

V3 - Kickstarting Purpose Innovation: Using Small Drops for Big Impact

How do you make purpose tangible? This is one of the key questions facing communicators today. With brands and businesses making big commitments to help create a better world many audiences are left asking what change is going to look like. Bold visions and audacious targets help set the direction but they are distant and abstract, what's needed to bring purpose to life are things you can see, hold, feel and engage with.

This is where purpose-led innovation drops can play a big role. Classic innovation drops tend to be limited-time, localised products or services aimed to enthuse fans, trial new designs and push into new audiences. Purpose drops do the same for impact. Small-scale releases of purpose-led products or services help signal the direction of the business overall. They don't claim to have fully solved a problem, just to show the ingenuity and commitment of a brand to its cause.

With [almost half of consumers viewing purpose activity with scepticism](#), taking action has become more important than ever. Drops have the advantage of being relatively quick to deliver and live as a compelling story long after their time on the shelves. So rather than waiting for some multi-year program to deliver a cluster of PR-able results, more and more brands are choosing to make 'a thing' that audiences can wrap their heads around and engage directly with. Drops are telling stories, creating statements of intent and generating buzz to cast halos around brands. Let's take a look at some of the best examples...

Is there potential in the byproducts of your production? Like [Castle Lager](#), South Africa's biggest beer brand, who spotted a bread-making opportunity in its spent grain, and is now committed to feeding over one-million disadvantaged South Africans over the next three years. As well as communicating its ingredient's quality credentials (i.e. 'it's good enough to make bread'), the initiative reinforces Castle Lager's position as a rooted and proud South African brand.

Can you create a 'proof of concept' for a sustainable solution that's not yet scalable? Like [Stella McCartney's](#) run of one-hundred luxury handbags that use lab-grown Mycelium as a leather alternative. Despite its small scale run, it acts as a demonstration of the brand's ongoing commitment to sustainable fashion, whilst setting a precedent for others to use the material in the future.

Is there a pressing issue that connects to your audience? Like womenswear brand, [The Female Company](#), who, in response to Germany's 'Tampon Tax' (which classed them as luxury goods alongside caviar and fine art) created a limited run of tampons packaged in books. Raising awareness, whilst playfully circumventing the tax, the books sold out in supermarkets, amassed huge amounts of attention, and played a big role in getting the tax abolished.

Can you use your scale to support an industry? Like our work to create the [Budweiser Energy Collective](#), where – as an extension of its pledge to brew 100% of its beer with renewable energy – Bud deployed its purchasing power to secure hugely discounted prices for electricity before passing the supply and savings onto their SME partners who drive the physical availability of the brand.

As you can see, purpose drops can put a wide range of possibilities on the table. So how do you determine your 'right to play' within an issue? The starting point is to look for alignment between the action you're taking and who you are as a business. Often, the opportunity and your right to play will be linked; for example, answering 'yes' to any of these questions could set the stage for credible impact:

Can you extend your offer to meet an underserved group's needs? Like [Ikea](#), who created a series of 3D printable open-source 'add ons' designed to make its furniture more accessible for people with mobility and dexterity issues. Alongside reinforcing its age-old brand purpose of 'democratising design', the initiative's launch saw a 33% uplift in sales for products featuring the devices.

Could an intervention improve behaviour in your category? Like Italian-owned food brand, [Barilla](#), whose 'passive cooking device' helps people cook pasta with 80% CO2 emissions; or [Makro Supermarket's](#) fruit and vegetable stickers that prevent food waste by educating consumers on 'adequate ripeness'.

Is there an issue your business's specific expertise could help resolve? Like [Koushi Chemical Industry Co](#), who applied its engineering and materials expertise to create a solution for the thousands-of-tons of scallop shells discarded on Japanese fishing shores every year. Recognising potential in the shell's calcium carbonate, they developed a way to upcycle them into a new compound – creating helmets (now sold to industrial giants), and setting a new materials standard for others to follow.

Purpose drops provide a practical route to impact. Even though they're small scale, if done right, they can have a disproportionate effect – both on your brand and your issue.

But that's not to say they can't scale. Drops can act as a method for trial and feedback. What starts as a tactic could end up informing the wider strategy. A successful initiative could lead to a more considered pilot, or it could serve as a business case that generates internal alignment and more resources for bigger projects down the line. Who knows, a drop could end up landing you on your brand's equivalent of Gregg's Vegan Sausage Roll!

