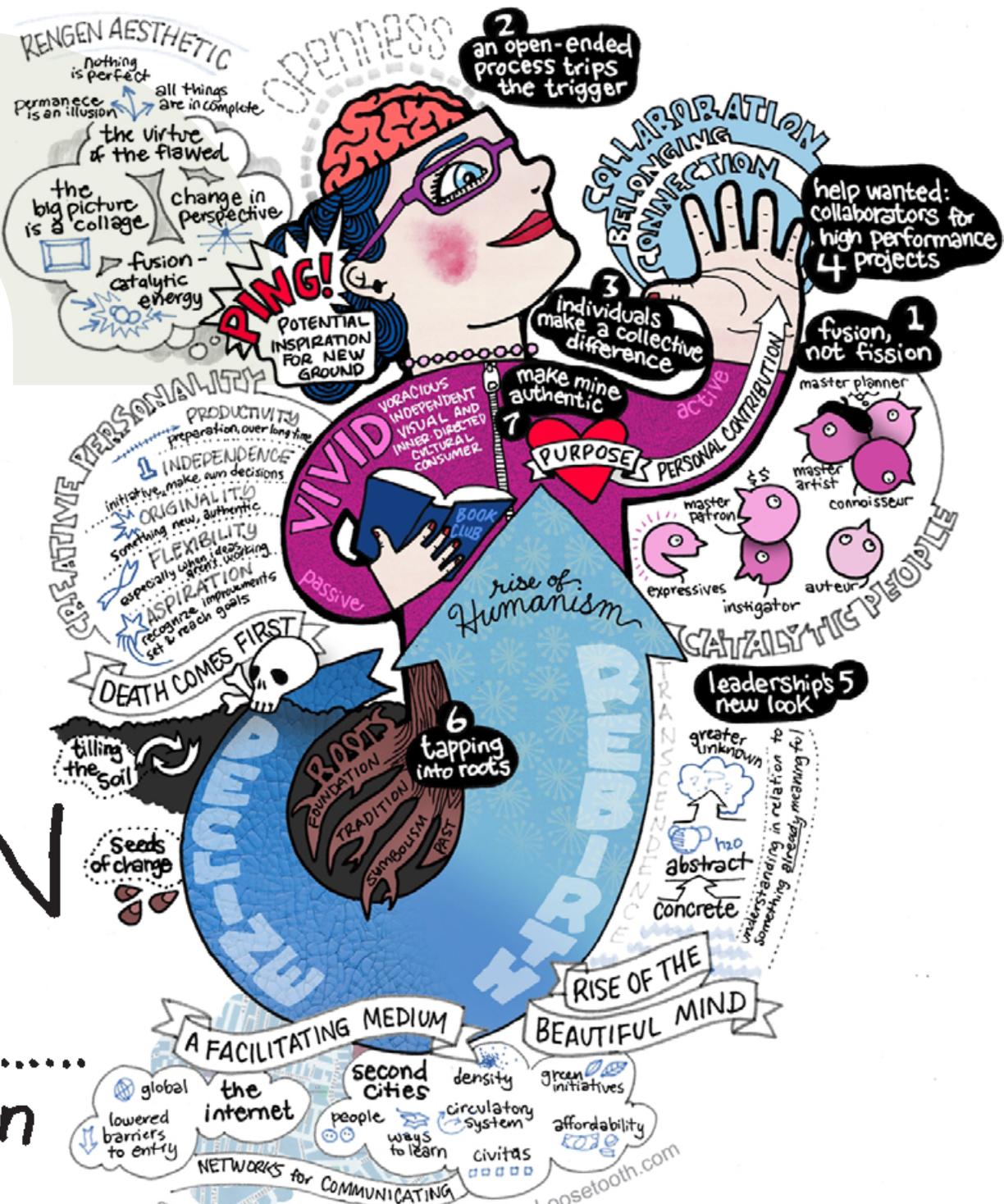


the RENGGEN manifesto

by Patricia Martin



graphic facilitation by Brandy Agerbeck, Loosetooth.com

At the dawn of the fourteenth century, human curiosity exploded with a burst of new ideas. It was the beginning of two hundred years that would redefine civilization. Explorers set sail to discover the ends of the earth. Artists and inventors stretched the limits of their imaginations. A modern point of view emerged when engineering, arts and science leapt from the dark ages into an enlightened age of innovation.¹

¹ DaVinci, exhibition notes, Museum of Science and Industry, 2006.

