

Talking sexy susty

**A roundtable on marketing sustainability
to the mainstream**

IN THE CONVERSATION

Gary Barker, CEO, Ditto Sustainable Brand Solutions

Lucas Donat, CEO, Tiny Rebellion

Nathan Shedroff, MBA faculty, California College of the Arts

Sandra Stewart, principal, Thinkshift Communications

thinkshift
COMMUNICATIONS

582 Market Street, Suite 905

San Francisco, CA 94104

415.391.4446

start@thinkshiftcom.com

www.thinkshiftcom.com

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Why isn't sustainability perceived as sexy?

It should be: sustainable products and services often are technically advanced, super smart, and emotionally appealing. But the landscape of sustainability marketing is littered with green leaves and a crunchy, good-for-the-planet ethos that doesn't inspire most people to buy. Companies are failing to make sustainability desirable to the mainstream, and that means they're missing market opportunities. It also means they're not doing all they can to make sustainability business as usual.

With these issues in mind, we gathered a quartet of experts in marketing, advertising, product design, and experience design for a much-needed conversation. Gary Barker, CEO of Ditto Sustainable Brand Solutions; Lucas Donat, CEO of Tiny Rebellion; Nathan Shedroff, chair of the design strategy MBA at California College of the Arts; and Sandra Stewart, principal of Thinkshift Communications, traded experiences, examples, and opinions about why sustainability isn't sexy, why it needs to be, how it can be—and what “sexy” means in the first place.

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Moderator Let's jump right in. What is sexiness? What creates desire?

Nathan Shedroff Sexiness is difficult to define, and it means different things to different people. To me, sexy can be smart and funny and insightful and aspirational.

Sandra Stewart That dovetails really well with a definition we've been working on. We've isolated certain factors that we consistently see in things that we consider sexy—humor, intelligence, empathy or emotional quality, good looks, and what we're calling the X factor, which is that thing that creates a kind of desire. You don't know where it comes from; it's not obvious. I think it has something to do with a tension between what you're presented with and expectations.

Gary Barker It's such an individual attraction. The X factor is a great way of putting it. I think intelligence is incredibly alluring. When you're looking at all aspects of a product—what will happen to it, how it will function, whether it's beautiful or not, whether it creates passion or inspires—it really is about beauty, where everything comes together: the material, the shape, the function.

Lucas Donat It's interesting because I think you're all describing a very new definition of sexiness, where sexiness has everything to do with the substance of what a product or a service or a brand is all about. We are no longer defining sexy as the facade or edifice as represented by advertising or communications. We are having a much more substantive relationship with the brands, products, and companies that we interact with. There's a much, much deeper relationship between consumers and brands, and sexy is defined in a much deeper way than it has been historically. Everything you guys are describing seems to redefine how we hold sexy in popular culture today.

“Sexiness has everything to do with the substance of what a product or a service or a brand is all about.”

Why do you think that, by and large, sustainability still isn't seen as sexy?

Lucas One reason is ... back in the late '60s and '70s, sustainability was the wilted lettuce on the unrefrigerated shelf of a co-op.

Gary To be clear, when we're talking about sexy sustainability, we're talking about [appealing to] the demographic that's new to this. I don't think everybody responds to sexiness.

Nathan What we're really missing—and the sustainability world has been terrible at this—is compelling visions of what a sustainable world looks like. We can't really be sexy until we're ready to communicate a sustainable vision that is deeper and more aspirational than the patina that we've been working with. And that requires a deeper, more systemic understanding of the parts.

Sandra You all hit on reasons people often don't consider sustainability sexy. Another is that a lot of people in the sustainability world are coming from the position that the consumption economy is bad, so we don't want to adopt any of the marketing strategies that built that economy. So there is a tendency to promote sustainability as good for you, and there's a tendency to want people to buy things for the "right reason." That can get in the way of successfully introducing people to something that they may not have thought about.

