



BSR Conference 2009
Reset Economy. Reset World.

Sustainable Consumption

Breakout Session Summary
Friday, October 23, 2009 | 10:15-11:30 a.m.

Speakers

- » **Brian Collins**, Chief Creative Officer, COLLINS
- » **Santiago Gowland**, Vice President, Sustainable Development, Unilever
- » **David Orr**, Paul Sears Distinguished Professor, Environmental Studies and Politics
Oberlin College, James Marsh Professor-at-large, University of Vermont
- » **Aron Cramer**, President and CEO, BSR (moderator)

Highlights

- » Brands have an important role in sparking conversations with their consumers to understand how, as citizens, their behaviors in every day life can be impactful.
- » The term sustainable consumption is uninspiring and does not reflect the mind shift and behavioral change that needs to take place.
- » People don't just buy a product; they buy a story, which is directly related to the brand. Advertising should focus on harnessing that power to tell a positive story.

Memorable Quotes

"We are moving into a pro-logo era when brands will play a huge role in a new consumer democracy." —Santiago Gowland, Unilever

"People don't just buy the product. They buy the story; they buy the brand." —Brian Collins, COLLINS

Overview

Sustainable consumption is becoming more visible and gaining greater interest and significance. Cramer explained how in July Wal-Mart's new CEO Mike Duke spoke about plans for their Sustainability Index, a big leap forward from where the corporate dialogue was on sustainable consumption just a year ago.

Discussing the role of brands in driving sustainable consumption, Gowland stated that we are moving into an era where brands play a bigger role in affecting consumers' every day actions, such as traveling to the office or buying food. He believes that brands will be the biggest contributor to sustainable consumption, more so than ideologies, campaigns, and company policies. Gowland urged that brands must start a new conversation with their consumers, seeing them as citizens and exploring with them fairness in consumption. As an example, he highlighted that 76 percent of the environmental impact of cars lies in how people use cars, not in the size of a car or its emissions.

Collins referred to the rapid acceleration of transparency and the need for credible product information. As an example, he highlighted greenwashing as a key challenge in building a credible brand, as well as eco-anxiety, alluding to the resistance to buy organic or green products unless brands provide more information. To motivate consumers to make smarter buying decisions, brands can engage in open dialogue and give people the opportunity to act.



Discussing whether current sustainable consumption terminology is effective, Gowland noted that we are ushering in a new marketing model in which we will have to address the collective good. Orr mentioned that language around sustainability will change as we incorporate more spiritual themes such as happiness, relationships, and sense of community into the concept of sustainability. Collins emphasized the need to personalize sustainability through people's every day actions at work and at home.

Referring to how these concepts could work in practice, Gowland stated that in building a brand architecture it is important to focus on integrating social and environmental factors into development and innovation plans. He noted that it must start with a good understanding of the key social and environmental impacts, in addition to key consumer concerns, to avoid perceived greenwashing. Gowland referred to Unilever's Lipton Brand Imprint, which identified areas of focus in ethical sourcing and capitalized on sustainable agriculture practices already in place. Gowland reiterated that each brand has its own unique brand proposition and can lead in a particular issue, providing a lever for a broader conversation on a brand's corporate strategy.

Looking at the role of third parties in validating propositions, Collins confirmed their importance and cited Rainforest Alliance certification and McDonald's platinum LEED certified buildings as best practices. Orr noted he'd like to see more focus on the dialogue between design and buyers with a view to restoring trust in the dialogue around product performance. Gowland differentiated between third party endorsement and the new role of consumers as key validators of brand propositions.

Orr urged that advertisers must stop instigating anxiety-driven consumption through their campaigns and link sustainable consumption and wellness earlier in life. Collins noted that people buy the story not the product and that the power of brands to educate is strong, especially with children. Gowland noted that behavioral change is very difficult for consumers if there is not compelling reason, and therefore, change must be driven by product design and technology. He expressed a need to broaden the narrative to include values more intrinsic to people's behavior in their daily lives in order to shift behavior.

Addressing the sustainability of the world's current growth in consumption, Orr noted that the United States needs to be honest about its own level of consumption and be pioneers in guiding the way to a more sustainable model. Gowland called for new frameworks for consumption, explaining that it is not possible to drive change with communications alone. He stated that it must be internalized to affect real change. Collins concludes that it is not how we buy and produce, but how we reproduce and regenerate and tell that story through a closed loop system.

In response to a question about how to tell a good story, Gowland referred to the Dove campaign that expresses the democratization of beauty for women. In response to a question about the role of government, Orr remarked that we need smarter government, working collaboratively with business and civil society.

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