

The **Good Business** of Good Citizenship

By Patrick T Davis

FOR MOST AMERICANS, THE CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION OF THE LATE 20TH CENTURY WAS NOT JUST A SHOW OF STATUS OR AN ASSUMED BIRTHRIGHT IN THE LAND OF PLENTY, IT WAS AN ACT OF JUSTIFIED (IF NOT INSPIRED) PATRIOTISM. PROSPERING AND BUYING THINGS PROVED THE AMERICAN SYSTEM WORKED.



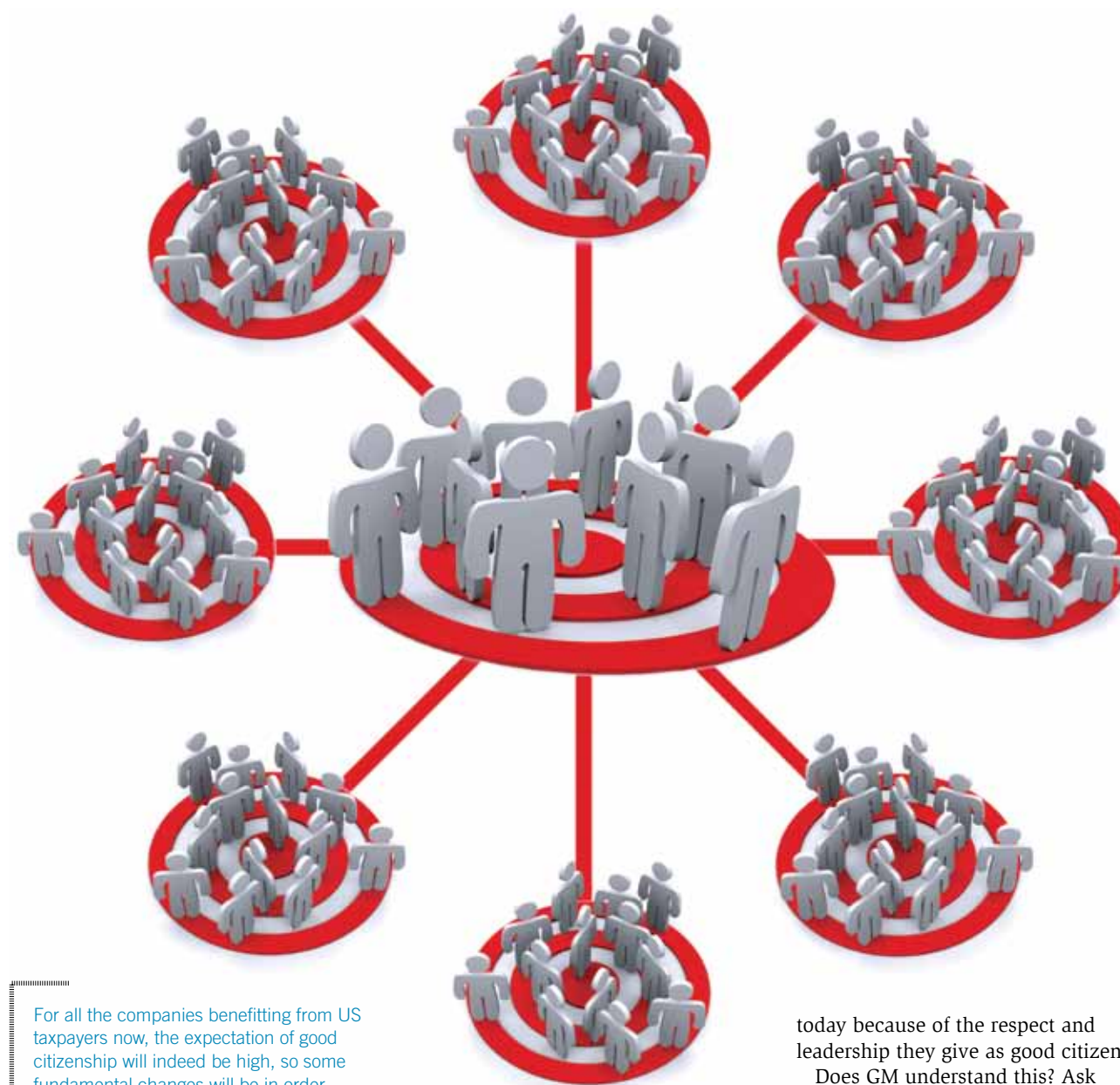
→ In our greatest moment of national crisis, George W Bush called us to arms post 9/11, with the rallying cry of ‘go shopping’ to support our economy and stabilise our nation. Consumption was the way to fight back; it was our role as citizens. Economic policies followed that fueled this citizen-consumer march into battle. But something else happened along the way, too. We didn’t just shop. We reconnected. We found new ways of expressing citizenship, and they can serve us well now as marketers, if we follow a few, new citizen-based rules.

