

# Future *inspires* future

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A conversation between Esther Bahne, John Elkington,  
Katharina Roehrig and Jochen Zeitz.

How will we live and do business in the future? What is our own vision for the future of life and business? And how do we want to shape this future? – The Melitta Group regularly discusses these questions with numerous experts and institutions. Because inspiration needs this interaction. It needs different perspectives, visions and utopias to help us paint a picture of tomorrow's world. Katharina Roehrig, the Melitta Group's Head of Corporate Communication and Sustainability discussed the topic "Future *inspires* future" with Esther Bahne, John Elkington and Jochen Zeitz. One thing soon became clear: profound upheaval, disruption, and change are imminent.

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Katharina Roehrig and Jochen Zeitz.

— *E<sup>sther</sup>  
B<sup>ahne</sup>*

is Head of Strategy and Innovation for the MINI brand of the BMW Group and founded the start-up Accelerator Urban-X, which has spawned over 40 successful start-ups to date. She was previously Head of Social Innovation at Audi AG.

— *K<sup>atharina</sup>  
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is the Melitta Group's Head of Corporate Communication and Sustainability. She is responsible for the Group's strategic alignment regarding all group-wide questions in the field of internal and external communication, sponsoring, and sustainability. She previously held management positions in marketing and communications at various branded goods companies.

— *J<sup>ohn</sup>  
E<sup>lkington</sup>*

is a visionary, author, consultant, and entrepreneur. For many years, he has been working on the topics of sustainable development and corporate responsibility. He is best known for the "Triple Bottom Line" concept he developed and his 20 groundbreaking books including, most recently, "Green Swans: The Coming Boom In Regenerative Capitalism".

— *J<sup>ochen</sup>  
Z<sup>eitz</sup>*

is a business manager, strategist, and author. He is President and CEO of Harley-Davidson, Inc. and Chairman of the Board of Directors of Harley-Davidson. In addition, the former CEO of Puma SE is founder of the Zeitz Foundation. Within the framework of various foundations, he is engaged in numerous sustainability projects.

**JE** There is now a pre- and post-Covid-19 reality. The world has shifted on its axis. And one thing most people now seem to think is that we will not – cannot – go back to the way we were. We will live and do business differently, as we work to realign our economic, social and political systems to new realities. Our current systems cannot address – let alone solve – many of our most pressing problems, such as climate change, ocean pollution, or increasingly obvious divides in wealth and wellbeing. As these challenges increase in the years ahead, we will have no choice but to rethink and reconfigure the ways in which we live and do business.

**JZ** I agree. This becomes particularly evident when you consider the objective of our current economic system, based on Adam Smith's "invisible hand" concept dating back to the 18th century. The idea is that entrepreneurial activity and the pursuit of profit also indirectly generates growth and prosperity. As much as this idea worked well in the past, it fails to attach any importance to the preservation of the environment or our social structures. This is hardly surprising considering the ecological and social challenges of

the 18th century were very different to those of today. Consequently, this system will have to be adjusted at some point so that companies – directly or indirectly – not only ensure economic growth but also the well-being of our environment and society.

**KR** I think this will only succeed if the promotion of sustainability becomes an integral part of business. What lies ahead – and what we at the Melitta Group are working hard on – is the question: how can systems, structures, and processes be designed in such a way that business decisions always support, or at least do not negatively impact, environmental and social objectives?

**EB** I think a lot about that too. A systemic approach with a positive impact on society and the environment is ultimately also in the company's own interest. After all, companies are dependent on the acceptance of all stakeholders to secure their license to operate. The most successful companies not only ensure acceptance, but also relevance: in the long term, those who make a genuinely positive difference to the lives of their customers will prevail. This is how enterprise and especially brand value is created, before the customer.

Unfortunately, this long-term goal is often displaced by short-term profit optimization. In principle, what we need is something that will help us to help ourselves, that will protect us from our own myopic tendencies, and encourage us to take a more long-term economic, ecological, and social approach.

