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Rengen Revisited: Stand Out in a Period of Intense Cultural Transformation

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The trouble with making a living in marketing is that it can be pretty tough to conjure a meaningful existence during shadowy economic times like these. How much hair gel can we sell to resurrect the dollar? Can a new breakfast cereal prop up Wall Street? Can a five-blade razor restore our faith in the future? Didn't think so.



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Yet, we all love what we do. And I'll venture reasons why: We are creative, and we want to help people succeed. It is those two impulses that will give our profession new relevance over the next decade as our culture dies and is reborn.

Our unraveling economy is part of a deeper cultural metamorphosis. From the restructuring of home values to the reorganization of mass communications, we are witnessing the disruption that occurs when the dominant civilization loses its relevance and another rises to replace it. We are becoming a renaissance generation -- RenGen, a generation that is smart, self-expressive, idealistic and cynical all at once.

History shows that the seeds of the first great renaissance were steeped in conflict and waste. 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.

So what do we do in the interlude while the RenGen gears up? How do we create meaningful campaigns when so much is up for grabs?

There are three brand archetypes that will hold appeal in these times.

Idea brands

Idea brands, such as Apple, use magical thinking to appeal to consumer intellects. Many of you will balk at this because you know that emotions sell products, but the RenGen uses the mind to conjure feelings of emotional wellbeing. In the same way that physical exercise gives us a high, scientists have discovered that a stimulated mind triggers a similar sense of happiness.

Compassion brands

As uncertainty grows to the point where people feel personally threatened, they'll seek comfort. This goes beyond warm and fuzzy. Compassion brands deliver love, kindness and even a little catharsis. Kleenex could have capitalized on the anxiety of the cold and flu season but opted instead for the brilliant "Let It Out" campaign that crosses gender, class and age demographics, inviting people to cry their hearts out.

Anxiety brands

People are fearful. It is possible in such an environment to win by offering a sense of protection or an anchor to which people can cling. But anxiety brands can backfire. Note the reaction to Hillary Clinton vs. Barack Obama. She is an anxiety brand. Obama is an idea brand. A wise marketer will infuse a little compassion or magical thinking into the anxiety messaging or else the consumer will become overwhelmed with negativity and shut down. FedEx is a good example of an anxiety brand that infuses its service-ethic with compassion saying, "We are in the peace-of-mind business."

As you read this, please keep one thing in mind: Our worldwide situation gives us all the chance to reinvent who we are and what we do. In the RenGen, there is no safe passage for brands that are willing to insult the intelligence of consumers who are increasingly expressive, inner-directed human beings. They are aware, for instance, that the environment and our survival in it are interconnected in perilous ways. They are aware that world financial markets are linked and interdependent in unprecedented ways. This may feel like a point of crisis. But in fact, it looks a lot like what happens right before a renaissance, and marketers can play a critical role in ushering in the RenGen.

In these times, a creative industry can shine. Our talent is for helping create a context for people. We are needed now more than ever.