

COP17 brand challenge to SA business

By [Thomas Kolster](#)

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Dear South African businessmen and women, why so quiet when it comes to [COP17](#) or as the official title reads: the 17th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)? Where's your advertisement, your support, your commitment?

Closing your eyes won't help you or the climate

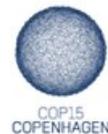
Last year, it was so exciting to see how seemingly every business, government official and South African proudly celebrated and supported the [2010 FIFA World Cup](#). This great support and cooperation made the world turn its gaze toward SA. It paved the way for many new business ventures and forged strong relations with the international community.



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Everyone's eyes, from Scandinavia to Bangladesh, are again turned toward SA, this time for COP17. There's plenty at stake not only business-wise, but equally so on a human scale; arguably one of the biggest challenges we have faced so far.

I was at COP15 in Copenhagen, Denmark and experienced the disappointing outcome, but I also saw how businesses were willing to do their part, raise their voices and make a difference. They simply saw the



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value in it.

This is not about rescuing polar bears; it's about money

Sustainability is not just the flavour of the month, fanatical tree hugging or a tactical consideration. The ex US president Bill Clinton put it well: "We can *choose* not to act. But we can *no longer choose* not to know."

Business is changing and if you, your brand or your advertising aren't changing with it, you risk becoming obsolete.

The business opportunity is major. Investors are taking environmental and ethical investments very seriously and the market in Europe alone increased from €2.7 trillion in 2007 to €5 trillion in 2009. That's almost 10 times the GDP of SA.

This is a tendency that has manifested globally despite certain stalemates and sticking points because of the financial crisis. These investments are forecast to grow significantly in the years to come.

Is this the slice of cake you can afford to miss out on?

They care; do you?

Moreover, the average South African does care about his or her health, the environment and sustainability.

Several surveys have shown that people not only care, but expect you as a brand to do your part and to place equal value in society's interests as the interests of business (from [Edelman's 2010 global goodpurpose study](#)).

Your average customer is also willing to put their money where their mouth is - rewarding brands that make a difference and leaving those on the shelf that don't.

A [2011 Sustainability Survey](#) from Ogilvy Earth Cape Town revealed that 76% of the respondents would be prepared to pay extra for a product or service that was either ethically or environmentally sound.

Consumers care; maybe you should, too?

Everything you can do, I can do greener

The competition is no longer about being bigger, better or cheaper, but what difference you want to make for people and planet.

Arch-rivals, Pepsi and Coca-Cola, demonstrate this well. In 2009, Coke launched its PlantBottle made from 30% renewable plant-based material. Pepsi is set to up the competition and introduce a bottle made of 100% renewable plant-based material in 2012.

The new responsible competition is fought not only by delivering on similar committed goals - but also by securing your share of a responsible voice in the market place.

In 2010 Pepsi left its usual celebrity endorsers, such as Britney Spears, on the bench and created a US\$20 million crowd-sourced community-supporting project, [Pepsi Refresh](#), in the US, that has now spread to other countries around the world.

Pepsi is responsible and their customers are thanking them for it. If your customers can't hear and see you care about them, why should they care about you?

Reframe the climate argument

You simply have to reframe your communication to meet your customers' worries or aspirations. Maybe for them protecting the climate equals saving money or for the poorest - getting food on the table. Electricity isn't cheap, petrol isn't cheap, food and clean water aren't cheap - and as recent uprisings in neighbouring Mozambique have shown, the poorest are always hit hardest when food prices go up.

Supporting your local community and securing their livelihood is the best way to a prosperous business and a beloved brand.

In that sense, sustainability does have a huge role to play here in SA, where more than half the population has very limited resources.

Greater responsibility, greater affection

For you, this is a possibility to get even closer to your customers and ask them to work together with you to solve some of these pressing issues. It's a move from target group to collaborators. Suddenly, you're not advertising to them, but working with them. I can't think of a stronger brand relationship.

I've seen the success companies such as Procter & Gamble has had with its [Ariel - Turn To 30 Degrees campaign](#), for example, where not only is it launching products that are more climate-friendly but is also inviting its customers along for a resource-saving journey.

This means money saved for you - and money saved for your customers. It's a win-win situation.

When you as a brand take on a greater responsibility, your customers reward you with greater affection.

Is your brand a trusted leader?

Dear SA businesses, the climate summit in November 2011 and the discussion around it in the following months are a possibility to begin a responsible journey and take the lead from your competitors, harvest the business advantages and forge a stronger relationship with your customers.

Personally, I think it's better that your brand gets out there and adds to the responsible voices in the marketplace, rather than continue the campaign for mindless or irresponsible consumerism.

I see this as future-proofing your brand and your business. In uncertain times, people look for leadership and determination, someone who can tell them it's going to be all right. What is your response?

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