

CLOSED WALLETS CLOSED MINDS



David Report

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YOUR PATHFINDER INTO THE FUTURE

**We are increasingly
suffering from
consumption fatigue,
but brands and
designers have yet to
acknowledge the fact,
reckons David Carlson
in this issue of the
David Report**

Closed Wallets, Closed Minds

Consumption is what makes the world go round. It is, so many economists and politicians would have us believe, progress. If we do not consume enough we will soon be deeper in recession. Like it or not, shopping seems to be what is keeping us from the brink. We have had plenty of negative experiences of recessions over the years. We have not even come out of the latest one yet. But there is a downside to this. Our consumption is slowly but surely destroying us - psychologically, spiritually, maybe even morally - and, more literally, the world we live in. Our desire for novelty has not taken this into account - nothing has been allowed to stand in the way of our quest for new stuff, while credit and cheap labour has facilitated it.



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Of course, the producers have been more than happy to satisfy our demands. But the quality of what is produced, in the holy name of design, sometimes leaves a lot to be desired. New versions of bad examples of design are constantly surfacing; products that never should have been allowed to leave the drawing board; more and more, cheaper and cheaper...

The large-scale operations demanded by globalisation are partly to blame for this consumption craze. A parallel with the development of our

cities can help explain. Nowadays most far-sighted urban planners preach for cities with smaller blocks and denser, mixed-use urban planning - cities that foster community, with welcoming meeting points where we can be together and be creative. In other words, the entirely normal for urban planning up until about a century ago, when demands of higher efficiency and rational development came to life. It was preferable to build on bigger lots and hence get bigger financial rewards.

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The same pattern is found when it comes to manufacturing of products. Until the 19th century craftsmanship and small-scale production co-existed. The industrial revolution brought along a radical new perspective. Human needs became subordinated to economy and technology. Small communities were shattered because people had to move to where production was focused. Rational production and efficiency were prioritized and the large-scale production that followed gave business a whole new opportunity to make a lot of money. It also - and this has always been its key defence - lowered prices on the items manufactured. This did serve the interests of the consumers. But it was also the beginning of the wayward consumer society in which we live today.

A black silhouette of a person with curly hair, wearing a long-sleeved top and pants, shouting into a megaphone. The person is shown in profile, facing right, with their mouth open and the megaphone held to their lips. The background is white.

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Marketing programmes us to consume: advertising spend is up across Europe, with more media channels boosting volume too. Consumption in itself has become a lifestyle - we go shopping to pass the time, and feel disappointed when the hunt proves futile. Buying for the sake of buying can as easily promote feelings of remorse as pleasure. Vicky Robin's studies in her book 'Your Money or Your Love' describe a Fulfillment Curve and shows how shopping only makes us happy to a certain degree - then the kick quickly wears off. Only a very slight part of our consumption is about filling our basic needs. We are balancing on the very top of Laslow's pyramid. Many will fall down. But even more are now willing to jump.

As remarkable as it may sound, we are moving slowly into a post-consumer society. As consumers we have begun to feel doubtful of this circus, to resent being part of this unthinking consuming collective. Downshifting has become a real phenomenon, off-the-grid living an experiment more are taking up, while even the love of vintage might point to a greater demand for products of both more emotional and sustainable meaning. We have even started to become anti-brand, prioritising fundamentals the likes of value for money, utility and ease of use above the label. The good thing is, consumers also have the power not only of the democratic vote but the 'economic' one, through which this agenda might be pursued.



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The big question is, can the wheels be kept turning without the habit of constant production of things that waste resources and add to the mountains of refuse? There are perhaps two courses open - brands must either get used to the idea of a world in which we buy less, which will at least test theories that endless economic growth is a social necessity, or they need to speak to consumers with new resonance.

It is evident that this is a huge challenge, requiring a fundamental shift in the approach and mindset of producers and designers alike. That has already begun, albeit in a somewhat superficial way. Lately we have been lured into a new, experience-based economy where things are custom-made, come in limited editions or are handpicked by gurus. These items are preferably somewhat austere and simple, a

somewhat ironic consumerist expression of 'back to basics' - another style option to buy into, such that now even this has begun to feel empty and fabricated.

