

MEDIA COVERAGE

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Much Ado About Sustainability: Is it Time to Stop Sensationalizing and Start Simplifying the Solution?

Americans are tireless talkers. Let's face it, we like to pontificate. What's more, we love to debate. We are drawn deep into the drama and entertainment of sound bites, gotcha moments, and sensationalized current affairs. Lights, camera, action used to be enough to sustain our attention. Now we need a steady dose of a few dropped f-bombs, hair extensions ripped out, and nonsensical rants for the replay reel to keep us immersed. What's more, we will like, hashtag, and share the hell out of entertaining content. If it goes viral, we're all over it.

Admittedly, I feed the beast of the booming buzz business. Once (maybe twice) a week I fix myself a scrumptious snack, get cozy on the couch, relieve myself of all responsibilities, and get sucked into some choice binge TV viewing. Hey, who doesn't like to get briefed in their own home Situation Room by Wolf Blitzer, or follow the feuds by flashing back and forth between the Kardashians, Housewives, and Scandal? Listening to Donald Trump can make a bowl of pretzels disappear like a Houdini act. Note to self: buy more pretzels before the next Republican debate.

Magicians, pop culture, and finger foods aside, we recognize that sensationalized stories sell, but they don't typically result in fundamental societal change, sustained action, or progress. Of late I find myself asking whether or not sustainability practitioners are shooting ourselves in our foot?

We give praise for small and big accomplishments: from local solar installations, to green car purchases, to backyard composting and organic gardening, to deploying leading edge 'sustainable technologies' in manufacturing, reducing GHG emissions, conserving water, and so on. All of these things are awesome. These accomplishments happen because people (and organizations) take deliberate action to improve their condition. I commend anyone who is hard at work on these kinds of critical initiatives.

The image shows the acronym 'LCTPI' in large, stylized letters. The 'L' is a vertical bar with a colorful, fiber-optic-like pattern. The 'C' is a circle filled with a blue and white circuit board pattern. The 'T' is a grid of blue and white squares. The 'P' is a white, wireframe-style letter. The 'I' is a vertical bar with a green and white circuit board pattern. To the right of the letters is a white silhouette of the Eiffel Tower against a blue sky with white clouds. Below the letters, the text 'Low Carbon Technology Partnerships initiative' is written in a blue, sans-serif font.

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But at this time and place in the evolution of humanity, with all that we know, with the sophistication and scale of technology we now have, and the sensibility toward environmental stewardship and ecosystem services we've grown to understand -- shouldn't we now be doing all of these things and more, without hesitation, without question, without the need for validation, approval, or accolade? Are our efforts to mobilize humanity with broad, sweeping sustainability goals desensitizing us to the ever-present realities occurring throughout the world, and which require continued adaptation and attention of resources? Do we need a more precision, surgical-like, and simple approach to sustainability?

I recently read an interesting article, [How to Communicate Sustainability at a Brand Level](#), published by Sustainable Brands. The article provides examples on how brands including Pepsi, Ben & Jerry's, and Hellman's are integrating the power of story into their product branding, and in ways that enable specific sustainability messages to resonate with their consumers.

Kudo's to these and other companies and brands that are working hard to connect consumers, create conversations, and drive conscious change. Think about the difficult task marketers have to communicate sustainability with consumers. As if getting consumers to pay attention to basic product marketing messages was not already challenging enough, asking them to evaluate their purchasing decisions and consumption behaviors in the light of tough topics like climate change is downright daunting.

Some people believe that sustainability is far too complex and serious a topic to communicate among consumers and citizens. For example, [The Big Brand Report](#), examined how 195 global brands communicate using Facebook and observed that most Facebook users simply don't want to be overwhelmed by content that is "too serious." Sustainability falls into the "serious" category. It needs something to spice it up a little, like a dancing cat, singing dog, or surprised spider monkey.

That's troubling news, especially for me, someone who doesn't have any pets and tends to be an overly serious person. I'm working on that by the way! I'm stimulated by sustainability, and all of the branches of its sprawling tree limbs, extending deep roots, blossoming and dying leaves.

Sustainability is a challenging concept. It's not easy to dismantle, make sense of, let alone achieve. As a framework for making sense of the anthro-ecologic complex, sustainability is not a panacea. At times it can appear to be more like a distant mirage in the shifting desert sands. If you're chasing sustainability, you're likely going to die from thirst and exhaustion before you capture it. Sustainability

