

Responsibility Plus - the new meaning of sustainable competitive advantage

The following essay is a statement of my intentions as a Climate Reality Leader.

Climate Change is the biggest issue facing mankind. I am working with millions of others around the world to 'do something about it'. More specifically, I am a **Climate Reality Leader** who will tell the story of climate change and inspire communities everywhere to take action. The issue will be central to my personal and professional lives.

The **Climate Reality Project** is presided over by **Al Gore**. You know the guy. The truth today is even more inconvenient than it was in 2006 when he produced his world changing **documentary**. That said, his 'core message', or should I say "Gore message" hasn't changed. As a Climate Reality Leader, I am committed to taking Gore's message forward. Since 2006, Gore has continued to tell the story day in, day out. He continues to mount a compelling argument for action in this lengthy essay from **Rolling Stone** in June this year (2014).

Government, business and the general community all have an equal and important role to play in addressing climate change. The future of the world is at stake. Yes, really. History will remember those that do something. It will condemn those that don't. The science is irrefutable, the statistics confirm what we've been warned about since the 1980's and we are now seeing real and negative changes to the earth's climate affecting billions. It's only going to get worse. The pace of change is accelerating. There's no upside to this. The long term prognosis, without action, is grave.

No one is to blame for the past. When asbestos was first used in building materials, no one knew of the consequences. When people first started smoking cigarettes, no one knew of the consequences. When the fossil fuel drilling, mining and energy producing industries were born, no one knew of the consequences. Fossil fuels are to the earth what tobacco or asbestos are to lungs. Unless the world dramatically reduces its use of fossil fuels, it will make the world sicker and, some say, terminally ill. No one is at fault for decisions made centuries ago. To use what's known as a 'streaker's defence' when it comes to the use of fossil fuels, "it seemed like a good idea at the time". In the last 30 or so years with the benefit of science and changes to the earth's climate beaming obvious, the problem has become real, very real. It is far from a good idea. Blame will be accorded to those who ignore the science and facts and fail to act on climate change.

We can't switch off fossil fuel use with the flick of a switch. The use of fossil fuels will be with us for the next 50 years, at least, as a key resource for energy. Economically, much is dependent on its various forms in production and use. There's the mining and drilling of coal, petroleum and natural gas; its refining into energy and, its subsequent use to power everyday living and business. The aim is to gradually reduce the dependancy of every user on fossil fuels. This in time will allow for communities heavily dependent on fossil fuels for their economic well being to make the structural shift to other industries that can generate sustainable economies and employment. Much of the opposition to action on climate change action is more about protecting fossil fuel economies and the jobs that go with them rather than opposition to protection of the natural environment. Much also has to do with 'the hip pocket nerve', populist politics, election cycles and nostalgic memories of an age long gone. Australia is a prime example of this. A strategic, measured, managed and modern approach to economic transition for these economies is required. Politicians will

only do this is if they are encouraged and rewarded by voters for taking tough, decisive and inevitable decisions that support action on climate change. Action on climate change is like a huge anti-smoking campaign. You have to encourage people to 'give-up'. The majority get it. Some people will always smoke. There will always be some use of fossil fuels. Both are inevitable. The important thing to do is to reduce this to sustainable levels. We can't continue to use the earth's atmosphere as an untreated and unmetered open sewer.

As I see it there are three key issues on climate change. First, ensuring the long term liveability of the planet for humans, flora and fauna (somewhat of a major issue). Second, creating the political will and reward to 'do something' and working around the short sighted, mischievous and vested public and private interests that seek to derail action or deny the need for it. Third, in the meantime, surviving the more frequent and more ferocious severe weather events - scorching drought, torrential rains, ferocious storms, blazing wild fires and thunderous avalanches and mud slides. These three issues effect everyone - government, business, communities and individuals. All can positively impact on the issues and each other. They need to. Success will only come through these four groups working together.

Many governments around the world are heading in the right direction on addressing climate change. Some, like the Australian Government, are not. The two 'decision makers', the United States and China, are. The world's leaders, via the United Nations in Paris in 2015, hopefully will set a re-energised course to lower carbon emissions over the next half a century. In terms of Australia, I see climate change somewhat differently to the conservative national government. This comment is based on policy and not politics. The conservative government in the state of New South Wales made some great announcements recently on clean energy, wanting to turn the state into the "California of Australia". The current view of the leadership of national conservative politics in Australia hasn't always been its position. The immediate past leader of conservative politics in Australia, Malcolm Turnbull, was an action on climate change advocate. Good policy always trumps bad politics. In time, in Australia, it will. This will occur by either a shift in policy as reality takes hold or through a very clear message from voters, before or after an election. Action on climate change can be a *strength* for Australia. It doesn't create a *weakness* for Australia. This is an *opportunity* for our prosperity. This is not a *threat* to our economic security. It requires leadership, imagination, courage and forward thinking. Individuals and communities are acting too. The move toward more affordable renewable energy, with and without help from government, is happening. It's a part of the evolution to cleaner living. Think back to the 1980's, we went from one trash or garbage bin to two, three or four bins as we adopted recycling. We did our bit. We've moved to more fuel efficient cars. We've installed energy saving appliances and light globes. We continue to do our bit. The next part of the revolution is the widespread adoption of affordable and available clean energy to power our lives at work, home and everywhere in between. It's real and it is happening. It is great!