But the demands for a genuinely new, sustainable, improving design ethos are there. Many companies' CSR work has focused on minimising their negative impact on the wider environment. Now it is time to look upon it from another, more proactive angle - to work on maximising positive impact, to follow a consumer desire for brands to not merely be purveyors of goods, but agents for good. When so many big businesses seem to have taken on the mantle of The Tyrell Corporation in 'Blade Runner', it may not be so strange that consumer demands are higher too. Indeed, producer wants and consumer wants seem to be increasingly drifting apart along this fault line.

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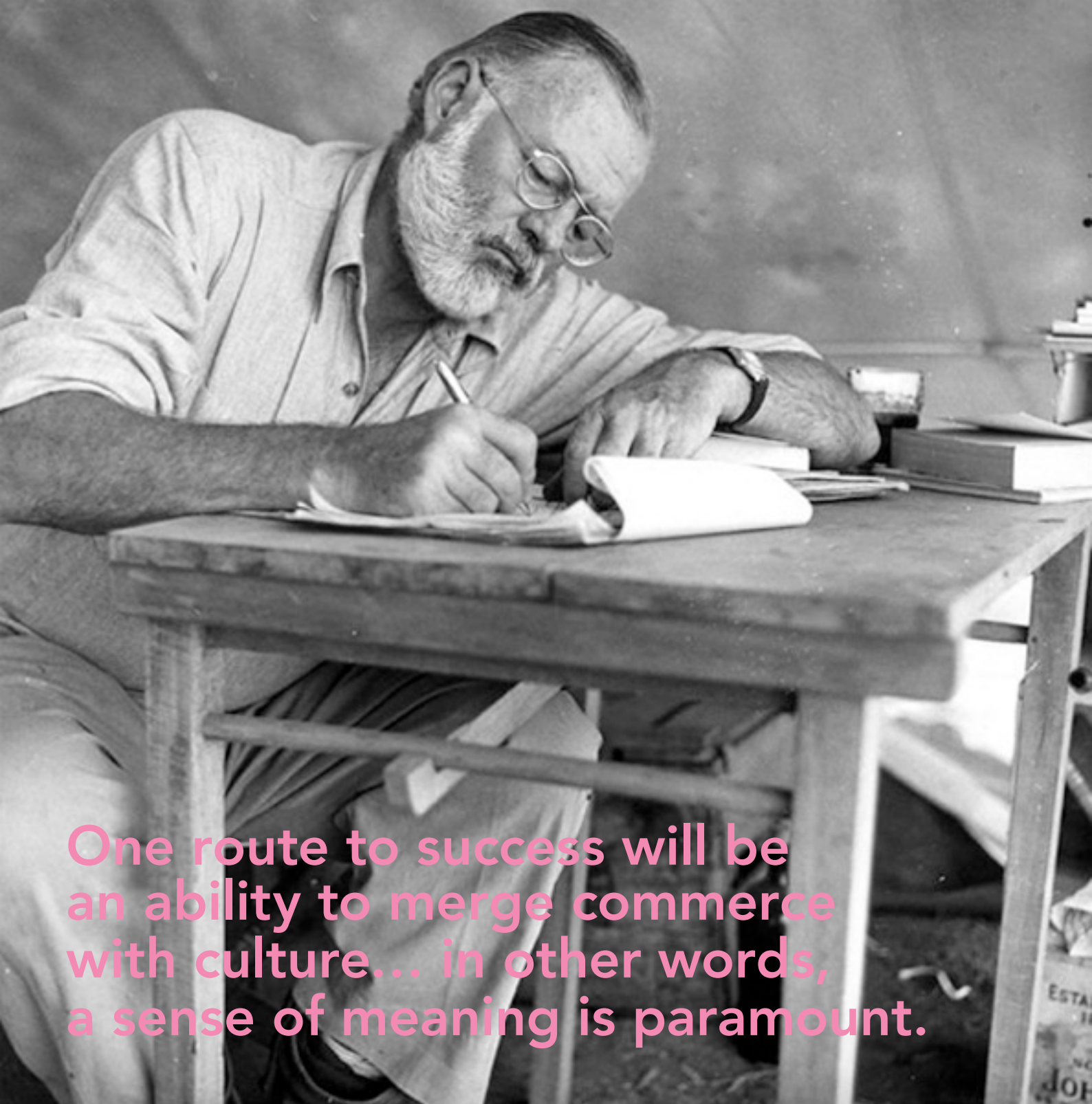