Lucas Yes. Bolthouse Farms is such a great example of this. Here are some statistics: veggie consumption is down 7 percent per capita. But consumption of cookies and chips is up 11 percent; candy, 15 percent; cake, 21 percent. One in three kids is on track to develop diabetes, and 80 percent of men are expected to be overweight by 2020. Bolthouse says the reason is that kids now are consuming 5,500 ads per year for junk food versus 100 ads per year for healthy foods. So Bolthouse said screw that. We're going to employ the marketing tactics used by junk-food marketers to sell healthy foods—literally spoofing the marketing techniques of junk-food marketers. Why can't healthy foods use television and create great advertising that makes carrots a really sexy snack food?

There are marketers who are thinking through these challenges and not accepting that sustainability has to be marketed necessarily as the "good for you choice," the sacrifice. That's where Elon Musk has completely changed the game by making the sustainable choice the sexiest, most superior, safest, fastest ride on the planet. Tesla has redefined what it means to be sustainable; it does not involve sacrifice—in fact, that option can be superior.

And if TED talks are any indication, very real, honest discussions around sustainability suddenly have the glistening allure of the new shiny object. There's an emerging trend of allure and sexiness around sustainability.

“We can't really be sexy until we're ready to communicate a sustainable vision that is deeper.”

Nathan You're right that there's something different about how these companies are successful and how they're engaging customers. In our program, we teach about the qualitative value, not just the quantitative value, and the qualitative is always more difficult to grasp and understand and see. And when you sell a company or have an IPO, the sum that's called "goodwill" vastly outweighs the book value. But most business people don't know how to build that value.

Lucas, I think you put your finger on it with "It's not a sacrifice." Sustainable products and solutions are often seen as a sacrifice in some way. That tide is turning.

"The reality is most people don't respond to sustainability."

Gary In the beginning, with our Ditto hanger, we were marketing the beauty of it and the sexiness of it, and that didn't really connect with our B2B clients. So then we started talking about sustainability and environmentalism, and they didn't like that either. Then we started realizing what our product did to help out their business and talked about it in those terms, how it worked more efficiently in systems, how consumers bought more product because [the clothes] were on them, how, in the long run, it was far cheaper than the plastic version. We got real traction because of that.

Sandra So you focused on the inherent intelligence of your product.

Gary Yeah. And we don't talk about sustainability, really. It's way, way down the line because we feel our brand is strong enough that people know it's a given.

Nathan It's key that the reality that is most people don't respond to sustainability. Tesla is not being marketed as a sustainable product. They're just talking about it as a better product. The key to being successful [is that you have] a better product in every single way, including sustainability.

Lucas There's an analog in the organic movement. Early on, it was marketed as, yes, it's wilted lettuce; yes, the apple has little spots on it; but it's healthier, it's better for you; and yes, you're going to pay a premium for that privilege. The organic movement took a turn when chefs got on board. Suddenly the premium was that it's delicious.

I think that the future will be saved by guys like Nathan and Gary who are designers, and it will be a renaissance of design. You're absolutely right, Nathan. The owners of Teslas are not necessarily driving them because they're zero-emissions cars. They're driving them for \$89,000, \$100,000, \$120,000 per car because of the superiority of performance. In general, the way we market sustainability will go back to the integrity of the product and superiority around the product offering, not necessarily because it's the right thing to do.

What are the barriers to making sustainability sexier? What could make things move faster?

“The way we market sustainability will go back to the integrity of the product and superiority around the product offering.”

Sandra People are often afraid to market products in a way that's different from what their peers do. People are afraid of truly standing out, of looking foolish or offending someone. That potential loss of face often trumps the potential reward. Also, earnestness is so embedded in the sustainable business community. I don't mean that in a negative way. I'm enormously earnest about sustainability myself, but earnestness isn't really sexy.

Lucas You've certainly seen Chipotle leverage sustainability in favor of meteoric growth in popularity to the benefit of its share price. You've seen the Unilever brand, Dove, do a phenomenal job of counterpositioning its products against the Madison Avenue approach to selling soaps and beauty products.

