The Emigre Legacy

I know someone who is a real stickler for recycling. She recycles her glass, paper, aluminum and cardboard. She lives in a city where most of these items are picked up by local agencies on a weekly basis. Plastic isn't picked up, so she drives to the local recycling center in town once every now and then to drop it off. When she goes out to buy groceries, she brings used paper shopping bags. She'll get 10 or 15 trips to the grocery store out of the same double bag before it falls apart. She tries not to buy products that are overpackaged. She does not read newspapers because she feels they create an unmeasurable amount of waste. Instead, she gets her news from the radio or Internet. Old clothes or clothes that don't fit anymore she takes to the Salvation Army. She carefully plans meals to avoid throwing out food. She shares a medium-sized car with her husband. She tries to walk instead of using the car, when and wherever she can. She occasionally tries to get off mailing lists to stop the barrage of catalogs arriving in the mail each day, but she found out that trying to do so often increases the number of catalogs she receives. She's working on trying to beat that scam.

Sometimes I try to imagine what this world would be like if everyone acted the way she does. Some people say that recycling and reusing are a drop in the bucket, that they don't address the real problems this world is facing. I say that these activities probably are some of the most important, because they are the simplest and easiest things everybody can do to reduce waste and limit consumption. Recycling is a great place to start caring about the environment. Best of all, if you commit to recycling, you start realizing how much you consume. If overconsumption is one of the greatest threats facing planet Earth, and I believe it is, then recycling and reusing are where you start turning the tide.

A person who grows up believing in the value of recycling and the need to limit consumption, and who understands that the Earth's resources are finite, will be a different corporate head or ad exec than the one who never cared or

thought about these issues in the first place. The problem is that in today's marketplace the former hardly stands a chance. The reason is obvious: because the public by-and-large doesn't demand responsible use of resources from industry. It's not that they don't agree with the issues; most people actually do. They just don't believe that their individual actions and demands can make a real difference anymore. They are simply overwhelmed by the onslaught of products.

And so it is in design and advertising. A few months ago, a number of advertising and design people signed and published the *First Things First* 2000 manifesto in an effort to encourage and inspire colleagues to put their creative talents to a more socially responsible use. The general response to this publication was one of skepticism. Most respondents said it is unrealistic to think that anything can be changed about today's market-driven society. I disagree again. Much can be done, and being a socially responsible designer or ad person does not mean quitting your ad agency job to work for your local ecology center. It means working at your job with an understanding that your actions affect others far beyond whether they will or will not buy your gizmo. Something as simple as considering the use of real recycled paper containing a high percentage of post-consumer waste, or to not overpackage a product, is a great way to start making a difference. Imagine all designers and ad people doing this on a regular basis – it would have a tremendously positive effect on our resources and environment.

There are examples of this being done successfully. Take a company such as Patagonia, for instance, which makes outdoor gear. Much of their catalogs and clothing are produced using recycled and organic materials. They've built a lasting and powerful image based on the simple premise of being environmentally conscientious. It's part of their brand identity. As such, they are mavericks.

Advertising has become very shrewd at coopting society's most radical ideas to hawk product. What are at first taboos eventually become tools for targeting specific audiences. Wouldn't it be a radical idea if eco-friendly pack-

aging were coopted as a marketing strategy by large corporations? The use of recycled materials and development of recyclable and reusable packaging would, in turn, bring this awareness to the greater population – that packaging containers have material value and that they should not become trash the moment they are emptied.

Imagine when Patagonia's model is copied and applied on a much larger scale. I predict it will catch on like wild fire. Not just because it will make everyone look smart like Patagonia, but because doing the right thing is intoxicating. Once you start caring about the environment and become aware of the positive difference that you can make as a citizen and a professional, you'll want to do more. Like the person in the beginning of this article; there's no turning back for her. It becomes a way of life. I know, because she also happens to be my wife. She inspired me to change my ways, which brings me to the idea behind this issue.

At Emigre, over the past 16 years, we have saved all our obsolete computers and other hardware. It now occupies three gigantic shelving units in our warehouse. It is a computer mortuary of sorts, collecting dust. At first we held on to outdated hardware simply because we thought it might come in handy later. And to some degree we felt a certain sentimental attachment – among the heaps is a Macintosh 128, the very first Macintosh computer. Then, as the stacks of outdated computer equipment grew, we reached a point where we simply couldn't get ourselves to throw it out, feeling guilty about filling up landfills with plastic.

As we continued adding outdated equipment at an ever-increasing pace, seeing the shelves bending under the weight of old hardware, we began to worry. We started to imagine that perhaps our true professional legacy, the things that will have the most impact, the stuff we'll pass on and that will remain for generations to come, are not the Emigre Fonts, or the issues of *Emigre* magazine, but these heaps of planned obsolescence. And that became a depressing thought.

Our situation is not unique. Most design studios, or any office for that matter, generates the same kind of hardware waste at a steady pace. Fortunately, there are always people finding ways to balance out the shortsightedness of others. While the computer industry continues to produce and market new equipment at an ever-increasing rate without much regard for the environment, others have invented ways to soften the blow that "progress" inflicts upon planet Earth. Over the past years, computer recycling centers have sprouted all over, providing a necessary service in a waste-based society. These organizations recycle, refurbish or upgrade donated computer hardware and software and redistribute these items to disadvantaged individuals, nonprofit organizations, schools, libraries, and developing countries.

Following is a comprehensive list of such recycling centers compiled by Anne Bubnic.* This list is not a license to consume more. It's a call to recycle, instead of simply discard, what you already have consumed, which is only one part of the solution to save this planet. The other part is to consume less, and for manufacturers to become as radically inventive in manufacturing as in marketing their products by using eco-friendly and reusable materials, and for us consumers to encourage and demand this.

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* The original list, published in 2000, has become outdated. To find a *recycling* or *re-use* location in your neighborhood go to: http://earth911.org/ electronics/