

A Climate for Creativity

Climate change is a topic that's justifiably seldom out of the news these days. Events like Hurricane Katrina make it very clear that "climate chaos" is a much better term for what's happening than the comfortable phrase we used to use "Global Warming".

It's also an instructive example of the way that new ideas are resisted, in many cases until too late.

Successful innovators adapt to new challenges, protect themselves from the dangers of changed circumstances and exploit new business opportunities. But, like dinosaurs, many fail to adapt. Of all the companies listed in the Fortune 500, 50 years ago, only 2 still exist in the same form today.

We've had scientific consensus that climate change is real and at least partially human induced since 1993. Sceptics still tried to deny it, but by the late 90s they were losing ground. For example, The Global Climate Coalition was set up in 1989 as a pressure group for corporations opposed to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. BP was the first to leave in 1997. Ford, Shell, Enron and others followed, and by 2003 it was effectively disbanded.

By 2004, even the sceptics admitted that climate change was happening, but bizarrely claimed that action was too expensive. In 2005, they quietly changed tack again, so now you will hear them emphasising the need to invest in capital intensive technology, rather than accept targets or change lifestyles to reduce emissions.

This pattern is the typical reaction to any new idea: Initially it is ignored. Then it's claimed that action is unnecessary. Finally, and very quickly, it makes the transition to being seen as obvious.

In climate change, we are approaching the 3rd stage. The reality is that new technology will probably help, but we can't afford to wait for it, or wait for action by others. We need to take action now on behalf of our companies and our families. We need to demand government action to create a long term stable policy framework within which we can all work and invest.

When faced with a crisis, there are two key things to do: Address it (which includes accepting responsibility for one's own contribution to the problem), and adapt to it. If one is clever, one can often find a creative way to do both simultaneously.

For example, Adnam's brewery in Southwold is building the most environmentally efficient logistics centre in Europe. It will be so well insulated that they will no longer need a refrigeration plant to keep the beer cold in summer. It will also insulate the business against the risk of higher fuel prices.

British Sugar recently announced that they will be building a 55,000 Tonne bio-ethanol facility at its Wissington plant in Norfolk. Manufacturing a petrol substitute is an interesting new business opportunity for them, in the face of the forthcoming changes in the EU's sugar support regime.

My small consultancy will never have the impact on emissions that BP do, but as our most significant contribution to the problem comes from our travel choices, we now pay attention to this. We have a policy of encouraging travel by train in preference to flying or driving and find this is also improving productivity and business performance.

Action is a financial imperative, but also a moral one. In September 2005, a coalition of NGOs, ranging from Christian Aid and Oxfam to RSPB and WWF was launched to provide a voice for people taking and demanding action to “Stop Climate Chaos”. See www.stopclimatechaos.org

As we come up to Christmas and the season for New Year resolutions, it’s maybe a good opportunity for us all to resolve to join them.

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