



Get real: People will want to connect in 2008

By Marco della Cava, USA TODAY

Next year, our friends in China will be feting the Year of the Rat. We'll have no such luxury. Here in the USA, it'll be the Year of Getting Real. Or so says a brain trust of marketers, activists and cultural anthropologists who live to dissect our shopping, eating, viewing, networking and lifestyle habits.

The coming 366 days — yes, it's a leap year — promise to be rife with drama, considering the Hollywood shutdown, the real estate downturn and a scrappy upcoming election. In reaction, they predict, we'll be all about avoiding artifice and affectation and embracing the tangible and practical.

Here are seven back-to-basics shifts to look forward to in 2008:

Social networking 2.0

So far, the bulk of the hoopla surrounding MySpace and Facebook has focused on kids connecting with kids. But the coming year will see social networking expropriated like never before by Mom and Dad as they push to make more efficient use of their time as well as stay in touch with their aging parents.

"In the 1950s, multiple generations lived if not with each other then certainly in the same town. Today, that model is dead, and sites like Facebook are essentially a replacement for that nuclear family," says Peter Sealey, a longtime tech-industry marketing adviser and founder of The Sausalito Group.

"Adults will turn to these sites to ask three questions of their loved ones: How are you? Where are you? And what are you doing?" he says. "The conversation on these social networking sites will flow between kids, parents and seniors."

Sealey says the increasing pace of everyday life makes the once simple act of picking up a phone to see what book a friend has read seem time-consuming.

"With social networking sites, you can tell friends what movie you've just seen or find out that your mother is going to be playing bridge for the day, seamlessly and efficiently," he says. "As the Wi-Fi network grows nationally, this is the way we'll stay in touch."

Expert central

The Web may well have put the world at our fingertips, but many of us are feeling as if it's getting a wee bit crowded out there. In 2008, those companies that can help us navigate that sea of information and misinformation will become trusted friends, says Marshal Cohen, chief industry analyst with Port Washington, N.Y.-based market research giant The NPD Group.

"This new year will be all about simplification," Cohen says. "We'll be looking for help in eliminating clutter in our lives, and that means looking for names and brands that we trust. In a way, it's like going back in time."

He says that means companies with brick-and-mortar locations will fare better wooing customers than Web-only outfits. Cohen also suspects that blogging and other amateur online efforts will wane. "The average person may well be shouting 'I want a say,' but that's created an absence of legitimacy on the Web," Cohen says.

What consumers will value most isn't innovation but expertise. "We'll listen to those we deem worth listening to, because we're tired of all the noise out there," he says. "Maybe it'll be Oprah, or maybe it's Consumer Reports, but we're going to stick with those brands that offer reliable information. In that sense, bigger will be better."

Group think

The enormity of our pressing national issues will cause us to band together to push governmental and business leaders to provide relief and guidance, says Hans Eisenbeis, senior editor at Iconoculture, a consumer trends research company based in Minneapolis.

"Consumers are saying 'reality bites,' and they want elected officials as well as corporate chiefs to step up and help find some solutions," he says, a significant shift away from "the do-it-yourself, less-government-is-better-government attitude of past years."

Eisenbeis says we should expect to see more examples of "people banding together to help each other out," whether it's groups picketing home loan companies or individuals starting so-called peer-to-peer lending programs to assist those experiencing foreclosure and personal bankruptcy.

"There's a 'we're all in it together' feeling out there that's only going to grow as more people get affected by issues such as housing and health care," Eisenbeis says. "People are going to lean on each other and push those in power to find the necessary solutions."

Green redux

The message delivered by An Inconvenient Truth and its Nobel Peace Prize-winning star, Al Gore, was both simple and dire: Work to stop global warming now, or else. That mandate probably left many feeling either overwhelmed or bullied into a narrowly focused green to-do list.

Next year, people will take a step back from that mass movement and make up their own minds about the ways in which they can contribute to the planet's health, says Zem Joaquin, editor in chief of ecofabulous.com, a blog aimed at showing that style and eco-consciousness can walk hand in hand.