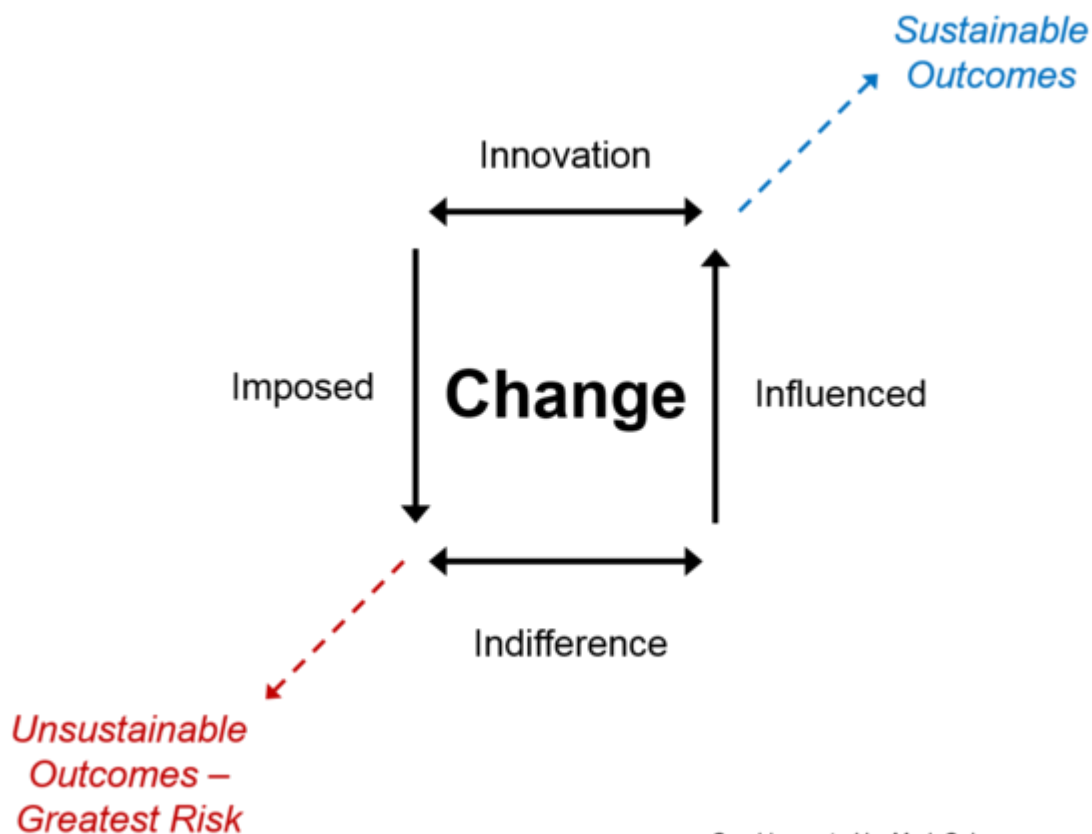
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is not a destination, it is a state of mind that can (if allowed to) enliven your journey, and enrich the milestones along the way.

Sustainability is also a choice, it doesn't (and will not) happen by chance, however it will be heavily induced by change. Change is difficult. Change can be imposed or it can be influenced. Some people are indifferent to change, and others, influence change through innovation. Where the choice to influence change aligns with a desire to innovate, the net result can be sustainable outcomes. Conversely, when change is imposed and butts up against intolerance or indifference, unsustainable (negative) outcomes persist.



Let's face it. We sensationalize sustainability. We have a tendency to present data with grim and grave prediction. We've had to do this, and to some extent need to keep doing so. But the dramatization of sustainability has an Achilles heel. Unfortunately for many, sustainability is a too serious, laying between the mental doldrums of a fear-factor and complete downer subject, not to be



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touched with a 10 foot pole. Thus as sustainability effort yield success, there is a subset of society that has become desensitized due to a steady stream of solemn forecasts. They've been told a mix of outcomes: sea levels will rise, crops will die, toxins will bioaccumulate, geo-political conflicts will intensify, and societal unrest will ensue.

These concerns are real and happening. The constant berating of business, government, society by sustainability soothsayers for not acting sooner and swifter is damaging. It fuels foolish feuds between the factions, perpetuating finger pointing and distances us from attaining truth and progress. Further, this outdated form of communication undermines the ability of humanity to mobilize the will and strength to take resolute action.

The power of story is an effective tool for sustainability evangelists. And as good storytellers and marketers know, selling the story requires an emotional hook that can delight and captivate. But telling a story is not easy. Sustainability is a local and global concern. Issues a world away are distant and disconnected to our daily reality. And while what's happening in our own backyard should be a top concern, too often we put our attention and resources to task away from the communities that need them the most.

Our generation has great deal to reconcile as there are no shortages of converging challenges we face globally. The basic needs of humanity remain under-served. More than half of the world's 7.3 billion people live in extreme poverty. They lack adequate access to suitable food, water, shelter, and clothing. We also know that as the world's population increases, people continue to congregate in urban areas, often in coastal geographies that are vulnerable to natural disasters including earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, wildfires, and drought. And here in the back yard of one of the wealthiest nations on earth, American's still have yet to adequately address a slew of integrated sustainability concerns ranging from poverty, disease, hunger, climate change, healthcare reform, education, social security, economic and national security.