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Maybe it is about time to replace 'newness' with another kind of differentiation. A lot of successful innovation issues from something already existing, based on knowledge we already hold. Re-designing, re-imagining, re-mixing and re-using could become the standard. IKEA, for example, now offers their customer help to re-sell their old furniture - this service is a great example of a positive meeting between producer and consumer, and an expression of an attempt to make people see their belongings with responsible. (IKEA has also just started trialling a system in Malmö, Sweden, in which the company gives impoverished people

furniture that was otherwise going to get thrown away).

Of course, which business does still not want to create the kind of design that sells? But this is to miss the new dynamic that is shaping the way we inter-relate, whether that be simply everyday communications, in the sharing of knowledge or, increasingly, in commerce. Sometimes it takes trying to look beyond the physical product, to understand instead how, culturally as well as emotionally, it affects our lives; how it can be a tool of change, not only in relation to a world sat on a precipice, but also between people and culture.



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We can see the replacement of the old B2C transaction economy by a relationship economy. It is the relationship economy, and a spirit of community, that has made a success of social networks - off as well as on-line. One route to success will be an ability to merge commerce with culture - to provide products with the same deeper meanings we find in experiences the likes of theatre, dance, food, museums, film, literature and sports, each of which offers an emotionality that multi-nationals desperately need. It is this mind-set that product design needs

to tap into if it, and the brands behind it, is to prosper in the years to come. If we are not ready to live in a world with slower expansion - and it is unclear that we do - it is time to come up with a new generation of relevant products based on a holistic standpoint - one that does not only look at sustainability from an environmental perspective. It is necessary to look further and include values such as authenticity, aesthetics, affectivity and compatibility. The ruling technological perspective should be set to instead view product development through the lens of humanity.

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In other words, a sense of meaning is paramount. After all, it is not so much that consumers are in a hurry to give up shopping - more that they are feeling their shopping needs to have a resonance that, for at least the last three decades, it has lacked. A brand could be an enabler of an individual's personality, rather than a badge that sends certain signals to our friends and colleagues, but also somehow diminishes us.

Our personality is made out of our cultural identity. Companies ought therefore to focus on providing us with memorable experiences, to

convincingly speak to our subconscious, to capture moods. They need to start doing this now.

True, only the future will tell if the climate of anti-consumerism is genuine or if we are only on a pause between mad bouts of bag-filling. But the pause will still be educative. It will still change shopping behaviour. Companies that want to come on the journey are going to have to do what many are not so good at. They are going to have to listen to what the consumer wants, rather than tell them.

David Report

about:

This issue

This issue of David Report is created by David Carlson. The text was originally written for Viewpoint #27.

About David Report

The David Report covers the intersection of design, culture and business life with a creative and humanistic approach. By challenging conventional thinking we are always trying to make a difference.

About David Carlson

David Carlson is a figurehead in the international design community as a culturally-connected trend insight specialist and multi-disciplinary design thinker. He is regularly invited as a speaker, moderator and panel member at conferences worldwide. Over the past years David Carlson has been doing presentations in different countries like Great Britain, France, Japan, Sweden, Iceland, Chile, Holland, Slovenia and Taiwan to mention a few

The audiences include everything from institutions, organisations, cities and governments to corporations like Audi, IKEA, Lego, Volvo, Nokia, E.ON, Scania, Thule, Absolut, Sony Ericsson, Carlsberg, 3M, Campari, Oriflame and Samsung among others.

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-David Carlson