"What started as a reactionary movement — you know, 'Poor polar bears, but what can I really do?' — will really turn into something more personal next year," says Joaquin, whose home just north of San Francisco was outfitted with the environment in mind, from its vintage furniture to its concrete countertops.

"It'll be about picking out what matters to you and pursuing that," she says. "For me, it's about material choices (in furnishings) and indoor air quality. But the cause will be different for each one of us, and that's OK."

And for the less-than-motivated, the good news is that you may not have to do much to be green as companies make the eco-changes for you. "A good example is Wal-Mart, who continue to push their suppliers to reduce the packaging used with their products," Joaquin says. "So it'll be even easier to go green."

New civility

No, next year we're not likely to find all our doors held open or stacks of thank-you notes in the mailbox. But there's a feeling that the hardships we're likely to face next year will be met by a return to manners, says Peter Post, great-grandson of etiquette maven Emily and lead presenter of the Emily Post Institute's Business Etiquette seminars.

"Etiquette used to mean rules for rules' sake, and that's not what we're talking about here," Post says. "What's really at issue is a civility that helps take the stress out of our daily lives. It's about using etiquette as a tool to achieve pleasant personal and professional relationships, which in turn will only help with our overall lives."

Post says he doesn't expect to see men laying down their coats over mud puddles. But he does believe that more people will work on not letting disagreements explode into vitriol, which is particularly possible with a hotly contested election coming up.

Next year could prove a tipping point in favor of a renewed appreciation of etiquette, Post says, a reaction to a "me-centric, informal world that runs on technology, which requires that we respond to people quickly and not thoughtfully, and at a distance instead of face to face. I think we'll wake up to the fact that our lives will be more

pleasant by being nice."

Radical acceptance

Anthropologist Robbie Blinkoff is convinced that the new year will find more people responding to the problems affecting the USA — such as the war and the economy — by setting out on a soul-searching mission that eventually will lead them to engage fully with the questions at hand.

"We heard so much about people trying to live 'off the grid,' but there's no such thing as that. It's really about reconnecting to the grid and finding out what you're really meant to do on it," says the co-founder of Context-Based Research Group in Baltimore, which helps product planners read the cultural landscape. "The first step is accepting the situation at hand, to know that you can't know what will happen, and be OK with that."

Blinkoff says arriving at a place of "radical acceptance" — a term derived from a book of the same name by psychotherapist Tara Brach — is a process that requires conquering the inevitable fear that comes with bad news.

"What's great about the term 'radical acceptance' is that it implies, rightly, that we don't have any choice but to confront the reality of our lives," Blinkoff says. "So maybe you can't personally stop a war. But you can help a neighbor in need. And hopefully that will ripple."

Pleasure revenge

OK, being nice to neighbors could be a way in which we regain our true sense of self. Then again, there's another possibility: glorious, damn-the-torpedoes, guilt-free indulgence — pleasure revenge, in the words of Faith Popcorn, founder of BrainReserve marketing consultancy.

"We just can't take all this bad news, so to some degree you start to understand the 'let's fiddle while Rome is burning' attitude, which will only increase," Popcorn says. "People will be eating more red meat, drinking, smoking."

Celebrity culture offers up a template "that says, 'Let me party now, I'll take care of the rest tomorrow,' whether it's a quick divorce or a trip to rehab," she says. "So the rest of us figure, fine, we'll just have our own bacchanal."

Popcorn says evidence of escapist behavior can be found everywhere from Second Life (the virtual world where online players take on alter egos, even marrying other avatars) to Las Vegas (whose pitch-perfect ad campaign slogan, "What happens here, stays here," speaks for itself).

"People feel like, 'I can't keep track of the terrorists or save the planet, so the heck with it, I'm going to have fun,' " she says.

"But the big repentance will come," she cautions. Just not now.

"Look for that in 2009."