

Circular Economy Stakeholder Conference

by **Ilaria Nicoletta Brambilla**

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Environmental Communication Should be More Emotive

A member of the EU Social and Economic Committee, the board of directors of the Agence Française de Normalisation and of the Institut des Futurs souhaitables, **Thierry Libaert** has also been a professor of Organisational Communication at the Université catholique de Louvain. He is concerned with issues tied to sustainable consumption, planned obsolescence and the economy of functionality.



As an expert in environmental communication, what do you think of the level of communication in Europe in terms of sustainable development and circular economy? What do you think is the best strategy to adopt?

"I believe that the global communication

Thierry Libaert, member of the EU Social and Economic Committee

strategies of the EU and many other national institutions on themes of social responsibility, sustainability and global warming suffer from being too 'top-down,' perhaps a bit unilateral and often moralising. If we look at the most positive ways in which people receive messages, there are several things that don't add up. Firstly, the sender circulates a message in a unilateral manner, with no interaction and often using a single instrument, like advertising or information pamphlets. I'll give you an example: a theme I have worked on has been how to get people to separate their waste. We have verified that results are obtained by combining informative tools and the

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human element, which means interaction with experts who, in person, explain good behaviours. The 90% of communication that is limited to distributing informative materials doesn't work very well. Secondly, speaking of the environment, when we ask European citizens how they consider themselves in terms of environmental behaviour, we discover that 95% of them believe themselves to be 'good eco-citizens.' Hence, when messages are sent out to raise awareness about environmental issues, the same thing happens that occurs with road safety information: most people believe themselves to be good drivers, therefore the message is ignored because people believe it is not aimed at them. The system, therefore, should include a higher level of personalisation in its messages. Thirdly, communication regarding certain themes, like climate change, is very technical: 'compliance with accords on 1,5 to 2 °C,' 'so many tonnes of carbon,' etc. I think that communication should be much easier to visualise: no one has ever seen a tonne of carbon, so the message is hard to understand. Furthermore, there should be more of a focus on emotional appeals, and on what climate change will lead to if we keep going the way we're headed."

Does more effective communication translate to better buying habits on the part of the consumers?

"The European Social and Economic Committee, of which I am a member, launched a large research project in 2016, involving 3,000 people in Spain, Czechia, France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands in a participative experiment, where people were put in the position of having to purchase certain products. We built a fake e-commerce site and we asked them to use it to make some purchases, and we tried to write a product's estimated lifespan in the description. We realised that consumers did look at this information – negating what many people say about there being too much information on labels already – and, furthermore, that they were able to choose in a thoughtful manner, not just based on lower prices but often choosing to pay more for a product if it would last for a longer period of time. It's a virtuous cycle, where consumers benefit from longer lasting products, companies have an interest in manufacturing objects that have a higher cost and the consequences for the

environment are less use of natural resources, and less waste."

Do you believe that companies are really moving things up a gear?

"I think they are, and that they understand that it's a profitable model, even in terms of reputation. From tyre manufacturers working hard to extend their products' life cycle, to large manufacturers of electrical appliances who ensure ten-year reparability for their products, it's a case of standing out in the field to attract consumers and help the environment, and not in terms of 'greenwashing.' Furthermore, the service economy – which is part of the circular paradigm – has a real interest in making its products last as long as possible."

And all of this also has a social impact.

"Exactly. From the perspective of creating new jobs in the various phases of product manufacturing and repair, a study commissioned within the framework of the European Resolution of June 2017 has demonstrated that, if product durability and reparability parameters are taken into consideration, approximately 45,000 jobs would be created. Additionally, planned obsolescence has a greater impact on lower-income portions of the population: those who have less money to spend buy less expensive products that don't last as long. This means purchasing frequency increases, creating more debt. Increasing the lifespan of products and their reparability also leads to higher social equality."