

Design for Planet first!



To celebrate its 20th anniversary, Medinge Group invited brand managers, designers and researchers during Dutch Design Week to re-think how they would work if the needs of the planet were primary. Using the inspiration of the Maoris and other indigenous people, we created a new framework for designing brands.

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Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au (I am the river and the river is me)

The Whanganui river in New Zealand is important to the indigenous Maoris economically, socially and spiritually. However, it has also been exploited as a resource by government and business. To reclaim the river, a legal action was launched and in 2017 the Whanganui river acquired legal status as a living being, which means its integrity could be protected in a court of law. There are other rivers, such as the Ganges in India, that enjoy similar positions, but just imagine if this became the norm. Brands would have to shift their behaviour. Rather than objectifying the natural world and seeing it as a means to an end, they would have to think about the rights of the resources they need and how to respect them.

Guardians of Planet Earth

Indigenous people, like the Maori, account for around 15% of the world's population but care for roughly 80% of the world's biodiversity. They understand that communities and nature are interdependent and there is a need to preserve for future generations. Our view is that this indigenuity (the sense of local connectedness and ingenuity) can be adapted to brands. Some brands have already explicitly made the planet the focus of their actions. Sportswear brand with a conscience, Patagonia, has been a long advocate of environmentalism – not least because its climbing, skiing, surfing employees and customers are directly connected to the environment they hold sacred. Their purpose statement, 'Patagonia is in business to save our home planet' makes

People, Planet, Profit has long been a mantra of enlightened companies. Yet, given the urgency of the climate crisis, we need to change the order. Design for Planet first.

it clear that people and profit are at the service of 'our home planet.' Similarly, Spanish fashion brand Ecoalf has a purpose rooted in a commitment to a circular economy approach that avoids using natural resources in a careless way and delivers recycled products that are of the same quality and design as the best non-recycled products. The purpose is then made explicit in the core message 'Because there is no planet B'.

Change the order of design

Both Patagonia and Ecoalf put Planet first and act differently. Rather than over-promoting consumption, which tends to be the case when you put People first, these brands have a focus on recycling and repair. More than the act of purchase, they are interested in the way they can create value in use and make a positive contribution to the Planet.

Drawing on the inspiration of these brands and the lived experiences of the Maori and other indigenous peoples, we suggest five guiding principles and their design challenges that we offer to brand managers to brief their designers.



Five guiding principles and their design challenges that we offer to brand managers to brief their designers:



I am the river, the river is me

How might we design for the desire, values and need of the system instead of the short term desire of an individual in the system?



Be aware of the impact

How might we design for a positive impact on the planet first?



Educate the consumer for collective happiness

How might we design cues for the ethical behaviour of people to educate them and make them collectively happy with making conscious choices?



What goes up must come down

How might we design for a lifecycle that has no end of the resources used?



Dematerialise your thinking

How might we design with as less material as possible?

Brand new thinking

Taking a stance on the environment is important as a signifier to consumers, employees and investors. Even if these audiences often overstate their commitment, putting the environment up front makes brands more appealing to buy, work for and invest in. Brands that put the Planet at the core of their brand purpose are also able to influence others to behave likewise. For example, the sneaker brand, Good News London, whose purpose is 'To create a platform we can use to promote a healthy planet' makes demands on its suppliers of rubber, cotton and dyes to conform to its requirements, while the retailers it sells to such as Selfridges, in return ask for supply chain accountability, both to reduce their reputational risk and to meet the demands of customers. This strengthens the integrity of Good News and Selfridges and creates the opportunity for consumers to match their identities with the brand. Helping to bring the brand and consumer closer. For the good of the Planet. Then people. Then profit.