

Weathercocks and Signposts

Should environmental campaigners go with the flow, or should they hold to deeper permanent values? **Simon Hodgson** reviews a new report on exactly that topic and interviews its author Tom Crompton.

Without wanting to get all philosophical on you, here's a question to ponder. Which is more important – an action, or the intent behind it? Does it matter if we do the right thing but for the wrong reason, or conversely if our intentions are good but our action is harmful?

This sounds academic, so let's apply it practically. If I buy my wife flowers, that's a good thing. But what if the act is motivated by some secret guilt? Is it still good? The VW Beetle is regarded fondly all over the world, but it was commissioned by Hitler and early versions were for the Nazi military. Does that matter? And – to come bang up to date – what about cutting our carbon emissions? It's great to save my 20 per cent, but what if I do it for financial rather than environmental gain?

On that last point at least, there's a settled answer. We need carbon savings and we don't care why people make them. Governments, campaigners and companies all agree.

But Tom Crompton doesn't.

Crompton is a softly spoken, thoughtful man employed by the WWF as a 'Change Strategist'. He is also the author of a recently published report *Weathercocks and Signposts*. Well, when I say 'published', the document was never really launched: it has simply diffused out from the WWF's website. But for all Crompton's soft-spoken nature and the low-key publicity, *Weathercocks and Signposts* is really making waves.

"We've had an immense number of downloads – about 600 in the first week – which is quite high for a technically dense report. Perhaps that reflects the report's serving as a lightning rod for a sense of frustration that many people feel," Crompton tells me, when we meet to discuss it. The Report's foreword from WWF Campaigns Director David

Norman says that it has "already led to vociferous debate within WWF-UK and ... cannot be taken to represent a seamless consensus in our own thinking". It's certainly started big discussions in Aconia and – I'd like to bet – several other organisations too.

So what is so explosive in Crompton's report? In 30 clinically precise pages of argument he puts a bomb under the whole happy consensus of ethical consumerism, social marketing and green

"...we can't consume our way out of an environmental crisis, and it's no good asking people to take simple painless steps to cut down."



behavioural change. He questions whether self-interest can ever be an adequate driver for environmental changes. He dissects our motivations in acquiring stuff, even eco-stuff, and finally quotes Tim Jackson concluding that "the transition to a sustainable society cannot hope to proceed without the emergence ... of some kinds of meaning structures that lie outside the consumer realm: 'communities of meaning' that can support the kind of essential social, psychological and spiritual functioning that has been handed over almost entirely in modern society to the symbolic role of consumer goods".

In simple terms: we can't consume our way out of an environmental crisis, and it's no good asking people to take simple painless steps to cut down. Nothing short of a values revolution will do.

Now this may not be news to you if you have come up through the ranks of environmental activism and always practised what you preach. But it's a nasty shock for all the CEOs of corporations, senior Defra officials and the growing eco-teams in the advertising agencies who have been painting the path of least resistance green.

The Report takes aim at the notion that small and painless steps are the first elements of fundamental change in values, something which has underpinned much social or green marketing. "Compact fluorescent light bulbs today, marching on Parliament tomorrow" is its rather neat shorthand. And it finds little evidence to support the idea. It also challenges another type of green marketing – making 'eco' sexy. We can make people aspire to a Toyota Prius or solar panel for reasons of social kudos, it argues, but unless they are motivated by a genuine environmental concern they may change when fashions do.

In fact, the marketers come in for heavy fire. Quoting social psychologists, W&S demonstrates how we place so much of our identity into what we buy. We buy stuff to say who we are. We buy to make us happy, but it doesn't. We

remain unhappy so we buy more. And the marketers fuel the whole thing, pointing out our unmet needs and associating their products with the people we wish to be.

You'll be gathering by now that this is deep stuff. Crompton has in his sights nothing less than what it means to be human. "I have a faith or confidence in the goodness of human nature," he explains, "that has been suppressed particularly in western civilisation in recent decades. [This is] in part as a result of the fantastically sophisticated motivational manipulations that the marketing industry has been able to effect, in part because of the political momentum towards individualism and the pursuit of individual self interest. If there's any silver lining to the climate change challenge it's whether it presents a prompt for us to rediscover something more fundamental about what's good about being alive and human."

The document is a challenge to all of us, but particularly the environmental NGOs to look at how and why they campaign. It ends with some practical actions, but they feel much more like

the end of the first movement than the symphony's final chords. The aim is clearly to start – and to some extent legitimise – a debate that society seems almost



embarrassed to have. Crompton points to Oliver Letwin's attempt to open public discussion on the importance of beauty in society and the speed with which it

was foreclosed. He plans a project with RSA to encourage and support public figures prepared to speak out in quest of a different values system.

This kind of change – radical, fundamental, disruptive – will need radical disruptive circumstances to drive it. Crompton admits freely that we aren't yet at that point, but points to the rising tide of evidence that shows we will be one day. "We're in for a rocky ride over the course of the next century or so," he says ruefully. "What I see the role of the environment NGOs as being is to rehearse some of these debates – to cut some of the channels through which public discourse might come to flow when the external pressure and chaos is so great that these issues do come to the fore."

In this Report, that process has been well and truly started.

*Simon Hodgson is a senior partner at Acona, where he heads the Group's sustainable business practice
simon.hodgson@acona.com*



Acorn: The green link in your supply chain

Turning over a new leaf...

The IEMA Acorn Scheme provides a new approach to environmental management systems implementation. It's a step by step approach providing flexibility and accredited recognition at every stage.

Organisations can engage supply chains in environmental performance improvements using Acorn, helping to drive better environmental performance and resource efficiency.

The scheme also provides an easy means of tracking your suppliers' environmental management progress. Don't let your suppliers drag down your environmental reputation – find out more about Acorn at

www.iema.net/acorn

iema
INSTITUTE OF ENVIRONMENTAL
MANAGEMENT & ASSESSMENT