Years into the knowledge economy, the context in which we live our daily lives is no longer a twilight zone of change. Who we are and what we care about are taking shape with an emerging set of imperatives, behaviors and ambitions. After decades of hearing the mantra that life is all about change—a daily flood of circumstances impossible to navigate—it seems risky to be definitive about the larger patterns emerging. But after spending two years researching our situation, I am convinced that we need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that we are poised to become a renaissance generation, a RenGen.

WHAT IS THE “RENAISSANCE GENERATION”?

Renaissance: a movement or period of robust creative and intellectual activity that is associated with a rebirth of civilization.

Generation: a group of individuals born and living contemporaneously in a span of consecutive years, the length of which approximates the span of a phase of life that is approximately twenty-two to thirty years.

For decades, we have been converted into believing that the majority of Americans could be defined by their appetites for fast food and reality television. The idea that the average American is below average has acquired such a grip on our collective imaginations, that many people have difficulty seeing the shift that is already underway in our society.

Look around you. Evidence abounds that a new outlook is rising. Otherwise, why does sixty-five percent of Americans cite reading as their preferred leisure activity? Why do companies like Google and Microsoft seek to borrow from the intellectual sanctums of museums and libraries for entertainment content? Why do art museums, aquariums, zoos and science centers draw more foot traffic than all the professional sports teams in the United States combined, including auto racing? Why do teenagers turn up in record numbers at poetry slams and post original short stories on their blogs? Why have applications to art schools shown aggressive growth over the last decade? Why does

MySpace have more than 110 million members who use the site as a vast canvas to express themselves? Our idea of mass culture needs an overhaul.

WHAT TRIGGERS A RENAISSANCE?

A welter of doomsday books and bleak forecasts makes it easy to conclude that we are trapped in an endless downward spiral. This is not the case. In fact, our present conditions look a lot like what happens right before a renaissance.

There are three conditions essential to a renaissance:

- 1. Death comes first.** Right before the emergence of a renaissance, the dominant civilization declines. The tension between life and death cycles stimulates a flowering of creativity. The culture fuses where it's been with where it's headed and as the civilization dies, it throws off seeds for the next cycle, which is often more creative and robust. After all, it is being built upon something that was remarkable.
- 2. A facilitating medium.** The Romans built a system of roads that covered most of Europe and far into the East to connect people with other cultures. Today, our paths converge via the Internet.
- 3. Elevation of human potential.** There is a penchant among the people to learn, explore new thought, contribute and exchange ideas. People regain their sense of self-determination.

Our idea of mass culture needs an overhaul.

And, these phenomena are accelerated by other factors:

Collaborative context

In a renaissance, things get done through collaboration. This working connection between people supports the larger purpose that is unfolding as one civilization declines and a new one is created. Such a process involves the sharing of ideas, rituals and customs. For example, consider the way Pixar, a highly collaborative company, hires talent. It demands two requisites:

1. Employees must draw well—and by hand. Memos, meetings, all manner of communications are delivered in storyboard form.
2. Employees must be sociable beings. That means if someone steps up to the white board and draws on top of your drawing, “it shouldn’t piss you off.”