When you look at millennials, 51 percent of them are actively seeking out brands that do good and/or act responsibly. We are very focused on marketing the sustainability angle in a way that also celebrates the individuality of a brand. So I do think, now more than ever, there is a receptivity to and a growing trend around leveraging sustainability in favor of building brands. And particularly with millennials, I am hopeful about how they view brands and how they vote with their dollars in favor of sustainability.

Gary We talk to a wide swath of different types of companies, and what I've found is that there are companies that want to build a brand that creates a connection with the consumer, like Apple, Gap, Disney. Other companies couldn't care less, and are just about price. It becomes a branding decision. The sexy part of it isn't the cheap end of it. It's in building the relationship that extends through a lifetime.

Nathan Exactly. We teach our students that you cannot build a brand relationship based on money, because the moment someone else can offer it cheaper, customers are gone. Cheaper is not sustainable, and cheaper is not sexy. You can never build a premium brand or company on the basis of a cost strategy.

This circles around to why we all want sustainability to be sexy—to create the demand. Where do you see the most interesting marketing work? How can you approach the problem of selling a seemingly unsexy sustainable product or service?

Gary The firms that I see doing really great sustainable design are smaller firms and companies like Method, which has built their brand around less toxic solutions. Freitag makes messenger bags out of truck covers. I love companies that make things out of existing flotsam. Their website is very upbeat and modern—they make it fun. In packaging, there are a lot of examples. Puma has designed a shoebox that's a topless, bottomless box in a cloth bag; that's a very powerful method of starting the conversation with the customer.

In terms of approach, we look at sustainable design as taking in everything about a product. That's our mission. Production is as important as the concept behind the production.

Sandra The French supermarket chain Intermarché did a campaign around ugly vegetables. They did beautiful photo shoots of bizarre-looking vegetables, called them the inglorious fruits and vegetables, and promoted the hell out of them. They made a whole in-house line of soups and other products using these vegetables and sold them at 30 percent off, with educational notes about how much food is wasted and how these are just as good as the perfect-looking produce. Markets sold out of them in two days. That, to me, is a great example of sexy sustainability in marketing. They took something that was not inherently sexy, and they made it sexy by using humor and good design and intelligence.

Lucas Chipotle has been massively successful at using sustainability as the unique selling proposition and the reason to buy. That's an example of something that has held up as the model case for how sustainability can be marketed in a way that makes it incredibly attractive. Also, Victors and Spoils did a crowdsourced campaign to market broccoli and make it sexy. And it's a very, very funny campaign.

“Cheaper is not sustainable, and cheaper is not sexy.”

“Companies are realizing that times are changing. I have great hope because of that.”

Sandra Another example—though it stretches the bounds of what people consider sexy—is the Indiegogo campaign by two inventors who are working on a solar panel system that would go in roadways. They made this video that is hilarious, called “Solar Freakin’ Roadways.” To me, that’s sexy. I look at that video, and I think, this is really smart. It’s funny, and it made me think, yeah, I want that to happen.

Is one of the barriers to not being a little more forward and sexy in sustainability marketing is that you’ll be perceived as being “sustainability light” or greenwashing?

Gary One of our clients said they do not say anything about their sustainability work because they’ve been burned so many times. Another client had three people in their sustainability department with no real power when we started working with them three years ago. Now there are almost 100 people in their sustainability department. It’s very encouraging that this is going on behind the scenes, without marketing, because companies are realizing that times are changing. I have great hope because of that.

Sandra A lot of this rests on the ethics of those doing the marketing. If, as marketers, we understand the sustainability issues and what our company or our client has achieved, we can market sustainability aspects effectively and honestly. Companies that are afraid to market sustainability are afraid to lead—they don’t want to have conversations that might be uncomfortable, that might lead to, OK, but what else have you done? On the other end of the scare are companies that are out-and-out greenwashing, and they create a cynical environment for everyone else.

