

## Richer communication will make richer societies

by Christina Merl<sup>1</sup>

**“A new global “Peace Force” of relationship communicators and stimulators is needed to provide for social change”, says Uli Wiesendanger, Swiss co-founder of the international advertising network TBWA and President of Strawberryfrog, a global communications agency. Wiesendanger talks with Rural Development about the potential of the new media and about the role of marketing and advertising in global knowledge and information sharing processes.**

*Thanks to the new media, consumers can participate in the economy like never before. They create TV stories, remix music and design software – the Natural Marketing Institute<sup>2</sup> even speaks of “consumer control”. What are the implications for marketing and advertising?*

As a matter of fact, consumers have controlled the economy for the last 10'000 years. Only lazy manufacturers have neglected to listen to them. Successful companies have always kept personal contact with their customers. After all, if you want customers to come back after the first sale you need to know whether or not they were satisfied with your products and services. The new media allow for new ways of relationship-building between manufacturers and consumers. By means of the new media, customers have fun while creating their own way of seeing a product. This is how

manufacturers can learn more about their customers and how they see a product and the company. More importantly, manufacturers are able to create direct and personal relationships with all their customers. As a result, hundreds or even thousands of company employees receiving input from customers and carrying the company's message directly towards them will replace traditional marketing and advertising. This is how conventional printed and video messages will be replaced by “real” people. And in fact, these people will make up the largest part of a company's workforce, followed by the inventors and designers of the products. “Making” the actual product will be left for the robots.

*Can “personalised” products help developing markets to break out of their commercial isolation, i.e., can the new consumer-centric media change societies?*

Communication between people from whatever corner of the world will bring down the old hierarchies of commercial dominance and power. That's what communication has done for centuries. From traveling prophets to printed books. Similarly, the knowledge-based economy will be based on relationships, not on money. In turn, good relationships are based on goodness, not on material, aggression and power. Bottom-up and bottom-down will be equal. Values of small, isolated cultures will have the opportunity to be known everywhere. A richer communication will make richer societies.

*Users in third world countries increasingly rely on mobile devices. Would you say that wireless technologies and service interoperability across devices, geographies, service providers, operators, and networks are satisfactory? If not, how could the situation be improved?*

Wireless makes a lot of sense for the developing world because it's a cheaper infrastructure to establish than

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<sup>2</sup> [www.NMIsolutions.com](http://www.NMIsolutions.com)

wired communications. It COULD possibly enable emerging democracies to leapfrog the first world countries. I think telecom companies should invest in emerging markets with wireless and help drive the advancement of new technologies, which then could be sold to first world countries. So why not use the third world as a testing ground for wireless advancement?

*Mobile users in developing countries express a strong desire for content and advanced features, according to a "Global Mobile Mindset Audit" study<sup>3</sup>. Can we say that mobile marketing is probably the most effective commercial strategy in developing markets?*

Because of the lack of infrastructure anything mobile works a lot better in emerging markets. Mobile phones and computers are or will soon be cheaper to buy than television sets. Messages on the Internet are cheaper to produce than newspapers or posters. Commercial strategies will soon exclusively rely on them. And so no crutches of conventional advertising will have to be thrown away first, like in the first world.

*How can potential consumers in developing markets be reached, i.e., how would potential consumers in areas with extremely bad infrastructure find out about new products and where they are available?*

We have the Internet. Let's use it. Even if we cannot reach absolutely everybody, we shall reach the cleverer people. And they will tell others. The worse the infrastructure, the better the Internet connections will work. For example, Finland became the strongest mobile phone market because its infrastructure was the weakest in Europe. What we need to do is go to Third World countries and listen to them. What do they think, what do they need? This is hard work and not often done enough. However, the times are over where decisions and plans could be made at headquarters, somewhere in the "Old West".

<sup>3</sup> released by the Forum to Advance the Mobile Experience (FAME) in spring 2007. The data come from findings from a GMI study of 15,000 consumers in 37 countries. Surveys were conducted in the native languages of each country.

<sup>4</sup> Social marketing goes back to 1971 and is described as the systematic application of marketing alongside other concepts and techniques to achieve specific behavioural goals for a social good. (Wikipedia).

*Can the model of Communities of Practice (CoP) help finding global cross-agency dynamics to inspire and energize exceptional thinking and ideas, and if so, how?*

CoPs function without traditional hierarchies and without the material resources available to large, hierarchical structures. One may compare CoPs to a small country. They may find themselves in the situation of a small country somewhere. As a matter of fact, exceptional ideas have always come from necessity, when no other resources were available except brainpower and interchange of like-minded talents. This means that CoPs are not burdened by hierarchical ballast from the past. CoP members see each day as a new adventure. Somehow, they have nothing left to lose, which is the safest guarantee for exceptional – never seen before – projects.

*In a keynote speech, the CEO of Strawberry frog said, "We could come up with the best advertising ever to raise money for cancer and AIDS research and rid the world of them." Is this possible and if so, how?*

It's not just that we could come up with that kind of advertising. We have to. To communicate the advances of science is as important as pills or injections or whatever. In fact, the largest factor in the fight against aids, malaria, or cancer is how the cure is sold. What if we have the cure but cannot convince millions of people to use them? We will have to work for the coming decades to mix transparency, compassion, self-esteem, and even "fashionableness" in our messages until they hit even harder than a good Nike message.

