassroots level already, even though most of the action is off the national radar. Business people—especially small business owners—are beginning to knit a new combination of brand values together around global warming. The values include downhome common sense, improving the lives of our children, improving business competitiveness, contributing to more livable communities, and promoting innovation.

Great brands tap into what is authentically true about a product and its benefits. Nike's products really do help you get in shape and Apple's products help the creative process. In reality, the climate challenge fosters collaboration, ingenuity, and our innate desire to control our destiny.

Does the climate change brand mean these values to most Americans? Not yet, but a competitive challenge to the government intervention brand is beginning to take shape.

The new brand proposition appears to combine parenthood, common sense, personal responsibility, and the American Dream. It's hard to argue with those values.