Lucas I had an interesting experience at this conference the other day where John Mackey, CEO of Whole Foods, was talking to Steve Ells, the founder of Chipotle. John asked Steve, “Do you guys do a third-party audit of where you’re sourcing your meat?” Steve sort of said, “Well, you just have to trust me.” And John Mackey was like, “Hang on a second. The whole reason we at Whole Foods created third-party auditing is because it was very hard, even for us, to determine who was doing a good job and who wasn’t; and who was meeting our standards.” I think what will happen is if Chipotle is this sexy brand,

“There’s a lot of greenwashing, but I think we’ll see less and less of that as consumers become more empowered through transparency.”

it’s because there is belief that they are walking their talk. Over time, consumers will force brands and companies to disclose, and sexy will really be back to our original conversation about the substance of a brand, not just the appearance. Right now, there’s a lot of greenwashing, but I think we’ll see less and less of that as consumers become more empowered through transparency. With mobile devices, at the moment of truth when they’re purchasing something, they can check and see what the standards are.

Nathan One of my favorite quotes is from Hunter Lovins: “Hypocrisy is the first step to real change.” We need to cut companies some slack because they need the space to experiment. There’s no way to expect them to get it right the first time. And we need another response to companies who try to do something, even if they’re greenwashing; we need something encouraging that pushes them to the next level as opposed to shutting them down.

Lucas Yes. That idea is the notion of step change to sea change. Steve Ells of Chipotle said, “Listen, nobody says we’re perfect. We’re trying, and we’re at the beginning stages of this thing.” They’re working toward it, and that should be rewarded, not punished. I think there are a few bad citizens. And the thing about transparency is that if you’re honest, human beings are very forgiving.

Gary We had an intern who asked me, “Are we going to do business with the enemy?” And I said, “Well, who is the enemy?” And she said, “You know, like Walmart and Sears and Target.” I said, “What are we going to do? We’re trying to help these companies change the way they think to go green.” It’s going to take a long time, but I’m seeing it happen.

Sandra: One thing that strikes me is that small companies really have an opportunity to lead, especially companies built from the ground up with sustainability principles in mind. They have a chance to have an outsized effect by getting their whole operation out there as a model that can be expanded and scaled for everyone.

B Corps are doing that, and they come in all sizes. One of them, West Paw Design, a smaller pet products company, co-founded a sustainable industry organization for an industry that has billions in revenue. That is a hopeful sign. What do you each think we should be doing to continue the trend in increasing the sexiness of sustainability?

Nathan The chief thing we need to do is innovate, make better products that are more sustainable on both environmental and social scales. Whether or not we sell them as such, we need to sell them on the basis of their being better in all sorts of ways.

Sandra Yes, we need to focus in marketing on how the sustainability aspect makes it better. We've talked about how the "do the right thing" approach doesn't work, but neither does the approach of ignoring sustainability because you don't think it's a selling point. If you do that, you're not doing anything to build a constituency for sustainability. And sustainability can sell if you make it cool.

Lucas Also, there's a perception shift. New isn't necessarily always cooler or better, and Patagonia has done a brilliant job simply from a marketing standpoint to say, hey, maybe change the perspective on whether you need a new coat. Maybe, really, what you need is the right kind of thread and the right kind of patch to patch it up.

Gary Patagonia is a process as well. We do a lot of work with them, and they're always pushing to improve. They have a tool on their website where you can track clothing and see where all the parts of it came from and the carbon footprint. It's not always an attractive result, but they're recognizing it, and they're saying we want to make it better. That's a crazy marketing idea, but it works.

"If we can make sustainable behaviors seem desirable—smart and fun—we can get over some big hurdles."

How can sexiness be applied to behavior change and awareness campaigns?

Sandra This may be one of the most important applications. We all have a two-year-old within us who just wants to say no, no, no, and that person tends to come out when we're told to do something. Guilt people has limited effectiveness, too—we avoid it, but not necessarily by doing the right thing; often it's just by ignoring consequences. If we can make sustainable behaviors seem desirable—smart and fun—we can get over some big hurdles.

“What’s the end state? Sustainable behaviors are the norm, not just a thing that freaky green people do.”

