

## Doing the right thing – AT&T's courageous call

At long last a company whose products can be dangerous has dared to address the issue with imagination and creativity, says Peter Knight

It was a brave decision of US telecoms giant AT&T to ask Werner Herzog, the legendary documentary film maker, to dissuade us from texting while driving. It was an unusually bold commission, given the usual creative timidity of the business community.

Herzog's public service film in the United States is good but not extraordinary. Not like the tragically mesmerising HIV ads that Benetton ran two decades ago. But given the climate of risk aversion in business today – especially in its response to sustainability – Herzog's hiring by the telecoms firm really stands out.

This sort of boldness was everyday business in the Madmen era of the 1950s and 1960s, when most managers were confidently drunk after a couple of highballs at lunch. Since then we have been overcome by the puritanical Perrier approach to business where managers are so risk averse they become immobilised with the fear of making a mistake. For them, fizzing the water is bold and they dream of the thrill of a personalised Sodastream on their desk.

The financial crisis increased timidity, with people clinging to their precious jobs by adopting the brace position – head down, ignoring the world around them. Now, big, bold, creative ideas are restricted to the fascinating ruses that companies use to avoid paying tax.

You've got to give it to Apple, Google, Starbucks and the rest for their perfectly legal ducks and dives as they play the international tax system. The strategies are smart. Some are even bold. But these ideas don't benefit our societies; they don't add value to our lives.

### **Creativity mis-focus**

What's worse, those fiscal fiddles neither excite nor inspire us. Sluicing sales through Dublin or Barbados does not encourage us to dream of making the impossible possible. Smarty pants tax avoidance will not make the Hyperloop transport concept a reality or solve the looming problem of environmental migration as climate change bites.

Take the booze business, which is in a very similar position to the telecoms industry when it comes to social responsibility. Both sectors make fortunes from products that alter the behaviour of their customers – changes that literally endanger the lives of fellow citizens.

Some drivers are incapable of keeping away from their cars when they've had a few vodkas, and turn their vehicles into killing machines. Others are incapacitated by the lure of their phones and feel impelled to type messages while steering. Really stupid and irresponsible, but very common.

What's the reaction of the businesses that empower their customers to act like killers? The first is always to deny responsibility – like a kid with a mouthful of cookies and an empty jar. Then comes the beating from the policymakers who remind them of the social privileges that society bestows to enable their fortune making. Finally comes a considered, strategic reaction because businesses, as the saying goes, don't want to walk down tobacco road.

It is the quality of the response that so often disappoints. It's usually just enough to shrug off the politicians, but lacks enough fizz to inspire: as exciting as a Sodastream.

Look no further than the creative poverty of the "drink responsibly" campaign. All the alcohol companies have bought into it but, with spirits and wine group Brown-Forman as a notable exception, they display as much enthusiasm for the cause as a surly teenager tasked to memorise a sonnet.

These are the same companies that are masters at telling highly persuasive stories that transform foul-tasting liquids into a fast track to heaven. Contrast their product advertising to the dull, unimaginative, uninspired, uninspiring approaches of their responsible-drinking campaigns.



The telecoms industry was also in deep denial, especially about the dangers of driving while using phones. Now at least one has awoken and has taken a more imaginative approach to getting the message out.

Thank you, AT&T, for hiring Herzog – and we are looking forward to your next step. Remember, there are hundreds of equally talented young, edgy film makers out there who understand the target market. Timidity pervades most corporate sustainability strategies too. For every Unilever and Interface, there are thousands of companies that can't see the opportunities hidden behind the risks. Most companies adopt the Sodastream approach where the strategies themselves are flat, but are couched in language that provides a superficial glitz.

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*Disclosure: Brown-Forman is a client of Context.*

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