

### From 'Me' to 'Wii'

24/03/2009  
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#### Scope

Signs of recessionary despair are around us everywhere. Pessimistic language in the papers tells a story of perpetual and rapid decline, the glimpses of headlines on Evening Standard boards outside tube stations irresistibly sear anxiety into the commuter psyche. Retailers in freefall compete to 'shout loudest' by filling windows with declarations of higher and higher (or should that be lower and lower) percentage reductions. The red backgrounds cry of alarm, the exploding design of the fonts and designs, the exclamation marks are all codes for consumerism in crisis. These are not sales, they are scares!

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Optimism in these times is a rare commodity, yet it is emergently signalled in a range of subtle ways. A small incident on the tube, recently reported in a widely read blog, signalled a change in our social culture which could substantially differentiate our age from the previous ten years.

A woman was on a packed tube with two young girls under eight years old. There was one seat and the younger girl took the seat while her mum and older sister stood. The older girl gently moaned to her mum about being exhausted and it not being fair, and suddenly a woman sitting on the seat next to the younger girl offered her lap to the girl to sit on.

It was clear that this woman was a complete stranger to the family and that she too was tired and there clearly was no room for her to stand. So instead of one of them making a sacrifice for the other, she offered her lap and in that way shared her seat with the older girl. Having accepted this generosity the woman then struck up a conversation with the girls and their mother.

This was an extraordinary action demonstrating a generosity of spirit that in all likelihood would not have occurred six months or possibly three months ago. Indeed such an offer might have been viewed then, in the wake of headlines about Madeleine McCann and Shannon Matthews, as somewhat sinister. But here was an incident that took place in a packed tube, in full view of numerous people, in response to which no one batted an eyelid.

Sentiments are changing quickly. This spirit of sharing and of simple altruism spoke volumes about the new cultural context that is emerging, and which has come upon us at an accelerated speed. The uplifting action on the tube though appears in marked contrast to the general tone of the news we read and hear every day.

There is much for advertisers and marketeers to learn from this, and much that has already been picked up. So what is different about this newly emergent cultural context?

We only need to look at arguably the most powerful icon of consumer identity over the last ten years to understand where we've been focused. This was the period of the iPod, iPhone, iPlayer – the world of the 'i' in which we all shut out the needs of others, cocooning so as to concentrate on satisfying our own desires. The intention may have been to symbolise 'intelligent' or 'innovation' but it ended up signifying 'indulgence'.

Yet in his victory speech Barack Obama used a word that may yet signify the coming period: 'Yes we can'. This word was there, already under our noses without us realising it. Nintendo's Wii offered a powerful challenge to the solipsism of the 'i' culture. Both in its name and its fundamental purpose, the Wii connoted a world of shared pleasure and excitement, a life of engagement with others. The Wii is not merely a game, it is a declaration that a life spent without time with other people in the pursuit of happiness has little purpose. The Wii is coded as a subtle critique of the separation, introversion and selfish denial of the presence of others, that the iPod surely represents.

Its advertising clearly signifies this adjustment – from groups of friends in shared laughter, to family groups (the Redknapps) in faux competition, the Wii is a symbol of shared aspirations and mutual support.

There are other subtle signs of this awakening. The new T-Mobile campaign similarly signifies this shift to a culture of mutual pleasure and fun. Indeed, its setting in a

mainline rail station challenges the traditions of silent & insular commuterism, a world in which we must compete with others for space in the mass.

T-Mobile has transformed this terror into a warm, human experience. Critically it codes this sense of shared pleasure as a costless exercise – a dancing mob entertaining themselves and each other with no entry fee. The spirit here is one of voluntary involvement, personal and mutual reward, social interaction, physical expression. Exercise & entertainment rolled into one.

T-Mobile's campaign signals a stripping away of the personal vanities and expensive excess that characterised the last ten years, in favour of basic fun and collective energy.

In times of anxiety, fear, and job loss, a story told about reliability, certainty, honesty, integrity and helping each other, is one which nourishes the soul and provides hope for the future. Utopian it may be, but isn't that the kind of message we all hope for when reality bites – isn't that the reason for Obama's success?

This is not, though, a wholesale shift to thrift. On the contrary, people will still want to find pleasure through purchase, but increasingly tough times will give us pause before the sale is completed, and thus we could see a flight to quality & Twitter-inspired discernment and connoisseurship. In this climate, value will be coded differently, not only as price but as purpose...its benefit to the 'we' not just to the 'I' - Fairtrade as necessity not niche, environmentalism as everyday not exception, sharing not separating, connecting not cocooning, giving as a state of mind and a consumer obligation. And it will need to be accompanied by a tonality and visuals which support such aspiration.

For marketing and advertising, then, the challenge seems clear. It must do what it has always done best – tell meaningful and inspiring stories that engage people powerfully, remove them from the mundanity of the everyday, and promise to change their lives. That is a hard enough task at the best of times. But it is a message that has particular currency in an era when all that seems to be spoken or written about in the daily press, is a sense of impending doom. There are signs though, of a clear opportunity for brands to tell stories of impending hope. Those brands that seize this moment will surely capture the consumer.



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<b>Industry</b>	Semiotics
<b>Location</b>	United Kingdom
<b>Keywords</b>	Individualism Altruism Optimism Obama T-Mobile