**JZ** I believe this transition can only succeed if we also assign a value and a price to ecological and social "assets". In his new book "Green Swans", John gave a very striking example of this: What is the value of trees in downtown areas – in terms of oxygen content, wind strength, shade, health benefits, etc.? We all know that trees have a positive effect on these factors. But unless we calculate these effects, we are always likely to underestimate or even ignore them because we cannot include them in our economic decision-making processes.

**JE** It is true that valuing and pricing such "assets" will definitely influence our future development and induce companies and consumers to behave in new ways. It will also make it easier to identify, stimulate, and promote developments that I call "Green Swans". By this, I mean profound market changes that will alter our paradigms, values, and attitudes, and thus lead to new needs, business models, technologies and different regulations and laws. These include, for example, the use of regenerative strategies across our economic, social, environmental and political systems, coupled with the implementation of the circular economy principle. Such developments are often triggered by "Black Swans", i.e. events that are regarded as highly unlikely and whose far-reaching effects shake up our existing ideas and beliefs.

**KR** Incidentally, the example of the circular economy clearly demonstrates that the future must – and will – require much stronger cooperation between social groups. Complex solutions, such as a circular economy, cannot be implemented alone – neither by policymakers, nor the business sector, and certainly not by individual companies. We are also already noticing that there is a growing willingness to cooperate and work together at all levels of society, be it for the development of future-oriented food wrappings or solutions to the social challenges of coffee-growing regions. Supply chains are so closely intertwined that any change is bound to disrupt the processes of upstream and downstream units. This means that companies going it alone or adopting stand-alone solutions are increasingly bound to fail. //

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# »Make me feel uncomfortable.«

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**KR** Everyone probably has their own ideas about how we want to live and do business in the future. What is clear, however, is that without sustainable action there can be no future. The pursuit of sustainability goals and the development and implementation of sustainable technologies will therefore increasingly determine our lives and business activities.

**JZ** Absolutely. And as the Sustainable Development Goals (or SDGs) adopted by the UN are widely accepted internationally, they also outline how we want to live and do business in the future. Even though many people still regard them as utopias, they convey clear goals and visions of a future world.

**EB** I think the good thing about the SDGs is precisely this utopian character. We need the power of utopias. For a long time, for example, the idea of generating energy exclusively from renewable resources was definitely a utopian vision. Today this has evolved into a realistic and concrete goal.

**JE** Exactly! And we should not forget that implementing these SDGs offers enormous revenue potential for companies: Paul Polman, the former CEO of Unilever, describes the SDGs as the world's largest business plan, the growth story of the century. Seen and managed in the right way, the SDGs are not so much a burden as a huge opportunity for our society and for future-oriented companies.

**KR** And an opportunity that every agile company can seize. Because these SDGs affect all industries – some sooner, others later. As a result, the product range of every company will change dramatically over the coming years. And I do not just mean the development of completely new products, such as solutions for storing renewable energy, because there have always been new needs and new products to satisfy them. The transformation will be much more far-reaching, because every existing product – with all its properties and components – will have to be reassessed and redesigned from a sustainability perspective. And the same applies to production processes and, of course, to supply chains.

**EB** On top of this, our lives and business activities will not only be drastically changed by technological progress, but also by other global developments. For example, our reactions to traumatic experiences like Covid-19, as well as more gradual processes like urban isolation, are changing the way we want to live. You only need to think about our future

housing needs to realize this: in the coming years, more and more small residential units designed for the co-living concept will be built. This resource-saving solution, supported by smart tech, will provide more affordable housing in those downtown areas of major cities currently under the greatest pressure. And: a solution for the growing number of singles who use space differently – and at the same time want more contact with other people. In addition to comparatively small private rooms, these concepts offer shared spaces for working, sports and, above all, socializing – mainly for students and young professionals, but in the future also for young families or older people. Driven by start-ups, an innovation process is emerging here that will force an ossified industry to take a fresh look at the requirements of its target groups and come up with relevant answers that are better for society, the environment – and its own economic success.

**JZ** And this is a good example that sustainability is neither a fashion nor a trend, but a prerequisite and an attitude. For companies, sustainability is neither a “nice to have” nor something to be outsourced to a separate department. The faster companies can integrate sustainability into their belief systems, their processes, and their product design, the more future-proof they will be.