*In the fight against AIDS, social marketing<sup>4</sup> has been applied to sell contraceptives in third world countries. How can contemporary (social) marketing help achieve sustainable social change in third world countries? Can grassroots campaigns help build locally managed, self-supporting communication and information networks that provide the basis for social change?*

We have to stop preaching, condescending. We have to involve every level of authority, family and friendships in every country. Nothing mobilizes all these better than a two-way communication system, which allows direct comforting, explaining, and encouraging from person to person. The ideas (for campaigns) will have to come from the people in the countries concerned.

I think that a new “Peace Force” of relationship communicators and stimulators is urgently needed to work like the “Doctors without Frontiers” on the spot and on the Internet.

*There is a huge market for counterfeit products in developing countries. Oddly, this market is mainly supported by Western customers. But there is also a big demand among young locals who want to participate in Western fashion and culture but cannot afford originals. Where is this trend going to take us? Are we facing a “global culture merger” phenomenon?*

We can't forbid any young locals anywhere to participate in fashion, may it come from the so-called West or East or North or South. Fashion ideas, from Nike to I-Phones to Louis Vuitton are sought after, because they are based on good ideas. But it is nowhere written that America or Italy or France has the monopoly on good ideas. The Pacific region and Asia and Africa will say their word in the future. Global culture is only good (and really global) if it lives on ideas from everywhere. Even if today it still smacks of domination of all by a few global culture will change into a global culture where nobody is left out.

*More recently, the Chinese have started to copy traditional African clothes – African tailors see themselves being deprived of their income. Could advertising and commercial strategies counteract this trend? If so, how?*

150 years ago the British snatched all textile manufacturing from India and made Indians wear clothing produced in Manchester. India was powerless in front of this outrage. Africa is not powerless in front of copies of their clothing made by China. The original always wins in the end over the copy. Like the Swiss took back the watch market the Japanese had taken from them, Africa can take the African cloth market back. They have the original and they make it better than anybody else. They have the opportunity to fight. Better design and better quality – and credibility – will win. There is nothing wrong with competition, even in an ideal global economy. As a matter of fact, some of the best advertising in the world has been produced by South Africa. Likewise, some of the best interactive work will come from other countries on that continent.

Our responsibility is to give them the confidence to “just do it”!

*Basically, good ideas sell all over the world. However, it seems that developing countries with their many local cultural differences and languages provide a particular challenge. How do or should campaigns for developing countries differ from campaigns aimed at western markets? Do culture-specific campaigns for very small niche markets pay off? What would these campaigns have to be like?*

ALL countries in the world have the same creative potential. Local cultural differences are interesting to the whole world. After all, British humor, French charm and American no-nonsense have dominated the media, as we have known them for decades. So I think it's time for a refreshing change: There is hilarious Thai humor; there is incredible beauty in Chinese calligraphy. And both are understood all over the world. In a globalised world where everybody has access to everybody, as discussed above, we shall have a mind-boggling multitude of ideas to choose from – I do indeed hope that we won't make the mistake of bending down to certain countries and looking up to others. Our roots go back to a couple of guys and girls who started walking upright in Africa 50 million years ago. Accordingly, goodness and honesty work everywhere the same way. And today we have the means to make them work everywhere.

*Critics say that too much development aid is swallowed up by high consultancy fees and excessive commercial and administrative costs – how could effective support be provided to developing nations? Could advertising play a crucial role in rural development and preservation of local cultures?*

Advertising is cheaper than the advice of a consultant. In fact it's for free. It's paid for by the maker of the product. Also, advertising agencies don't stash away money in Switzerland like corrupt politicians. Today, more and more manufacturers understand that they will have to give something back when their products are sold; that they do have a social role, wherever they operate. The healthier, the richer their customers are, the better their sales, no? The more they are seen as respectful partners to their customers in developing countries and not just grabbers, the healthier their

business will be. The field of intelligent cooperation – and sharing – is wide open.

*What do you refer to when you speak of “cultural connection”?*

When there is no cultural connection there is just: Here is my product. You should buy it. I might even tell you why if you care to listen. When there is cultural connection, the buyer knows the company which sells him or her the product, respects it and even likes it. And as a result thereof will think that we are cut from the same cloth, in many ways. We believe in the same ideals. We are not just selling- and buying-robots without a heart. We want to have a good time together. We help each other. You, the maker, will listen to me. And I, the buyer, will therefore trust you. We are both glad that the other exists. We even say thank you and how are you to each other.

*When you make ads in say, South Africa, do you work with locals? How can (marketing) knowledge be passed on most effectively in developing nations?*

There is no knowledge to be passed on to developing nations. They have it, just as we do. We are not sharing secrets of rocket science with them. And even in that area they will soon catch up with us. We listen to them. We laugh with them. We create together with them. South Africans love Swedish humor. Swedes love Mediterranean passion. We work with people from all over the world, because we want to work with the brightest, wherever they are. And we want to have a lot of fun while we are at it.

*In many parts of the world, freedom of commercial speech is under attack. Which role can advertising play in the knowledge and information sharing process in these countries?*

When Yugoslavia was breaking up and Serbian and Croatian tyrants and generals started to shut down radio stations and newspapers, their best talents went into advertising. Why? Because it was the only uncensored medium left. You could still speak in advertising, speak the truth. Even if it was about a detergent. Speaking the truth was more important to them than the particular subject of truth. And since advertising is about building relationships and caring for them,

they could take a stand. Maybe a timid one. But still. I have never met truly nobler people in my business. “Commercial” speech is impossible to attack. Tradesmen have continued the dialogue with opposing camps since the beginning of history. Advertising can play the vital role in the knowledge and information sharing process when everything else fails. Companies just have to stand up to their customers as they do to their product. Steve Jobs (Apple) and Richard Branson (Virgin) would know how. We need many, many more of those guys. And then, as they both like to say, we can change the world.