

We can always count on the nerds...

Thomas Kolster believes that brands and marketers have a much bigger role and responsibility than just increasing their sales. He claims that brands need to focus on doing good and that this approach is the only option if they want to stay relevant, credible and even profitable. He calls on brands to accept their responsibility for the future of mankind and to create real value. And when you listen to him and see his energy, passion, enthusiasm and persisting optimism, it is hard not to believe this man...



THOMAS KOLSTER
Mr. Goodvertising, Author,
Speaker, Thought-leader

We're living in times when the digital revolution is transforming existing industries and creating new ones. How would you describe the main changes happening in the marketing industry?

There's no doubt that digital is transforming the world of advertising and branding. I don't think there's any industry today that is not influenced by digital. It begins at the very top of companies in terms of how many digital competencies the board has, if there are any digital experts on the board, and so on. That is, of course, one driving force of change.

That said, I think we are ignoring four other things. Look at the five biggest megatrends that are going to shape our society in the next thirty years. The other four would be sustainability related challenges. These are resource scarcity, climate change, urbanization, and also demographic change, which is very important to look at. I am going to Japan this week. The median age in Japan is 47 while in Nigeria it is 19. It really changes how you have to do this outreach.

So digital is definitely changing everything but I do think that there are some perimeters that I would call sustainability related perimeters that we need to take very seriously very soon.

In your book "Goodvertising" you describe a completely different approach to communication and marketing. How do you envision

the mission of the communication industry?

What kind of happened is that everything is changing. We talk about digital. When I started in advertising school, we had all these mass media channels and it was very easy for brands to dominate the conversation. Today the approach is completely different. Donald Trump is probably a very good example of how you want to circumvent the traditional power structures of media and reach out through social media directly to people. It's a symbol of the changes that are happening. Look at Selena Gomez, who can charge 550 000 USD for a single Instagram post. That is the equivalent of about seven to nine full pages in the New York Times. So it kind of shows something is changing in the media landscape.

Secondly, I think we all have become these small media houses. Twelve-year-old kids have their own Instagram and Snapchat accounts, so we're all part of communicating stuff. In this situation, brands need to understand that they need to be ultra-relevant. We need to be focused 100% on people and what matters to people. For me, the concept of Goodvertising is really quite simple. If you think about it, not many people talk about hygiene pads on Facebook or social media. We want to talk about the things that matter in our lives. The brands need to be even more focused on giving us that value. And the marketing

and advertising may suggest that we as people should be in the center of that conversation. People ask "what is interesting for me" or "what is it that your brand can do for me". In the past, advertising served just to create propaganda products. This doesn't really work anymore. Something is happening and people are more and more turning their back on traditional advertising, so brands need to create value.

What is the main factor behind this change? Is it the digital revolution we have mentioned, or is it originating from the customers, or perhaps the brands themselves?

I think we could identify at least two of those tendencies. Of course it is influenced by the digital revolution which is giving much more transparency to everything and putting some of the media into our own hands. But I also think that we are just getting more aware of our role as consumers. If you go back to the 90s, people talked a lot about boycotting products. That was the way that you'd punish companies. Today a lot of people might think differently. It's more about opting in and choosing the brands and products that you like rather than boycotting those that you don't like.

And thirdly and I don't think we can ignore the fact that there is some sort of social consciousness happening. People are getting more aware and they are expecting much

BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Kolster is a man on a mission, one of the early pioneers in the do-good space coining the term Goodvertising to describe the changing advertising landscape that's become a movement in itself. As a seasoned advertising professional counting more than 16 years he's a vocal voice for advertising and brands as a force for good and his book "Goodvertising" is the most comprehensive book to date exploring communication for good.

He's a globally experienced keynote speaker featured at events like SXSW, Eurobest, D&AD, Epica, ad:tech & Sustainable Brands, a columnist for *The Guardian* and several other publications and a regular judge at international award shows. As a passionate entrepreneur and change-agent he's launched impact platforms like Cph:Change and Wheregoodgrows.com. *The Huffington Post* has dubbed him "Inspirational Leader".



more of companies than they used to. And this is not just a consumer thing but if you look at the European Union, it is also in many aspects a legislative thing. A lot more pressure is being put on companies and the role they play than before. The classic Milton Friedman "the business of business is business" is not really something that would resonate with a lot of CEOs today. The role of CEOs has changed. Look at Mark Zuckerberg, who is in his early 30s and one of the richest guys on the planet. These young CEOs, these types of young companies, they have a completely different perspective on the role of companies. Corporate culture has changed as well.