**JE** Most people do not want to think about sustainability when buying their products. Just as they do not want to think about manufacturing quality or compliance with product safety regulations. They want to be able to trust brands, producers and retailers. And they – we – increasingly expect branded products in particular to comply with sustainability requirements as a matter of course, without even having to raise the issue.

**EB** Yes, I agree. Sustainable business is a *sine qua non* these days. However, in addition to the widely cited “hygiene factor”, sustainability can also serve to strengthen the brand – especially when sustainability is not just a question of modifying existing products, but becomes a driver of innovation. The electric cars of today, for example, are not about sacrifice; in fact, they are even more dynamic than conventional vehicles. They are not only “The New Good” but also “The New Cool”. Solutions that have been systematically reimagined will stand out and appear intelligent and sexy. And people are happy to pay more for such solutions. //

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» We need  
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**JZ** If a company claims to be playing a part in shaping the future, it needs to develop “genuine” innovations. Unfortunately, however, we often talk about “innovation” when it is actually only an optimization. Not even inventions are considered innovations unless they offer something completely new.

**KR** I agree. Continuous product optimization may be important for market success, but you can only achieve quantum leaps if you challenge the entire product category. For example, it is not enough to make coffee or plastic more sustainable in cultivation or production. Instead, the concept itself needs to be redefined and oriented around the coffee or plastic of the future. This requires a new approach and a different perspective.

**JE** Successful innovations are always part of a holistic system. The locomotive, the light bulb, the smartphone: they were all extremely successful innovations because they all resulted in a complete system that was hardly conceivable, or even utopian, at the time of their invention. When the locomotive was

invented, there were very few people who could have imagined railroad networks spanning the entire globe.

**EB** In order to create such innovations, companies have to ask themselves the key questions: Why are we doing this? Why are we doing it the way we are? What do people really want – and what would be the best response, irrespective of what we have already established? Or even more radical: Would our customers miss us if we no longer existed? Surprisingly, many companies never ask themselves this question, or only very rarely. And it is precisely this gap that start-up companies exploit. They have no existing product categories or production structures; they can operate without restriction and with a high degree of agility. Ultimately, they have just one objective: to identify the customer’s actual problem and offer the best-possible solution. And they are always prepared to change directions if a better option emerges.

**JZ** And this is exactly how “genuine” innovations are created. They are often solutions

that future users do not even know they need. Before the invention of the vacuum cleaner, the computer, or the smartphone, for example, nobody knew the possibilities these products would unleash and how much added value they would create for users. It is therefore equally important for companies to communicate the benefits of innovations and to arouse desire. And this also means that companies cannot hide behind the statement that the customer does not want this.

**EB** Companies need leaders who ask the big questions – and then allow the answers to come from within their own ranks, no matter from whom or how unconventional. “Make me feel uncomfortable” – that was the guiding principle for my strategy and innovation team at my last companies. My bold hypothesis is that if you as a manager have not heard anything risky, crazy or even heretical for a long time – then your culture is not innovation-driven and therefore not future-proof.

**KR** Mark Twain once said: “A person with a new idea is a crank until the idea succeeds”. And indeed, sometimes utopias can quickly become reality: in March 2020, for example, nobody would have thought that the Melitta Group would be producing large quantities of face masks just a few weeks later.

**JE** This brings us back to what we discussed at the beginning: it is precisely such unexpected events with significant adverse effects, in today’s world the coronavirus pandemic, that expose the flaws in systems we previously took for granted, that accelerate a range of existing trends and, in the end, can spur huge changes in the norms, rules and institutions that shape market expectations. We see the evidence all around, with people moving online and increasingly working from home, potentially cutting down the long-term need for commuting. And with renewable energy becoming cheaper than most forms of energy based on fossil fuels, a completely new energy order suddenly seems not only possible but virtually inevitable. The opportunity to “build back better” in the coming years, to achieve step changes – quantum leaps – in creating and distributing new forms of wealth and well-being, is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to do what we all say we want to do. To make the world a better place for everyone and for all life. //

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