

Green Business perspectives

This time REALLY IS different

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Throughout the course of human evolution, proto-man has been faced with countless natural disasters that threatened his world and existence. Mega-volcanoes, tsunamis and errant meteors brought terror and suffering that forced dramatic change during humanities multi-million year accent. During the brief period that makes up recorded history, nature cooperated with a relatively stable, well balanced environment. Humans flourished.

We Did it to Ourselves

Along the way, man-made disasters began to raise serious doubts about our future. War, maniacal despotism, filth borne plagues and the unintended consequences of advancing technology repeatedly altered the course of events and pushed individual civilizations back. With each set-back, the impact was limited primarily to the population of the time and the region. For the most part, inhabitants of other parts of the world were neither aware nor affected. Regardless of what havoc humans created in one part of the world, in the larger picture, the overall course of human development was ever upward.

Always a Way Back

Until recently, nothing humans were able to do was serious enough to destroy the future for every generation to follow. New generations, somewhere on earth, always had the chance to make life better and had the raw material to do it with. There was always a road back from terminal tragedy.

Changed Forever

In May 1945, that changed forever. For the first time, the acts of individuals had the potential to permanently ruin life for future generations across the planet. The nuclear threat changed human perception in ways nothing had before. The possibility of instantly erasing five million years of human evolution was a sobering thought and over the next sixty years had a powerful impact on how the world was organized and governed. It remains to be seen what the future affects of peaceful nuclear energy will be, but the alternative to nuclear war is really quite clear. "Don't push the button and no

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permanent damage is done.” While the threat remains and solutions not easy, nothing irrevocable has yet occurred.

This Time REALLY IS Different

Unknown at the time was that more than 100 years earlier, a much slower but equally devastating force had been set in motion. The burning of fossil fuels to power the industrial revolution had begun and in less than 200 years, completely reshaped how people lived, thought and conducted business. A more recent complication of the industrial explosion is that many of the raw materials used to create this economic phenomenon are beginning to show signs of tight supply. The world we now live in is both economically inter-dependent and technologically dependent. The whole thing runs on cheap energy and transportation, and we are just now learning that there is a late payment due on the bill.

In previous man-made disasters, once people stopped their mischief, the disaster was dispelled and life went on. Nature's bounty always came to the rescue. There were always more raw materials to work with and always a road back to a new beginning.

Climate change is different. Human activity is merely the catalyst that disrupts the delicate balance that has allowed humans to flourish since the last ice age. The real and irrevocable change occurs when, once disturbed, nature begins to take it's own course, slowly going through millennia of unknowable and unstoppable cycles that may take many thousands of years (if ever) to return to anything like the benign balance we have come to enjoy.

Nuclear War in Slow Motion

Picture an outcome similar to nuclear war played out in ultra-slow motion. The combined threats of climate change and depletion of resources is much more insidious than nuclear holocaust because a bomb blast is an instant and terrifying event with us and everything we are about at immediate risk. Climate-change and resource depletion are a slow, vague processes with unclear outcome, little personal connection and nobody specific to blame. Until now, this glacial pace has allowed us to believe we had plenty of time to figure it all out when in reality we are 200 years down the road and just about out of time.

We do not know what the world will be like at the end of this century, only that it will be very different from today. While we can be hopeful that it may be a great deal better, there much to do to see that it is and the time to start is long since past.

Things We Know for Certain

The forces that move markets are often subtle and hidden, but some are easily knowable, quite certain and can only be ignored at great risk. Below are a few things we know for sure.

- 70 million new people are added to earth's population every year.
- More than fifty percent of the world's population is transitioning from a low energy/resource intensive agrarian economies to a high energy/resource intensive industrial economies
- Transportation is fundamental to the global economy and runs on oil
- Oil demand is forecast to permanently outpace supply within ten years
- Eighty percent of oil reserves are controlled by entities of uncertain stability or intent
- The United States has not built a new oil refinery in over 30 years
- Critical non-petroleum resources are under increasing supply and price pressures
- Weather patterns are becoming more extreme and unpredictable

These are but a few of the unprecedented market forces that we must acknowledge as we plan what to do next. While alarming, they do not signify a specific outcome. From another perspective, these developments may be seen as directional indicators to a better future for people everywhere.

Business Perspective

Rarely do business leaders have access to such long-term and clearly defined telemetry of the market forces that will inevitably alter the marketplace in which they compete. There is considerable disagreement about timing, priorities, who is at fault and who should pay, but the reality of the changes are undeniable and the impact on individual businesses will be staggering. All that is left to do is act.

While large scale global business is perhaps the most powerful engine of change in the world today, larger companies generally prefer a climate of predictability and stability and abhor the unknown. Smaller, more flexible enterprises have less of a stake in continuity with the past and often thrive in times of disruptive change. We are now entering a period likely to be characterized by long-term instability and uncertainty. Fortunately, the laws of supply and demand still seem to be operating and the engines of commerce turning. New value is constantly being created as markets for energy and energy efficient products, services develop.

The message is sobering and the challenges unsettling, yet the opportunities for business growth are unprecedented. In the not too distant future, as yet unimagined technologies will sweep aside those we have come to depend on and new names will replace familiar ones on leading exchanges. The stage is set now for the next industrial revolution and, as before, free enterprise will lead the way.

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