Many businesses engage in 'corporate social responsibility' and focus on the natural environment. Some do a great job and it is integrated into their every day operations. Some see it as a 'bolt on' that 'ticks a box'. Worse, some 'green wash'. I have always said that the best form of 'CSR' is business-as-usual. The most socially responsible thing any company can do is have a well run business. Integrated or 'bolted on' was last century's thinking. Business-as-usual was the thinking of last decade and today. In the future, business, to be successful, must not only do 'what's right', but it must go the extra step and do more than its 'responsibility'. It is what I call "responsibility plus". Business will go from being carbon neutral or off-setting to a point where they become carbon negative where they take out

more than they put in. Why? Consumers will demand it. The world is in trouble. People want action and the desire will grow as the problem becomes more apparent. So, a combination of significant disruption to business practises and a demanding public means that addressing climate change and adaptation is a high order issue for every business. I believe “responsibility plus” is a source of future competitive advantage. Indeed, it gives new meaning to Michael Porter’s theory of ‘sustainable competitive advantage’. Sustainability comes from “responsibility plus”. I can see addressing climate change becoming another ‘fork in the road’ on McKinsey’s [consumer decision journey](#).

I am planning to use my interest in addressing climate change to work with my peers in marketing, corporate communications and public affairs, primarily in the private sector, to engage or deepen their relationship with the issue. I want them to embrace the need for urgent action and to become champions in their business. Will they pay attention? As the climate warms, prices will rise, consumer confidence will fall, disruption to business continuity will become common place, consumer behaviour will change and the market for many products will change significantly. It is in their interest to act. More importantly, as I said previously, I believe the public will demand action on climate change from companies they do business with. It is simple as that. The public will ask, ‘what are you doing to save the planet?’. The answer could determine the viability of a business.

I am a fan of the author and motivator, [Simon Sinek](#). He makes sense to me. He believes in “the golden circle”. His TEDx Talk is worth watching on [YouTube](#). The basic premise is that people don’t buy *what* you do - they buy *why* you do it. Therein lies the link between corporate social responsibility plus and action on climate change. People won’t buy the fact that ‘you’ are, for example, a paperless company (although that’s great!). They will buy the fact that you are trying to help save the planet by acting on addressing climate change - the biggest threat to mankind. They will buy it as a concept and actual purchase. *“People don’t buy what you do - they buy why you do it. The goal is not to do business with everybody who needs what you have. The goal is to do business with people who believe what you believe,”* Simon Sinek, 16 September 2009.

There is an enormous amount of data [available](#) indicating that more and more people are becoming increasingly concerned about climate change. The [Lowy Institute poll](#) in Australia is just one of them. It’s most recent ‘headline’ was *“This year, 45% of Australian adults now say that ‘global warming is a serious and pressing problem. We should begin taking steps now even if this involves significant costs’. Concern is up 5 points since 2013 and 9 points since 2012.”* This is indicative of the community’s mood. As more and more people see and feel the impact of climate change for themselves, they will look to companies who are doing something about it. They believe action should be taken. They want to do business with companies that believe what they believe.

Marketers, communicators and public affairs specialists are influential people within organisations. They ‘get it’. If they don’t, I will help them. If they do already, I will help them go to the next level.

My agenda for the marketing, communication and public affairs profession is to:

- Educate - Bring them up to date on the climate change issue
- Enlist - Have them champion action on climate change in their organisation
- Adopt - Have their company adopt “responsibility plus” by being climate friendly
- Promote - Tell their clients, customers, staff and industry about their “responsibility plus” activities
- Cascade - Urge their customers to become climate friendly

I will do this through:

- Using the messaging and other resources of the Climate Reality Project
- Providing evidence to support the concept of “Responsibility Plus”
- Conducting one on one meetings
- Presentations to in house and agency teams
- Presentations at industry conferences and other gatherings
- Content for industry newsletters, magazines and journals
- A weekly bulletin summarising the latest news and developments for brands
- Social media resources to help practitioners keep up to date
- Hosting a library of downloadable publications that relate to marketing, communications and public affairs in the age of climate change and adaptation or can assist practitioners with advocacy in their company.

In committing to action, I made myself carbon neutral by purchasing off-sets through [Climate Friendly](#) (used by [World Wildlife Fund](#)). I have also returned to University of New South Wales and commenced a [Masters of Environmental Management](#) to deepen my understanding of the science, issues and solutions.

Pulling all of this together, we know climate change is the biggest issue facing mankind and therefore business. We know it has short, medium and long term implications for every business in every country. We know the need for change is inevitable. We know the community is concerned. We know the community wants action. I know, marketers, communicators and public affairs specialists are leaders in their organisations who can affect change. I commit to helping them affect this change with their colleagues, customers, clients and contacts in both my personal and professional lives.

In his Rolling Stone essay, Al Gore says a turning point has been reached in the battle to save the planet - “a powerful, largely unnoticed shift is taking place”. The premise is that government, companies, communities and individuals now ‘get it’ and are beginning to act at a more accelerated pace. I commit to doing my bit to make sure we continue that shift and at an accelerated pace. To quote Mahatma Ghandi, ‘be the change you wish to see in the world’. I am.

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