

Combining desire with virtue - a key branding trend

By [Mathew Weiss](#)

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Type the word 'environment' into Google and you get 376 million results. Going green is hot right now, and there are plenty of Hollywood celebrities who will testify to this. Where celebrities go, the adoring public usually follow and brand owners are waking up to the fact that being green is not only fashionable, but can be a powerful brand differentiator, too, when product attributes are quickly copied by competitors.



Going green is only part of the story. It is one consequence of a global mass movement towards 'doing good'. For a whole host of reasons, of which global warming is just one driver, consumers increasingly want their brands to be one of the good guys and are choosing accordingly. This rise in mass-market ethical consumption represents both challenges and opportunities for brands.

Ethical buying by the majority is a different beast to that of traditional ethical purchasing. Until recently we divided between those of us who loved to shop, to consume (the majority) and those of us who cared about the world at large, beyond material goods (the few). An ethical purchase meant standing by your convictions, even if it meant sacrificing style, comfort or performance - all while paying a premium to do so.

Offer goodness

Mass market consumers, on the other hand, still love shopping for their favourite brands, but they now expect these brands to offer goodness in an accessible way, without compromise and without sacrifice. This is the change we are seeing - rather than the absolutes of traditional ethical or non-ethical purchases it's now about being virtuous.

Ethical brands define themselves by their goodness, whereas the new breed of virtuous brands incorporates virtue with other qualities. Virtue allows consumers and brands to do their bit without having to squash their desires and radically alter behaviour. This means we don't have to be perfect to be good, which is basically more realistic and attainable.

Combine virtue with desire

Brands that will be successful in this eco-environment are the ones who help us combine virtue with desire.



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For example, our design of the Spier calendar is a subtle and beautiful way to highlight how Spier endeavours to improve the environment, as well as the lives of the people who form its greater community. Each month one particular aspect of these social and environmental upliftment programmes is highlighted and beautifully illustrated on recycled paper.

The areas covered include, but are not limited to, their cheetah outreach program; its financial support of children's education; its water and waste recycling programmes; and its support of small businesses. The idea was to give Spier the opportunity to showcase its considerable social and environmental investment in a way that people would find beautiful and non-intrusive.

Charity

Another relevant path to virtue in South Africa is charity. It's been a part of good corporate citizenship for years but only recently is it becoming central to market differentiation. The answer lies in bringing together both the desire and the virtue in a way that stays true to the brand while driving home a strong social message.

An example of getting it right is Cell C's "Hola 7" initiative, which used the iconic youth role model Zola as a figure head for the development of community spirit, making sense of mobile telephony's role in helping people get in touch. It shows how a brand can use desire to sell product and make a measurable social difference in an appropriate way to target the lower end of the market.

Another benefit of targeting products at this end of the market, with this kind of brand strategy, is simply offering people more and better choices. It is empowering for consumers to be given the choice between products that simply meet their individual needs and those, which in addition also contribute to the good of their communities. They may even be prepared to pay a small premium to achieve this.

In the ensuing race to demonstrate ethical credentials, many brands will feel unsure about putting their heads above the parapet in case they are shot down. But don't be scared, instead be vigilant in the area you choose and a simple message of 'we're doing our bit or doing our best to' can be enough. After all, it's what most of us are doing.

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