Nathan Promotion and messaging have always sought to change behavior. Sexiness is just one of many attributes, mostly trading on issues of identity. There’s a level of core meanings that describe how we view the world around us. Messaging and actions that tap into this level have the ability to better connect with people, on a deeper level. This conduit can carry a message about sustainability (or anything) in a stronger way.

The vision piece is key. You can throw all the information in the world at people, and it doesn’t make a difference if there is nothing aspirational or visionary about it.

Gary Part of this is education. We’re educating companies all the time, and I think it’s going to take a long time to bring everyone on board. Paul Hawken, in his great book *Blessed Unrest*, looks at how people all over the world are working to make society safer and more equitable. That urge to do good is part of the human condition, which encourages me on a daily basis.

Lucas This notion that it’s too late to be a pessimist is appropriate for our time. In the millennials that I work with and that I hire, I do feel an abiding sense of optimism in spite of some fairly discouraging times. This kind of optimism is very encouraging. I don’t believe in fear-based marketing. I believe in catching an aspect of human beauty that ignites the spirit, and I feel very hopeful about the future.

Nathan As I said in the beginning, the sustainability world has done a terrible job of proffering visions of what a more sustainable world would be like, so I think the companies and the products and services that do this well, that deserve the description of sexy sustainability, are the ones that are producing a vision that people want to go be a part of. We want to buy and use things from brands that reflect our values and world views, including our vision of the future, so it’s immensely satisfying when we find those that do.

Sandra If we can be successful at better product design, sexier products, and sexier marketing of sustainable products, what’s the end state? I see four things, just off the top of my head. One is radically reduced resource use. Design that’s intelligent becomes the standard, not an alternative. Sustainable behaviors are the norm, not just a thing that freaky green people do. And sustainability isn’t seen as a sacrifice but as the smart, cool approach.

Who we are



Gary Barker is the founder and CEO of Oakland-based **Ditto Sustainable Brand Solutions**, a Certified B Corp that conceives, designs, manufactures, and markets environmentally preferable, sustainably manufactured, and beautiful retail display products and packaging. Ditto received the 2013 Acterra Award for Environmental Innovation, the 2013 California Stewardship Green Arrow Award for System Design and Innovation, and a number of international industrial design awards. In 2014, Ditto was honored as one of the Best B Corps in the world for environmental impact.



Lucas Donat, the founding CEO of the Santa Monica-based change agent advertising agency, **Tiny Rebellion**, has helped purpose-led companies emerge as iconic brands that disrupt their industry while positively changing the world. Lucas has helped democratize legal services through LegalZoom and bring transparency to the automotive industry with TrueCar; he is currently leading a farm-fresh revolution with Bolthouse Farms. As an entrepreneur and CEO, Lucas believes accountable business is the most powerful force for positive change. As a human being, he practices what he preaches and effects positive change through his passion for organic gardening and sustainable farming.



Nathan Shedroff chairs the Design Strategy MBA program at the **California College of the Arts** (CCA). He is a pioneer of experience design and also works in the related fields of interaction design and information design. He has written extensively on design and business issues, and his book, *Design Is the Problem: The Future of Design Must Be Sustainable*, explains the principles, tools, and strategies for creating more sustainable solutions. In addition to holding a BS in industrial design, Nathan received an MBA from the Presidio Graduate School, one of the country's preeminent sustainable business programs.



Sandra Stewart is co-founder and principal of **Thinkshift Communications**, a San Francisco-based agency that expands market reach for sustainable businesses and cleantech companies. Sandra has helped sustainability pioneers such as New Resource Bank and RSF Social Finance cement their leadership position and reach new audiences, cleantech companies like Powerit Solutions expose the genius in their products, and advocacy organizations make the case for policies that accelerate the shift to a sustainable economy. Thinkshift was one of the first California benefit corporations and is active in the B Corp movement.

Thinkshift Communications is a San Francisco-based agency that builds brand presence and value for sustainable businesses, cleantech companies, and social enterprises through brand storytelling and messaging, thought leadership and PR, and content marketing. Follow us @thinkshift.

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