

The power of sustainable experiences

A column by Patrick Kruithof

One of the most striking situations I encountered when I was travelling through India was that of a group of villagers sitting around a cosy looking campfire. Approaching them I suddenly detected a pungent smell. These people were using bicycle tires instead of wood to keep their fire going. Black smoke was spiraling into the air. What they did not know was the negative impact of this toxic smoke on both their bodies and the ozon layer above them.

This experience in India was a clear encounter with an unsustainable habit. The image of these people around the campfire is a kind of metaphor for the way humans have been treating the environment in the past decades. Large scale deforestation, mountains of refuse, air pollution, fresh water shortages and species threatened with extinction are just a few examples of this. The question raised here is how and in what way these unsustainable lifestyles can be changed and what role designers can play in this.

The Brundtland Report (1987) defines sustainable development as follows: 'Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' An ancient Indian proverb states the same but can be perceived more intuitively: 'We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children'. So sustainability is about acting responsibly. It is a certain feeling located in the lower belly of what is wholesome and what is not. In the design field sustainability is referred to as eco-design. There are four different layers of interest to be mentioned here, based on the theory of the Experience Economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). These are in order of historic importance: experiences, services, products and materials. Organic hemp for example is a sustainable material, a ruler made of reused venetian blinds is a sustainable product and renting car-share vehicles is a sustainable service. But what then are sustainable experiences? Can these be designed and sold as well?

The combination of the two words sustainable and experience seems to be a contradiction in terms. An experience is always momentary and certainly not ever lasting, so how can it be sustainable? The answer is given by the way the experience has been designed. With a strong storyline it creates meaning, by stimulating the senses it creates a memorable event. By its power it will be shared with others and thus duplicated. In the end it will become a valuable memory in the human brain. Most important, frequent consumption of sustainable experiences will completely change a person's lifestyle.

So what do these experiences look like? One clear example is a cup of coffee from the Dutch brand Max Havelaar. Drinking this coffee one feels comfortable because the farmers that grew the beans received their fair share of the profit, they live in relatively good conditions, their children go to school and no pesticides were used to grow the coffee plants. We cannot buy this story from a conventional coffee company. We have to buy it from Max Havelaar and are even willing to pay a higher price for it.

Other examples of sustainable experiences are programmes which compensate the CO2 exhaust from air travel with the planting of trees, the company Well water which spends twenty five percent of the revenue from its bottle sale on water projects in rural Africa and Asia, and a recent but not yet realized concept for a sustainable dance club where visitors create electricity while dancing on the dance floor.

In designing these experiences, all four previously mentioned levels need be addressed. Well water is using healthy water resources (material), its bottles can be recycled (product), clients will find honest and transparent information on the website (service) and glass bottles have been developed for special occasions and events (experience). If one of these four levels fails in the design we cannot speak of a sustainable experience anymore.

Sustainable experiences can be defined as experiences that do not only benefit the well being of the person consuming but also that of other world citizens and of generations to come. Consumption of these experiences will evoke positive emotions in people like compassion, solidarity, a sense of common good, joy and love for life. Lets see if we can design new kinds of campfires where these emotions can find their place.

*Patrick Kruithof considers himself a multidisciplinary person. Educated as an industrial designer he is both entrepreneur, writer, photographer, adventurer and artist. He developed several concepts and products in which sustainability plays a major role and consulted small and also bigger companies in making their products more durable. His research has been focused on new sustainable materials looking for useful applications. Feeling the need to share his experiences Patrick Kruithof started teaching eco-design at several educational institutions using a practical but dynamic approach. In 2001 he launched his second business The Moment Company which aims to stimulate sustainability awareness by creating and selling sustainable experiences.
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References

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published a report entitled 'Our common future'. The document came to be known as the 'Brundtland Report' after the Commission's chairwoman, Gro Harlem Brundtland.

Pine J. & Gilmore J.H. (1999) "The experience economy", Boston: Harvard Business School Press

Max Havelaar coffee: <http://www.maxhavelaar.nl>

Well water: <http://www.wellwater.nl>

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