So all three of these trends are responsible for the ongoing changes: the change in corporate culture, the change in consumer expectations and thirdly, of course, the increasing pressure from digital.

When you introduce your concept around the world, do you meet with any resistance from mainstream marketing? Can marketing really be based on truth and moral values?

People are always afraid of change. My key message is that applying the goodvertising principles is actually more profitable. If you look at these types of brands, they outperform their peers. The second thing which is happening all over the place right now is the rise of adblocker. Marketers are increasingly dealing with consumers who are not satisfied with an opt-out but demand an opt-in system. The message they send is "we are going to tell you when we want advertising, not the other way around". The fact that you have markets that believe they're an island, or marketers that believe they're an island like the nationalist opting that we see now in more and more markets in Europe is for my part ridiculous. Of course people look to brands like Redbull, or Unilever and see what these companies are

doing. It's a trend you cannot ignore. Last year's Cannes Lions festival, which is like the world cup of advertising and Superbowl this year, which is a good barometer of how things are going in advertising, were both very much focused around social issues and social equality.

In general, from a marketer's point of view, more brands need to dare speak up and if you as a brand don't have the guts to do that, people start questioning your authenticity. And that can be very dangerous for any brand whether you are a Slovakian company or a global company. I see this very much in the big Fortune 500 companies that are aware of this trend and they are checking a lot of steps to mitigate some of these risks and also use the available opportunities in this space.



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It is true that people, especially the younger generation, are so overwhelmed with advertising that they are slowly becoming immune to all commercial messages. On the other hand, consumerism doesn't seem to be in decline. How can this be explained?

If we look at where consumerism is heading, we do see niche cultures which go the extra length to act according to their beliefs. Personally I am most interested in mainstream consumerism. How we consume is changing. Of course we're still consumers; we still look at

symbol value, the status symbol of what we use and how we use it. But those symbols are quickly changing. We are beginning to see a lot of celebrities promoting the sustainable mindset so the mission is to make the mainstream green and I think a lot of companies are doing that already. A couple of weeks ago, Procter & Gamble launched a campaign for their Head & Shoulders brand where all the packaging is made of reclaimed ocean plastics. There are more examples like this one and I think this approach is definitely becoming a part of mainstream culture.

Sustainability is something we need to fix. It's not like it's going to go away if we put our heads in the sand and cross our fingers hoping for the best. All four of the global megatrends I mentioned earlier that are going to shape our society are related to sustainability. Water is a good example. Today, in many regions of the world, water is very precious. Big brands are closing their plants in these regions because they can't produce what they need to due to a lack of water. The question is how do we create a system where we still consume but in a smarter way? Answers such as closed loops recycling or the circle economy are emerging. All CEO surveys indicate that sustainability challenges are now taken much more seriously and consumers across Europe are beginning to evaluate products based on a different set of criteria where social and environmental issues rank quite high. So I think that these two trends are hopefully coming together.

Do you worry about advertisers abusing the sustainability discourse just to improve a brand's image and profits without actually believing in its message and values?

Scepticism is always present when it comes to any important change in society. I think people always forget the bigger picture. Let me share my view

on humanity in general. I'm super optimistic about our ability to survive. Right now we are digging our own graves in terms of endangering the livelihood of our own planet. But we can always count on the nerds, we can always count on clever people. These sustainability nerds are already doing amazing stuff that nobody thought possible. A lot of people talk about sustainability being a society of less. I don't believe that. I think a sustainable society is a society of abundance.

So you have people like these guys from Stanford who are building a village outside of Amsterdam, which is 100% self-sufficient in terms of energy, food, everything, so it can be taken off the grid. That means no power to electricity companies and all that stuff. You see people who are able to grow abundance in food out of bacteria or mushrooms, you see people being able to grow clothing out of mushrooms and bacteria. So we are just beginning to understand the world of living organisms that we're part of and that nature can give us whatever we want if we understand its rules.

I think the press is not good enough at communicating some of these landmark discoveries that are happening right now. So for me, I go to work much more inspired than I ever did and much more hopeful than I ever was. And the role of communication and the role of brands is to give people a different vision. Brands need to lead. They need to tell us these stories about a healthy, sustainable future. We all want that. By the end of the day, we all want to bring up our kids in a healthy, creative, educational environment. So I think ultimately, sustainability for me is a real dream of marketing.

Actually selling people a better life and not just an illusion of a better life. Hopefully, we'll get there one day.