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Climate Change Lessons from the Slopes

By Ryan Schuchard
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A recent [study](#) presented at last month's American Geophysical Union conference holds chilling news for the \$2 billion U.S. ski industry: Climate change might end skiing in Aspen and Park City by 2100.

It stands to reason that if the snow pack dries up, the ski industry could, too. But the study from Mark Williams and Brian Lazar could be a harbinger of things to come for other consumer-facing industries as well. As one of the first industries to face climate change head-on, skiing provides three key lessons for other sectors.

Learn the Terrain: Know and Promote the Facts

Climate change myths abound. On a recent Google search for "climate change facts," five out of the first 11 hits led me to websites that downplay or contradict the science. Media watchdog groups substantiate my findings: According to Media Matters, recent content by CNN, the Wall Street Journal, Fox News, and other mainstream papers and broadcast outlets have contained inaccurate and flawed information about climate change.

In light of this misinformation, consumer-facing industries have a responsibility to get their facts straight and share them with their customers. According to the best assembly of experts on the subject -- the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change -- [here's what we know](#): The climate is destabilizing, this destabilization is driven by greenhouse gas emissions, and humans are directly responsible for causing those emissions (see sidebar).

With this gap between public knowledge and the scientific facts, one of the most powerful things companies can do about climate change is use their communication channels to set the record straight. In the ski industry, outdoor apparel manufacturer Patagonia, which has an extensive "[environmentalism](#)" section on its website, has been doing this for years. By demonstrating a deep-rooted commitment to environmental stability, Patagonia has enjoyed the commercial benefits of long-term customer loyalty, and the ethical benefits of being on the right side of science.

There is a business opportunity for virtually every company to use their existing communications efforts to give their employees and customers a compass for climate change, which is shaping up to be one of history's greatest social threats. Since people need accurate information to make good decisions, this is, for many consumer-facing businesses, the easiest and most important thing they can do.

Go Out of Bounds: Look Outside Your Company's Operations

In many ways, it's logical to focus efforts on reducing emissions from your company's internal operations: Internal emissions are the easiest to measure and control, the effort yields useful information about costs and risks, and committing to operational reductions is important for credibility.

But as the ski industry has demonstrated, there are important opportunities to look outside the scope of your company's boundaries and consider ways you can help reduce emissions on a broader scale.

The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change

There is much debate about the details of climate change, and future-looking analyses in general bring uncertainty. Yet we confidently

For example, the energy bar company Clif Bar has supported the formation of the collaborative initiative [Keep Winter Cool](#), which aims to raise public understanding of global warming. In an effort to take responsibility for their customers' drives to the mountain, California's Kirkwood ski resort partnered with SnowBomb, a resort information and discount portal, to develop user-friendly rideshare schemes. Enabling conservation-oriented consumer behavior is one of the most important steps companies can take to combat climate change.

At the same time, a company's operations have less influence on the customer than the customer's experience with the company's products, which generally takes place among an ecosystem of complimentary goods and services from other companies -- in the case of skiing, that includes the drive, lodging, gear, and more. Consumer-facing companies therefore have

manage risk in all aspects of life -- climate change should be no different -- and the world's most informed experts agree on the most fundamental issues that we need to understand in order to act: The climate is destabilizing, this destabilization is driven by greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs), and those GHGs are directly caused by humans.

These are the findings of "[Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science](#)," the most comprehensive review ever undertaken on climate science. The review, dubbed "AR4," was conducted by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the world's leading scientific body on climate. Peer-reviewed science stands in agreement: According to the last published review of scholarly literature, conducted by [Naomi Oreskes](#) in 2004, in more than 900 scholarly articles, not one disputed this consensus view. Furthermore, no major world scientific academies contradict these basic findings.