An important question we need to ask of ourselves is whether in our efforts to celebrate success and share knowledge, are we also becoming blinded by our own do-good-isms, which can, if we don't stop in our tracks every once in a while, lead our collective futures into places that we never intended?

Although we have 20/20 vision looking at past mistakes, we remain limited in our perception of what our future may bring. But we are making progress. Although sustainability remains an obscure topic,



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we cannot dismiss that there has been a convergence happening among business, government, NGO, and stakeholder interests.

This year the United Nations' [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) were refined to heighten awareness of, and drive action toward, solving the world's most pervasive development challenges.

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) has leveraged the power of business to support the roll-out and implementation of its [Low-Carbon Technology Partnerships Initiative \(LCTPi\)](#) so that integrated partnerships can deliver lower-carbon based energy infrastructure, products, and services to the neediest regions of the world.

The [Sustainability Accounting Standards Board \(SASB\)](#) has advanced the use of sustainability accounting standards within public corporations so that investors can have more transparent access to data and information material to their informed investment decisions.

With sustainability more front and center than ever, many people are asking whether the progress being made is happening at a scale and speed that will truly make a difference, particularly in the areas of decarbonization the economy and working reducing GHG emissions impacting climate change. A recent [New York Times interactive graphic](#) creatively lays out the data on climate change and the voluntary pledges made by nations to curtail greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) and simply asks, "will they [climate pledges] fix anything?"

The 12 o'clock alarm has rung. Climate change is happening and dramatic impacts on humanity are underway. Yet there remains a faction of individuals, and in the U.S. in particular, that choose to dismiss the changes happening before their eyes. Americans like entertainment. The longer the climate debate plays out in politics, the more distracted we will be from the reality that we need to willingly adapt to climate change and modify our lifestyles. Of course the option to do nothing remains on the table, but prolonging recognition that climate change is happening only intensifies the potential for negative economic, social, and environmental damages.

Sustainability is serious business trapped in a world where no one wants to be fed a steady dose of serious. Daily life and just working to make ends meet for basic survival can be overwhelming enough for many people. Thus dismantling sustainability into bite sized snacks is simply not part of the daily regimen. We want light hearted humor, sex, drama, and outrageous opinion (not necessarily in that order). We prefer to reserve serious as an option for the Saturday night Movie-On-Demand main



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feature, when the kids are asleep, and after we're reached our fill of sensational non-real reality pop culture from our friend, the absolutely divine DVR.

What's ironic is that we're really missing out on something special. If you didn't already realize, sustainability is the ultimate Shakespearean story. How the sustainability plot plays out, whether as a classic comedy, tragedy, or social history, is completely up to us.

Simplistically, sustainability is story of titans, the clashing of God's, and the forces between good versus evil. Big business against big government, tempered by big data. That's an aspect of our reality. But look deeper, and you will find that sustainability is a transitional story about the evolving human condition, and how we reconcile our existence with earth and the cosmos. Our character is complex, as humans play the roles of both antagonist and protagonist in the story of sustainability.

But amid its vast potential sustainability has become a politically charged word. It has its own global movement, represents an enormous economic opportunity, and remains a self-effacing generational reality leveling our bravado and reminding us that human evolution is still in its infancy. Humanity has a great deal of work to do, particularly with regard to our respect for human life and the environment.

We are at odds with one another, exercised by a selfish pursuit of control (over earth, each other, and the unknowns life has to offer), and left only to discover that ultimately this is futile in the context of time and fate. As we seek to control our external environment, we are also forced to battle the most pervasive adversary, ourselves. As our ego and conscious collide we are blinded by the obvious reality that control is an illusion.

But as we've transitioned the word sustainability to take on a meaning for our generation, we've made a breakthrough. Let's keep our goals aspirational, yet attainable. Let's defray indecision with good data and fact. And let's keep this journey fluid and flexible, responsive to change. Whether we are adopting climate adaptation strategies, fighting hunger, eradicating the world of disease, transitioning to a decarbonized economy, or adapting to a world of asymmetric terror threats, simplifying sustainability will be critical to our success.

We [humans] are our own worst enemy. Although some humans make a great show out of perception, none of us truly has ultimate control, as we cannot control anything but our own behaviors. Thus the greatest power and potential anyone can reveal to the world, is control over their own spirit, actions, and behaviors.



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Sustainability then, is up to us. The sensational power of story can make us laugh, cry, dread the future, get angry, become dismissive and distant, and bring us together. Sustainability is a story that we all live out each day. We have a choice to make the story our own, one that lives beyond us, throughout the ages, and for another generation to retell their grandchildren.

So how sensationalized does the story need to be? Will the fate of humanity be a Shakespearean tragedy? Will we be a comeback, feel good, or comedic story? Who knows? But one thing is for certain - all the world is a vast sustainability stage - each of us has a role in the production. What role will you choose to play?

Huffpost Green - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/markcoleman/much-ado-about-sustainability_b_8682164.html