Catalytic personalities rule

In uncertain circumstances that surround the dawning of a new age, forceful risk-takers play a critical role. For these leaders, there are no small plans—only bold visions. They operate without the fear of being judged, and have a knack for quelling the naysayer. Teflon-coated, connected to power in one form or another, they animate a renaissance with large, complex projects that average people would never imagine, let alone realize. Consider the story of Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel project. He declined it twice, each time for the same reason. It was impossible, he said. The large ceiling showed mineral deposits that made it too unstable for a fresco, which sets quickly and is unforgiving. The final offer was put before him. He was at the height of his career. The money was what he commanded and gave him the freedom to hire the best artists to assist him. All his conditions were met. Pope Julius II, and his wealthy banker Agostino Chigi, both catalytic personalities of the Italian Renaissance, were firm—take it or leave it. Michelangelo reluctantly agreed. Later, he wept fearing he had taken on the impossible. Consider the result.

This story bears witness to the power of catalytic personalities: leaders, sponsors, and artists, all converging to make something extraordinary happen.

A sharp intake of fear

The threat to survival quickens our ability to problem solve and innovate. In fifteenth-century Europe, it was the plague. Deadly and completely unexpected, it wiped out entire villages in a matter of days. No one on the continent of Europe was left untouched by the epidemic. It is hard to predict our modern-day equivalent, but the current wisdom is that the degradation of our planet's resources is real. Global warming is an accepted truth, and a century of progress at any price has left us with a deadly problem to solve.

A shift in mind-set

People in a renaissance adopt a new outlook—a shift that disrupts the status quo. Consider that humanism in the European renaissance signaled the decline of the Catholic Church and the rise of Protestantism. The RenGen is embracing a new sense of self-determination. This mind-set fosters a belief in the power of an individual to contribute to the greater good through his or her own personal actions. Likewise, there is a desire to be non-conformist. The “indie” mentality becomes a social construct for a much bigger transformation away from the idea of the mass conformity that allowed mass marketing, and toward the ideal of individual self-expression. This implies a redefinition of what mass culture means that pushes us toward mass customization. YouTube, Facebook and MySpace are driven by the unleashing of mass creativity. This marks the first time in history that mass communication is a dialogue, not a monologue.

The interactive nature of the Internet marks a crucial cultural development then, as we move away from the passivity of television toward emerging forms of expression that seem limited only by our imaginations. Here are just a few examples of companies looking to harness this creative energy:

- Whole Foods plans a magazine, written by employees, that allows customers to contribute ideas and perspectives, as well.
- Starbucks manages a program through its charitable arm called Make Your Mark. It allows baristas to get behind arts events and local causes that improve the community. From literacy projects to community murals, Make Your Mark encourages employees to be catalysts and puts real dollars behind employee initiatives by making grants through Starbucks' philanthropy.

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MEET THE CULTURAL CONSUMER

At the center of the RenGen we find a decisive, inner-directed, powerful new player: the cultural consumer. Once a niche population, cultural consumers are building mass. Consider the facts:

- The typical adult attends an average of 1.9 cultural events per month.
- Sixty-eight percent of the American public is interested in independent film.
- Younger respondents (18 – 29) attend an average of 2.3 cultural events per month.
- Twelve million out of eighteen million households surveyed ranked “avid book reading” as their number one leisure activity according to the Standard Rate and Data Service (SRDS), a company that collects data on consumer behavior for the advertising industry.

Cultural Consumers Redefine Leisure

Book groups have replaced bowling leagues as a popular leisure pastime. There are an estimated one million active book groups in the United States, according to the Association of Book Group Readers and Leaders. Most groups are free of charge and consist of a minimum of three participants, but can encompass large city populations who participate in One City One Book. Comparatively, there are three million frequent bowlers according to the United States Bowling Congress, the governing body for bowling leagues.

Popularity of poetry slams: Over 75 cities sent teams to the 2007 National Poetry Slam in Austin, Texas, according to Poetry Slam, Inc., the official governing body for poetry slamming.

Travel spending: In 2004, 92 million, or 46 percent, of U.S. adult travelers included a cultural, arts, heritage or historic activity. These tourists travel more often, stay longer and spend more.

A HANDY GUIDE TO THE CULTURAL CONSUMER

To understand how the cultural consumer thinks, here are some guidelines:

Metaphysical basis: Humans and the natural world are interdependent; the fate of one controls the destiny of the other. Human purpose is interwoven with universal oneness.

