



World Export Development Forum (WEDF), 8 – 11 October 2008

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Question & Answer Session: Friday, 10 October 2008

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# NEW STORIES FOR THE NEW CONSUMER

SPEAKER: Craig Davis, Chief Executive Officer, JWT Worldwide,  
London, UK

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In his address, **Craig Davis** of JWT Worldwide described the value of stories from a consumer, business and brand perspective. He pointed out that consumers make the private sector – businesses and brands – actually work.

He also talked about a new set of stories: stories concerning the relationship between what they do as businesses, and the communities and the environment – local and global – that they affect. The changing context in which these stories are told is critical as is the global information revolution that is creating a new culture of radical transparency.

Davis also argued that the growing demands for businesses to behave responsibly and ethically is an opportunity, not a threat, for companies and countries that are smart enough to see it that way.

“When I’m talking to businesses in developing economies, I tell them that stories that might seem familiar or banal to you – stories about where your mineral water is sourced, or how your employees interact with one another at work – will seem fascinating to the rest of us,” he pointed out.

“You can interrogate your own company, and the local and national culture it comes from, for stories that the rest of the world will find interesting. Stories about your employment policies, your environmental policies, your sourcing policies. Stories about how you do business. Stories about your national character and traditions. Because the rest of the world is listening.”

He added: “In my field, we’re always asking our clients to think about what the *benefit* is of whatever they’re selling. That’s different from the product. A professor of marketing once reminded his students that people don’t want a quarter-inch drill; they want quarter-inch holes. Whatever you’re selling, you have to get the product right before anything else - and businesses have to ensure that they generate profits.”

“But making money isn’t an end in itself. It’s the means,” Davis pointed out. “The ultimate *benefit* of a business is always bound up with the society and the environment it exists in. It’s the thing that gets us out of bed in the morning: the quest for contribution, reputation, respect, meaningful work, education and health care, giving them better tools, giving people a job they like, and so on.”



However, he noted, “different business people will frame that benefit in different ways depending on where they come from, what they do and what they care about. The way I’ve framed it today is the way I feel about it: I do what I do because I want to generate more interesting, more compelling stories for people to hear and share and discuss.

### **Consumer conscience is a creative spark for business**

“For me, my business, and for many businesses, the fact that consumers are demanding higher ethical and environmental standards is a huge creative spark, for every part of the business of my clients. It drives them and us to create, curate and communicate more and better stories about what we’re doing for the communities we work with and the planet we live on.”

Davis then summarized his message in “an organically grown, fair trade nutshell”:

- More and more consumers everywhere are looking for ethically sound and environmentally responsible and sustainable brands. There is an increasingly holistic view taken of business and brands. Even in a downturn those values are sticky.
- Technology puts everything on the record. Do as your mother taught you – do the right thing, tell the truth, look people in the eyes when you talk to them, listen well and apologise when you make mistakes. Authenticity and integrity are important business and brand values. In a culture of radical transparency these things will serve you especially well.
- Doing good is good for business. It’s working on a significant scale.
- There’s a very good chance that developing countries, companies and brands have much better stories to tell than they know, or know how to tell really well.

### **Good stories are good for business**

“Good stories, true stories of businesses with high ethical standards and sound sustainable conduct are good for business. They should be, it’s important for growth, prosperity and well being the world over,” Davis told participants.

“But there’s a higher purpose here too,” he observed. “We have an obligation, all of us, to deliver the world safe and sound into the hands of our children and theirs. Sustainability is about ‘meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs’ [in the words of the World Commission on Environment and Development].”

He concluded: “I would encourage us all to develop initiatives, policies and practices so that we can tell the right stories to ensure that this happens. It may well be these stories are the most powerful and sustainable resource of all.”

### **Questions and answers**

The follow-up session gave participants a chance to exchange ideas with Davis and to question him about the best approaches to follow in getting across to consumers.

**Question:** *How do small producers who want to add value to their products approach the big retailers? A coffee producer from Costa Rica described how Wal-Mart wanted him to pay for a programme that would enable him to sell to the company.*

**Craig Davis:** There are no easy answers. Retailers have an enormous amount of power and some are trying to develop their own brands of merchandise. But there are examples of small organizations that have built up a brand or story that has been compelling enough to be viable and then scaled up.

**Question:** *What can a small grower do to get out into the ethical consumer market?*

**Craig Davis:** One of the great things about technology is that it gives the little guy a chance. If you have a point of view and are articulate, you can pull an audience. All you need is a laptop computer and a blog. Find the stories and amplify them through small scale, very available and cheap technology. You can make a brand with a really good story and not a lot of money.

**Question:** *What kind of resources are available, free, online -- and what are the elements of a good story?*

**Craig Davis:** The Internet is still very text based, but it has liberated many things, particularly information and centralization of information. People assume that online media commercial message is driven by display advertising, but a majority of online advertising spend is delivered against paid search [i.e. through search engines]. There is a lot of free social media out there. You mentioned Twitter. There is also LinkedIn, MySpace, YouTube, Facebook and many more. All you need are facts and some creativity.

There is the expression that laughter is the shortest distance between two people. But you don't have to be funny. You can be dramatic. The important piece is that all great communications is interactive in that it stimulates a response from the audience. You must provoke a response – laughter, tears, leaning in and participating – that is the key to it.

**Question:** *If we in the South are going to sell our products and services in the North, we need storytellers in the North if our message is to resonate. How does a supplier or producer in a developing country get in touch with and finance the cost of getting in touch with the storytellers?*

**Craig Davis:** No doubt there are fantastic stories to be told – you know them better from the inside. You may need help telling them. But today, business strategy is trial and error. Experiment and amplify the things that work. When things don't work, move on to something else. Experimentation is a very valuable way of working, even if you cannot anticipate how people are going to respond.

**Question:** *Is the effectiveness of your message [as an advertising and marketing agency] limited by the fact that many people do not trust advertising?*

There are many sources with credibility. This is part of the power of the social media, which is largely non-commercial. More and more people are seeking recommendations from each other rather than from traditional media. If your story is good and stacks up, it is quite likely that people interested in that area will end up sharing it. That is what contagious/viral media is about. If you have a fair trade message, all of those sources of confidence can be relevant – it's peer-to-peer communication, or communication between "strangers who might know something".

**Question:** *In the organic farming sector, millions of dollars have been spent, but consumers are not buying. Why are marketers fumbling the messaging that will mobilize consumers? If business strategy is about trial and error, what is working and what is not?*

**Craig Davis:** The research highlights that people are much more inclined to be supportive. But being concerned is not the same as acting. I am not sure that people are fumbling. Only in the past few years have people understood that what they choose to purchase has a ripple effect upstream and down. We are just starting down this journey and there are enough interested and concerned consumers. We should push while we have momentum.

**Question:** *What about the idea of a country brand, selling the idea of a nation?*

**Craig Davis:** Countries are a powerful source of influence in this area, whether you choose to go with a branded solution that's linked to the product or deal with country level first. Where things come from is one of the first things people seek out when looking for credibility. Look at the country, the service or the product and look for differentiation – then use it as a centre of gravity for everything you do.