

Towards sustainable growth

In the August 2001 issue of Ingenia, Professor Meredith Thring commented on the problems posed by our ever-increasing consumption of natural resources and the pollution of the environment. KG Adams and WE Duckworth, in a letter in the November 2001 issue suggested that, in future, people could achieve personal fulfilment through intellectual, aesthetic, spiritual, physical and social activities, rather than through material consumption. Here they expand upon this idea.

The problem

Organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth have been promulgating, for the last two decades or so, the message that the developed world's obsession with the acquisition of material goods cannot be sustained without irreparable damage to the environment and exhaustion of natural resources. Their essential plea to Western people is 'stop consuming'.

This request is very difficult for the general population to absorb and act upon. The satisfaction of needs is an essential part of human nature. Acquisition and the satisfaction of desires have become part of current behaviour in the Western world. The triumph of the market economy over communism has demonstrated the power of the consumer today. Marketing and not production is now the dominant force. Production is in the service of what the market can sell.

In his book *The Practice of Management* (1955) Peter Drucker said 'There is only one valid definition of business purpose: to create a customer'. Business is therefore about finding new customers for new products or more customers for old ones. Underlying this is an understanding of humanity which sees people as having limitless latent desires which can be continuously and progressively stimulated into felt wants. Business therefore cannot respond to a plea to reduce consumption.

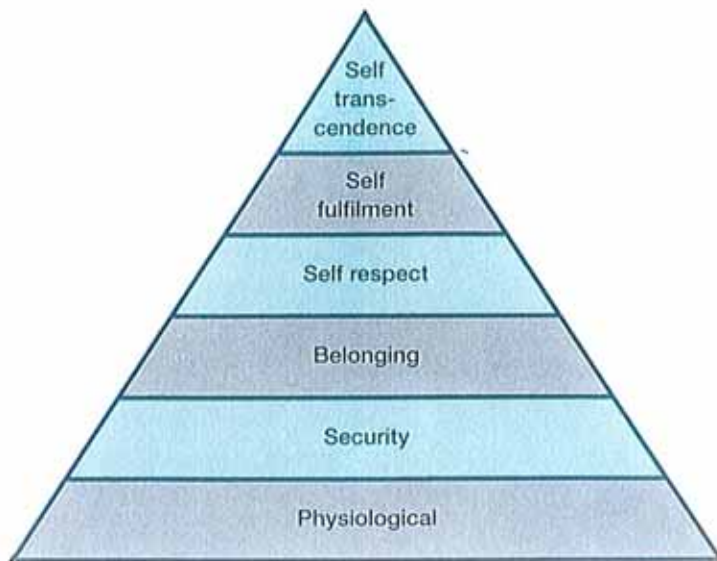
Reduced consumption would also be disastrous for the world economy.

Because marketing seeks continually to extend the range of human desires it ensures economic growth. Without that the market stagnates and recession occurs. The hardest hit would be the developing world which the environmentalists seek to defend. The world economy thus depends upon the ever-hungry consumer.

Those who lead in marketing study how to sell their services or products by appealing to one or more of the full range of human needs from those basic to survival, from fresh air, food and water, to those for security, love, self-respect and self-fulfilment. They are continually exploring what latent areas of human desire can be aroused or re-awakened to open up new markets or expand old ones. Growth in these desires and aspirations is the fuel that drives market economies.

As Meredith Thring and others have pointed out this growth is already beginning to place an intolerable burden upon the environment. So market economies would appear to have within them the seeds of their own destruction.

Figure 1



A possible solution

What we will now suggest is a process for business to change the direction of the market drive and thus consumer demand into one less dependent on the acquisition of material goods. The key factor which has not been examined in the exposure of the dilemma is the truth or falsehood of the view of humanity on which the marketing concept rests. Long ago Abraham Maslow pointed out that there is a hierarchy of human needs which is often presented in the pyramid form shown above.

Life depends upon our physiological needs being met – for air, water, food, warmth, etc., but as we progress up the pyramid these needs are no longer directly promoting survival but are those that allow us to develop. In a paper published in the November 1990 journal of the RSA (the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce), one of us (KGA) pointed out that the representation of Maslow's ideas made it look as if our greatest needs lie at the bottom of the pyramid. Although these are essential they are limited. One can only eat so much food, drink so much water, breathe so much air. This is also true at the next level. Only one suit, one room, one car can be used at a time.

As the hierarchy is ascended the picture changes and as the needs for self-fulfilment and self-transcendence into new experiences are realised the restricting factors seem to fall away: these needs feel limitless. Adams proposed that the real picture of our needs was the inverse of the popular way in which Maslow's ideas are presented as shown in the second diagram (Figure 2).

The needs are in the same order, but the picture reveals the limited nature of our physical needs, and the limitless desires for intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual growth and delight. There is no top to this pyramid. This new picture affirms that the underlying view of human beings as creatures of limitless latent needs on which the marketing concept rests is true, but the great growth markets are not in our physical needs which place high material demands on the environment. They are in those that can place a very small demand on material resources and energy. A realisation of this by the business communities of the developed world will show that their main future markets no longer lie in producing more energy-consuming and polluting physical products but in gratifying our less material desires.

