

MARKETERS HAVE NO GREATER PURPOSE THAN SAVING THE WORLD

MICHAEL KASSAN
Chairman and CEO, MediaLink



"We are in a war."

That's how [Ann Rosenberg](#), SVP and global head of SAP Next-Gen described the dire reality facing humanity, as world leaders grapple with (or in some cases, ignore), the threat of climate change.

Rosenberg didn't mince words – in her mind, the fate of the planet is on the line.

And in her eyes, marketers – yes, marketers – have a unique opportunity to literally save the world.

It was that belief that really struck me as I moderated a discussion at our fourth consecutive event at the Whitney Museum in New York during Advertising Week. It was purposefully planned just as the United Nations General Assembly Week unfolded across town – and we even included [Dianne Dain](#), UN global partnerships lead for UNTILabs, to participate in the discussion.

As the speakers, which included a mix of marketers, publishers and consultants, debated the fairly broad concept of purpose-driven marketing, they kept coming back to the ultimate purpose – making sure the Earth has a future.

That that was in question was hard to ignore, given the backdrop for the discussion. Less than a week earlier, millions marched in cities across the world as part of a massive Global Climate Strike. Meanwhile, the UN had just unveiled 17 Sustainable Development Goals to transform our world, a series of initiatives aimed at tackling climate change and a number of other issues including education, health, social protection, job opportunities and environmental protection.

And of course, who could forget, 16-year-old Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg memorably excoriated world leaders at the UN for not doing enough.

"It's time," said Dain. "There is no plan b."

Dain's organization has been looking to harness technology in innovative ways to tackle global problems. What I didn't expect was how big of a role experts like Dain believe that marketing can play in this war for the planet. I came away convinced more than ever that we have a huge job to do. It's up to us to do it.



Takeaway number 1: in the climate war, brands shouldn't sell themselves short.

To hear Kathleen Hall, corporate vice president of brand, advertising and research at Microsoft, tell it, marketers may need to step up, as world leaders struggle to make headway on climate change.

"Brands are carrying this for institutions and governments," she said.

But can brands really do much? Isn't this just marketing, after all?



"This industry has more influence over human behavior [than any other]," said **Alicia Hatch**, CMO at Deloitte Digital. "We are playing well below our superpowers...what we can do to galvanize the planet is incredible."

SAP's Rosenberg agreed. However, she cautioned against limiting that galvanization to just running a few pro-environment ad campaigns. If brands really want to be purpose-driven, that principle has to be reflected in how they run their companies, from top to bottom, to how they interact with consumers and whom they partner with, she argued.

"You are really responsible for so much more," added Rosenberg. "The illusion you create is exactly what the company is."

Takeaway number 2: young people are on the front lines.

Ok sure, but brands are still companies - companies with shareholders and profit goals, right? True, but brand values are quickly becoming criteria for consumers when they make purchase decisions. Particularly younger ones.

"The youth are watching you," said Dain.

They have far more means to do so than generations past. Hatch theorized that young people's environmental concerns are a side effect of living in such a digital world.

"They feel connected," she said. "That makes you think more about well-being. It's very natural for them."

Takeaway number 3: purpose-driven marketing isn't just good for the world. It's good for the bottom line.



When it comes to businesses' responsibility for their impact on both society and the planet, the climate – no pun intended – has shifted. “The bar has been raised,” said eBay CMO **Suzy Deering**. “There’s been a lot of soul searching going on at the corporate level.”

Unilever has done much of that soul searching, becoming a major proponent of purpose driven marketing and sustainability. It hasn't just become a slogan, but a differentiator, said **Luis di Como**, EVP global media for Unilever. The 28 brands Unilever has built around its sustainability criteria are growing 68% faster than the rest of Unilever's portfolio.

“Brands with purpose grow,” he said. “And they last.”



Takeaway number 4: nobody can fake it – or bury their heads in the sand.

Of course, marketers won't be able to keep growing their companies if the planet doesn't last. Yes, the stakes are that high. It's crucial that brands don't become complacent or apply purpose to marketing that isn't all that purposeful – thus, they risk losing credibility.

“We have become a little bit fatigued by the word [purpose],” noted **Armando Turco**, SVP of content and commerce at Vox Media.

Instead, brands must take the mantle and embrace the mission in front of them.

It's a war, not one we asked for, but one we can win, urged Rosenberg.

"This is your obligation," she said. "We need to make sure we all contribute to this."

If not?

"It is going to get you," she added. "Nobody can run away from this."

The good news is, my sense is that the marketing community is deeply engaged on these issues. Nobody is running away. If anything, marketers love a big challenge.

We sometimes joke that marketing isn't all that important – we're not exactly curing cancer or saving babies, the saying goes. But this time around, our mission, and our unique ability to fulfil it, couldn't matter more.