We found new ways of connecting to each other – from LinkedIn to Facebook. We found business meant more with companies more engaged and responsible – from Chipotle’s ‘food with integrity’ ethos to Dove’s ‘real beauty’ campaign. We found a return to our local communities – from produce at Whole Foods to hyper-local media coverage and blogs. We found a new voice – from managing brands in partnership with big companies to broadcasting ourselves on YouTube. We found we were done being talked at, marketed to and pushed upon. This is when a new age of marketing began to emerge, but we couldn’t see its real implications at the time. We were still too busy shopping as all this was happening. In fact, Yankelovich data indicates consumer resistance to marketing reached all time highs two years before what we now know was the outer stretch of our

economic bubble – an early indicator of consumer exhaustion and today’s crashed consumer confidence? We had moved on, had engaged elsewhere – with each other, companies and brands as citizens. We were done listening to marketers. More importantly, they had not started listening to us.

Now that the ‘shopping war’ is over we can see that, beyond consumption, we made huge inroads in building a different and more truly patriotic way of connecting, consuming and communicating (one, by the way, that helped organise and mobilise ‘local politics’ to get out the vote against Mr. Bush’s party in 2008). Perhaps these new standards of behaviour we found while shopping – those of the re-connected citizen-consumer – are why there is such outrage over ‘irresponsible’ homebuyers and mortgage lenders; over AIG bonus payments; over bailouts to industries that have not been good citizens over the years. We are, perhaps, holding our neighbours (personal and corporate) accountable again, now that we are reconnected, re-engaged, re-localised and re-voiced. And we have the technologies and platforms to be all of these things at much more powerful levels now, too.

It is from this new place that marketers can begin to solve the challenges ahead. Good citizenship is not a ‘program’ to be planned and managed by corporate public relations. It is not a platform for ‘social responsibility’. These are ideas



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of the 20th century, and usually a mere list of mitigations, not belief-based actions. Now, good citizenship – for consumers, brands, companies – is a price of entry, a requirement. Quality, price, service, selection: these used to be differentiators. No longer. Now, they get you into the game but do not guarantee you play well. Good citizenship is the same: don’t do it, be it...or get booed from the field, even the chance of playing the game lost.

Patagonia understands this. Target understands this. Umpqua Bank understands this. These companies are respected innovators and leaders

today because of the respect and leadership they give as good citizens.

Does GM understand this? Ask people in the towns it has both built and shut down. Does Bank of America understand this? Ask the customers at Merrill Lynch and Countrywide, the two disgraced companies the bank now owns, who were all along teetering on CDOs and subprime mortgages. Does AIG understand this? Ask the American people, when the company wants to put its hand back in Congress’ cookie jar. All of these companies have ‘corporate responsibility’ programs – segmented neatly away from their daily behaviours, a list of grants, initiatives, and promises of how things can be made better with some

money or time, but not core business processes. That's not good enough for a good citizen. For all the companies benefitting from US taxpayers now, the expectation of good citizenship will indeed be high, so some fundamental changes will be in order.

Managing a brand – a business – to be a good citizen isn't hard, but it is unfamiliar. Simply follow the consumer to get your bearings:



Be connected — in a modern, open, responsive way. An advertisement does not make a connection, so get digital now and learn to morph with the moment.

Be engaged and responsible — the issues that matter to the world must matter to you; proactively show us you care. Your agenda, if not aligned with the consumers, will fail.

Be local — what are you doing here, in my community, every day to make me know, like and trust you? Grant and volunteer days feel like you are just phoning it in. Innovate here, too.

Be in dialogue with a real, non-marketing voice — listen first, respect what you hear, respond in a genuine way. Message points died with traditional media and old-school PR.

As a citizen, do you tend to trust strangers, who are disengaged and



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irresponsible, from out of town, who talk with you in an unnatural way? No. Instead, you tend to run from them, knowing they are likely up to no good, ready to manipulate and move on. It's no wonder consumers moved on from 'big marketing' and found their own ways of connecting with and recommending things to each other. They have set the new terms for how things will be done. And they should; marketers are asking for their money, so their control is very real. Be a good citizen, or your consumer will find a competitor who is and they will tell all their friends about both of you. ❌

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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