If your company does decide to pursue a climate strategy of learning and promoting the facts, looking outside internal operations for opportunities to reduce emissions, and planning for both adaptation and abatement, start with the following links for more essential information about climate science:

- [Global Warming Myths and Facts](#)

(Environmental Defense Fund)

- [Global Warming Fast Facts](#)

(National Geographic)

- [Global Warming 101](#) (Union of Concerned Scientists)

- [Fast Facts about Climate Change](#)

(The Nature Conservatory)

- [10 Facts on Climate Change and](#)

[Health](#) (World Health Organization)

- [Global Warming Facts and](#)

[Figures](#) (Pew Center on Global

a great opportunity to meet the customer where they use their products, particularly by partnering with other companies that are operating in the same environment.

While the previous examples are customer-focused, you can extend the influence of your company by using whatever assets have the most reach. For instance, Colorado's [Aspen Skiing Company](#), which is influential in its community, has directed its resources to partner with utilities to deploy new community solar arrays. The company also has lobbied for policy change by filing federal amicus briefs and testifying before Congress about the expected effects of global warming on the ski industry.

These early initiatives by the ski industry are just the beginning; there's a whole wilderness of opportunity for other industries to develop climate change solutions by venturing beyond the boundaries of their own operations.

Proceed with Caution: Abate, Abate, Abate

In climate change, we talk about adaptation -- preparing for change -- while committing to abatement -- doing our best to prevent things from getting worse. There is a multi-decade lag between emissions and their effects on the climate, so we are almost certainly locked in to at least 2 degrees Celsius of warming. Some adaptation to climate change will be necessary. For the ski industry, making more snow and employing new business strategies will be the keys to survival for many resorts. Other companies will make similar plans for adaptation. At the same time, it's critical for companies to maintain an unwavering focus on reducing emissions.

There are three reasons for this. First, adaptation is perilous. According to most predictions, climate change could easily push currently stable ecosystems across boundaries. For instance, as the climate warms over time, the thawing of ice and tundra could release huge amounts of additional emissions. Yet, no matter what the pace, climate change effects are irreversible. So while technological solutions like snowmaking may provide a quick fix to the narrow interests of some, they won't replenish the breadth of lost ecosystems and their natural services in general.

Second, adaptation is a classic "win-lose" game, where people and companies will compete for fewer resources (especially water) and defend the most fertile real estate, while more energy will be needed to resettle and distribute goods and services. Such a process is inherently disruptive, brings about sociopolitical instability, and is likely to leave the vulnerable behind.

The last reason companies need to focus on abatement, not just adaptation, is that every incremental rise in average global temperatures is more menacing than the previous one. It is not about whether climate change will occur, but to what extent, so every abatement effort counts.

While skiing is one of the first industries forced to deal with climate change so directly and comprehensively, consumer-facing companies in other industries will face the same challenges soon enough. These lessons from the slopes will help all businesses build a stable and predictable future.

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Links:

[1] <http://adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2008AGUFM.C32A..08L>

[2] <http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/ar4-syr.htm>

[3] http://www.patagonia.com/usa/contribution/enviro.jsp?OPTION=ENVIRO_ARTICLE_DISPLAY_HANDLER&assetid=1809

[4] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A26065-2004Dec25.html>

[5] <http://www.edf.org/page.cfm?tagID=1011>

[6] http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/12/1206_041206_global_warming.html

[7] http://www.ucsus.org/global_warming/global_warming_101/

[8] <http://www.nature.org/initiatives/climatechange/activities/art19631.html>

Climate Change)

- **Global Warming Frequently Asked Questions** (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration)

- **Facts and Trends to 2050: Energy and Climate Change** (pdf) (World Business Council for Sustainable Development)

- **Frequently Asked Questions** (pdf) (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change)

- **Climate Change: A Guide for the Perplexed** (New Scientist)

- [9] http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/climate_change/en/index.html
- [10] http://www.pewclimate.org/global-warming-basics/facts_and_figures
- [11] <http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/oa/climate/globalwarming.html>
- [12] <http://www.wbcsd.org/includes/getTarget.asp?type=d&id=MTA2NDY>
- [13] <http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/wg1/ar4-wg1-faqs.pdf>
- [14] <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn11462>
- [15] <http://www.keepwintercool.org/>
- [16] <http://www.aspensnowmass.com/>