

## Get Ready for the Renaissance

### How to create meaning for consumers and thrive as civilization transforms itself

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-By Patricia Martin

What if I told you that by 2020 our entire civilization -- who we are and what we care about -- will be completely different? The transformation is already under way, and it will have far-reaching consequences for marketers.

As we search for effective ways to invent and sell products in a fractured, warp-speed world, one thing is clear: We are sloughing off the old skin that defined mass culture as an aggregation of tasteless, unenlightened people. It's time to prepare ourselves for a seismic transformation as our civilization undergoes a rebirth. As it does, it will force a more individualized sensibility and an enlightened approach to life for millions of consumers who will make up the renaissance generation, or RenGen.

Evidence of a coming renaissance abounds, but most telling are the pre-conditions for a rebirth that are now in place:

Death comes first. History shows that the seeds of the first great renaissance were steeped in conflict and waste. At the dawn of the 14th century, Rome was in ruins. The economy was in shambles. In the 1340s the Black Plague swept across Europe, triggering a transformation catalyzed by the human imperative to survive. And it coincided with a period of vast creative output. Consider that YouTube, Facebook and MySpace are all evidence that our society is gearing up to become very creative -- just in time to solve some serious problems.

A facilitating medium. The Roman Empire left behind an important gift to Western civilization: a vast network of roads that connected people to a larger world and carried the ideas and information that led to the Renaissance. Today, the Internet has a gale-force impact on our culture.

Dawning of an age of enlightenment. In an ideal renaissance, culture operates at a heightened level of mental capacity. Hence, knowledge and information are powerful currency. As a society is presented with unprecedented problems it can no longer ignore, ordinary people begin acquiring knowledge and sharpening their ability to find information. Today, people search the Internet more than they drive or drink coffee.

In the 1930s, Pitirim Sorokin, a Harvard sociologist, became obsessed with discovering why civilizations rise and fall. His four volumes on the topic can be boiled down to this: All major civilizations decline. They end because, as the dominant society progresses, it also changes until, finally, all the values, customs and social systems that gave life meaning become irrelevant. Then the civilization declines. As it does, it throws off seeds for the next. The greater the previous civilization, the richer the medium for new seeds to germinate.

The most perilous period of this cycle is the interlude. It's rife with paradoxes. It's also difficult to predict what people will want or need as they struggle to create meaning in their lives. That's where we are today.

Products and services that will thrive in the renaissance translate into helping people create meaning when their world is transforming. The idea is less elusive than you might think. Here are three concepts that will figure into how people who crave meaning will devour the brands smart enough to serve it up to them.

1. Fusion, not fission. Fission, the dividing up and segmenting of things, was a way to create energy in the 20th century. The 21st century is moving the other way: uniting things that are sometimes paradoxical to create force. As we shed the old civilization's trappings, we won't invent a new reality overnight. We will harvest what is still meaningful and fuse it with the new. Brands that adopt fusion as a point of view will rule in the RenGen. Reebok's research revealed music, the spoken word and dance were eclipsing sports as leisure preferences among youth. Rather than make its customers choose between the athletic and the artistic, it fused the two identities with the "I am what I am" campaign.

2. Smarten up. New ideas, thought and knowledge are aspirational. Your brand's teachable moment will be its moment of truth. Allowing the consumer to play an active role in that learning experience is nirvana. That goes for employees as well. Google's author series brings notable thought leaders to headquarters for live discussions with employees. The events are taped and loaded for the world to see. And they are all managed by employees.

3. Truth is beauty. A renaissance is a period of heightened context. Sights, sounds, smells, textures all have elevated importance. Consumers crave experiences that indulge their senses, not so much as an escape, but as a point of inspiration for those who see themselves as creative and self-expressive. Icons, logos and symbology will be more important, as will elegantly written narratives in the place of blah-blah product copy. Doing things will matter more than buying things, so sponsoring events will bring the two together. Powerhouse Books is reinventing the publishing model by fusing events, contests, exhibitions and think tanks with its products. The annual "Powerhouse Arena" event has become a must-attend for RenGen in New York.

One more thing: The RenGen believe they can make a difference. Small, personal gestures snowball. Anyone can be a leader and reap the rewards. You don't need a corner office to lead change. RenGen people lead without ladders.

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