To some extent this is already occurring. Martin Hayward of the Henley

Centre pointed to this in an article in the June 2001 issue of *The Director*, the magazine of The Institute of Directors, when he drew attention to a search for satisfaction in new consumer areas being potentially a precursor to a post-materialist swing. Last Christmas, he wrote, the luxuries that many consumers wanted were intangible. More rest, a couple of days without the children, someone to cook the dinner, a nice day out or a holiday, were far more popular than traditional products. Boots, WH Smith, Thomas Cook and Marks & Spencer had all developed new products for sale: a day at a health farm; learning to rally drive; a flight in a hot air balloon. These 'experiences' were on sale alongside the more traditional gift items and the market for innovative thrills is growing rapidly.

This realisation of where the growth markets lie for those who have enough in material terms is of profound importance. Those of us who have enough still need to be motivated to continue to play a vital part in the production of the material needs of all the other people in the world. We will generally only be so motivated by reward which we can devote to our own growth.

If the latter continues to be expressed in material terms we will fail to supply the needs of the rest of the world and will destroy our environment. If we change our aspirations we will do neither. The new markets are already appearing in extended education, entertainment, music, garden and leisure centres, provision for better health and a more secure old age.

In this vision of the new markets, business is not simply called upon to be more green in its operations in a negative way. It becomes the leading force in solving our environmental dilemma through its marketing skills in changing aspirations.

Issues

We are aware that the changes we urge on business will concern those who wish

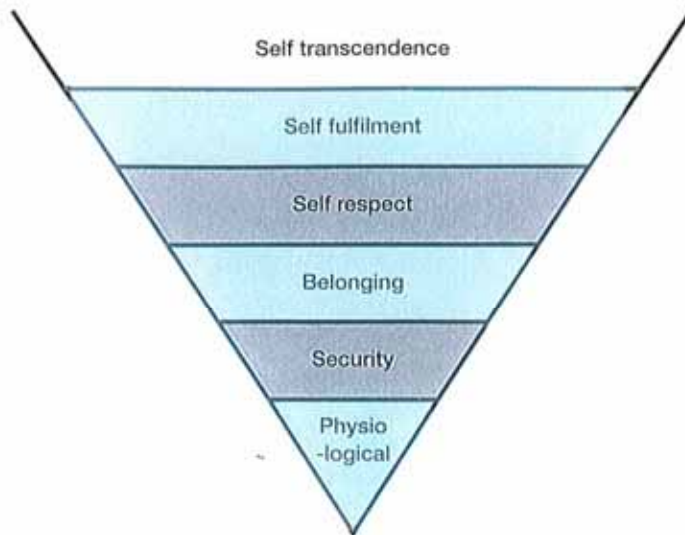


Figure 2

to preserve in the West the traditional hardware manufacturing industries. These will still be needed because many of their products will still be required, but with a greater emphasis on exports to the developing world. They will, in any case, be less material and energy-intensive than at present following trends which have been underway for many years. (See 'Present and Future Patterns of Material Use'. *Chemistry and Industry* Nov. 1982.)

These natural trends, plus the increasing outsourcing forced by competitive pressures, have already moved major manufacturing operations into developing countries to their great benefit. Even such a staunch supporter of British manufacture and design as James Dyson has had to follow this practice. What matters is not the decline of industries. This can never be halted, as post-war governments have found to the taxpayers' cost. It is jobs that must be preserved and increased in value. This will be much better done in applications that are sustainable rather than in jobs that are continually under threat from environmental pressures.

The skills of modern manufacturing can be readily used in the leisure industries of the future. The software that enables plant makers to explore three-dimensional models of their

designs can be adapted to enable realistic holiday tours to be enjoyed from an armchair with none of the hassle of actually travelling. Three-dimensional laser holography could eventually make videoconferencing totally acceptable. Inexpensive numerically controlled tools would transform many hobbies. Distance learning and other techniques common in business will improve the capacity to enjoy leisure, and will produce many creative outlets. Instantaneous language translation will foster more international friendships.

The opportunities are endless. Manufacturing has long ceased to be just a matter of metal bashing. As Dr Ivan Yates has said, it is better defined as a process in which the product is distinct from the means of its creation. With this acceptance, there will be no end to manufacturing nor of the skills employed within it in environmentally friendly use.

Summary

To sum up: We maintain that business can play a major part in the solution of our environmental dilemma by changing the aspirations of people in the developed world through the expansion of its markets in the areas of intellectual, aesthetic, spiritual, physical and social

delight, because these are not highly consumptive of materials or energy.

The Comino Foundation, whose purpose is to help people in Britain live fulfilled lives within a prosperous and responsible society, is interested in encouraging debate on the validity of our argument. We would value comments on how best to initiate that debate. ■

Further information and offers to assist in the work of the Comino Foundation should be directed to:



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1959. He then became a director of Hays Wharf and a non-executive director of other companies. He was also involved in the Industrial Mission of the Church. In 1969 he was appointed the first Director of Studies at St. George's House, Windsor Castle and in 1975 initiated a movement to develop an affirmative cultural attitude to industry in Britain. This led to the setting up of many institutions now pursuing this activity and the promotion of Industry Year 1986.



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