World view: The world's natural resources are devolving and finite.

Time and space: We have pre-assigned the limits of time and space, but they are not inherently structured as we perceive them.

Spiritual values: What can be imagined can be manifested. Spirit can be brought into everyday life, work and physical surroundings. Heaven is the uplifted state of consciousness, the wonderful, peaceful sense of universal oneness. Old traditions are fused with new spirituality.

Moral code of action: Transformation of society and the planet can be achieved through modest, personal, constructive acts. Balance the health of the mind, body and spirit for true well-being. Overcome hierarchies that prevent understanding and connectedness. Return to what is simple, natural and direct. Value sensory experience above expert opinion. Do what you love, love what you do. Contribute effort toward achieving greater ends.

Objects and the physical realm: Put more stock in the natural process of things. Accept imperfection as a mark of what's natural or authentic. Objects that are associative—beloved—tell a story or convey a sense of belonging.

WHAT WILL RULE IN THE RENGEN?

If you want your brand to stand out, you must buy into the fact that the cultural consumer possesses the leading mind-set. Here are some lessons to point the way.

The rise of ecophobia. Say goodbye to the perfectionist tyranny of Martha Stewart and hello to products that are rough-hewn and imperfect, but ecologically correct. The big sellers at home gardening centers in 2007 were potted plants in knobby, biodegradable containers.

Lesson: The RenGen prefers products that are imperfect but authentic, over perfect products that pollute.

The dawn of the brain-fit era. Buffed-up bodies and a focus on physical fitness are being supplanted by new efforts to get our brains into shape. Facilitated by the Internet, the average American now spends more time online searching for information than he or she does driving. More Americans visit museums, aquariums, zoos and historical sites than attend all professional sporting events combined. Yet, less than 5% of corporate sponsorship dollars are being spent on arts and cultural events.

Lesson: To be effective, companies need to diversify their promotional portfolios to reach consumers through cultural experiences.

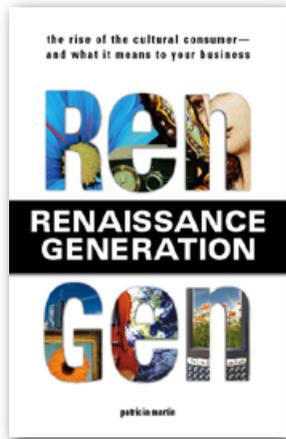
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It's about fusion, not fission. If the last century was defined by fission—the segmenting and dividing of people and things—the new century is defined by fusion, in which consumers fuse a dizzying array of disparate choices. Consumers want to fit in and stand out at the same time. They want to share values with the communities they form, but also express their individuality. They may cleave to the religions they were raised with, and embrace new mysticism simultaneously. Businesses will miss some of the juice of this movement if they continue to apply old-school market segmentation of age, gender and household income. Today, punk rock might appeal to both a fifty-year-old male and a sixteen-year-old female.

Lesson: The old rules of marketing by age, sex, income and other identifiers no longer dominate. Targeting the consumers' interests and appealing to their sense of creativity in a way that leaves room for their self-expression wins the day. They will do the work of customization for you.

WHAT LIES AHEAD

The time just before birth is often a dangerous and complicated one, as one civilization ends and a new one is born. So, too, has our world today reached a critical turning point. The passage into a better and brighter time will demand individuals and organizations that possess a force of creativity powerful enough to challenge the status quo, disrupt the marketplace and transform society. The RenGen is right on time. 📖



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author, consultant and recognized expert in cultural marketing, Patricia Martin is president of Chicago-based [LitLamp Communications Group](#), the firm she founded in 1995. The firm has worked with a variety of organizations including Discovery Channel, the Art Institute of Chicago, Bank North, Brooklyn Public Library, National PTA, the New York Philharmonic, Target, Unisys and Sun Microsystems. Martin has been featured for her innovative work in marketing in the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Wall Street Reporter*, *Boston Business Journal* and *Brandweek Magazine*. Visit her [CultureScout](#) blog.

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