

## Keynote: Apathy and Anti-Apathy: Re-engaging Citizens

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I spend most of my time talking to businesses about the problems of the world, from climate change to global poverty, inequality, bio-diversity and so on. You can imagine the subtle rolling of the eyes I get around the boardroom table. Then they'll do something to make you go away and I often ask myself, is that apathy or is it something else?

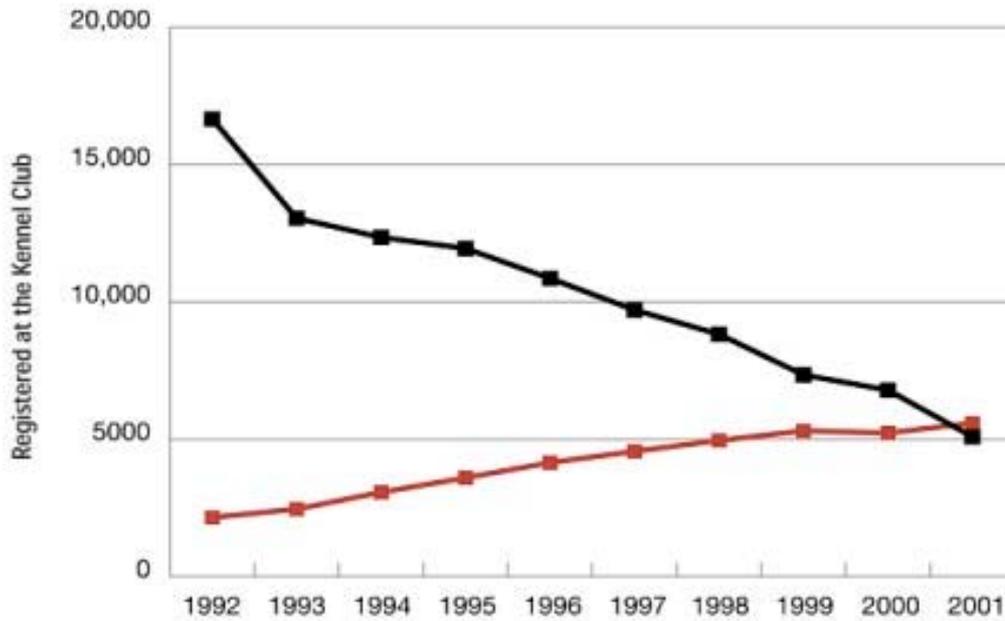
Apathy is defined as, “A want of feeling; privation of passion, emotion, or excitement; dispassion” and some of the synonyms are: “Insensibility; unfeelingness; indifference; unconcern; stoicism; supineness; sluggishness”. At first glance, I do not think that this is what people are feeling.

So, what do the statistics tell us? Voter apathy tells us a story - people are not engaged any more in politics. Only 51% of people intend to vote in the next election (down from a turnout of 59% just two years ago); fewer than 5% of people belong to political parties and only 39% of 18-24 year olds voted in 2001.

But I asked the question, is it something other than apathy? 36% of people – over one third of the population in the U.K. - believe that getting involved could actually change the way things are run within their communities and U.K. society. That is actually quite a large percentage given that only 5% of people join a political party. Seven out of ten people from black and minority ethnic communities feel disengaged and feel that what is on offer isn't for them. Only 17% of people see a great difference between the two main political parties and trust in traditional institutions is declining. So, is it apathy or is it an issue of trust?

What I often get from people in the boardroom is people saying, “I'd like to do something but...”. So we need to get beyond the “buts”. In other words, there is a germ of a need for action, but people often are not sure *how* to feel engaged. I've been working for the New Economics Foundation and a couple of years ago we put together a paper on trust in business. What we did was put together a Rottweiler Index:

## NEF's Rottweiler Index



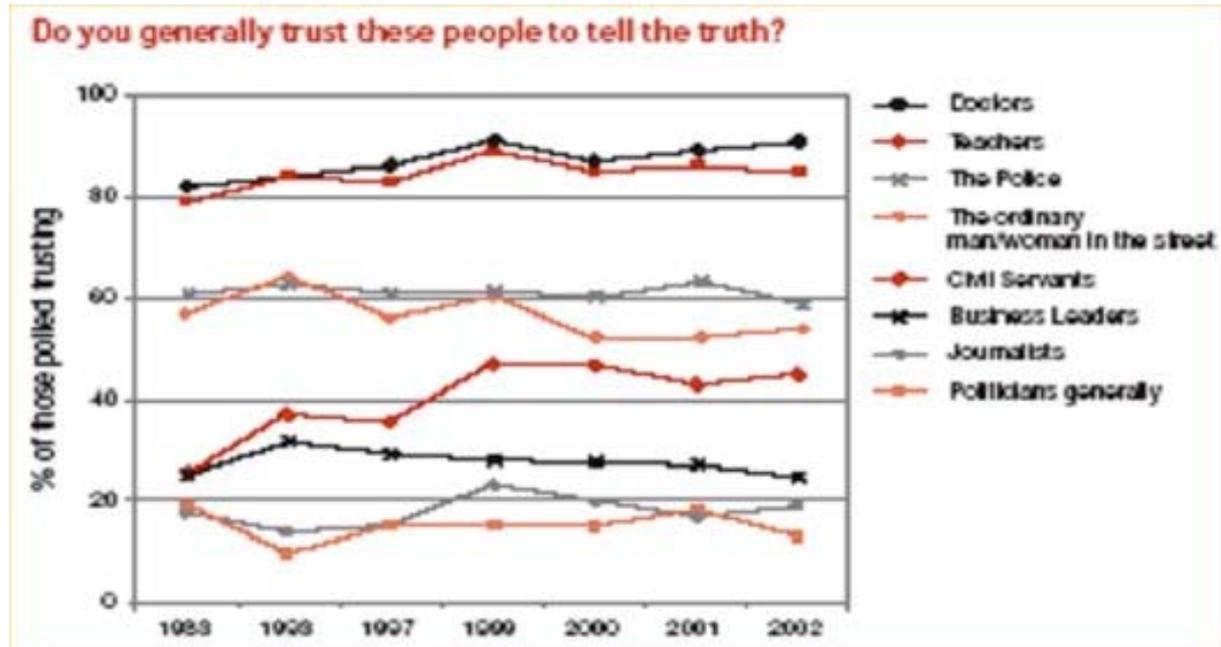
Rottweiler



Yorkshire terrier

We looked at the ownership trends of Rottweilers and Yorkshire Terriers and saw the ownership of Rottweilers outstripping the ownership of Yorkshire Terriers. So, is it a fad or a fashion or something else? Why do people own Rottweilers, which are considered to be dangerous and not sociable dogs? Interestingly you could plot the same graph for the number of doctors versus the number of lawyers. We have fewer doctors and the number of lawyers is starting to outstrip the number of doctors. We thought this was a symptom of an issue around trust.

When we looked at some of the numbers around trust we found that people didn't trust politicians, journalists and business leaders:



So, how is this relevant to the talk about apathy? Well, I think that apathy is less of an issue than people not knowing how to feel engaged or trusting. This is demonstrated in two case studies – The Ethical Consumer, based on a report for the Cooperative Bank, and Anti Apathy.

What is the Ethical Consumer? 83% of consumers intend to act ethically on a regular basis and ethical purchasing and consumption is a big growth area. The Ethical Purchasing Index looks at a basket of goods, so that is certainly not the total ethical marketplace, and in 2002 found the value of ethical consumption at £19.9 billion. Of course, there is also a grey area between ethical consumption and unconscious consumption, but looking at a basket of deep green ethical products found they were growing at a rate of 20% per year, which is substantial when compared with regular economic growth of 2-3%. Now a lot of these brands are young brands, so there is greater room for growth versus traditional mainstream corporate brands, but there are products that are making huge inroads. Fair trade coffee now occupies 15-16% of the coffee market in the U.K. Other products have become quite mainstream like organics, although many of the people buying these products don't necessarily choose them for ethical reasons, and there is a difference between making a purchase for an ethical reason, in order to have an impact on something or someone else, versus what you're trying to do for your own personal well-being. Energy efficient products (ABCD rated appliances) are now capturing between 60% and 80% of market. To me, this is not apathy but people trying to find a way to be engaged.

Now, I said that 83% of consumers have an intention to act ethically. In practice, however, people are only active about 18-20 % of the time and only 5% of people are hard-core in all of their purchasing decisions. However, we see a large value in ethical boycotts – £2.6 billion lost to business every year as a result of ethical boycotts. One of the reasons is that it is much easier to opt out than to opt in.

But people do want to act. When we looked at consumers who were boycotting products, they say they positively intend to shop locally, as much as they can away from the big brands.

This was why we set up Anti Apathy two years ago. The New Economics Foundation did talks at the ICA in London on sustainable development, poverty, consumerism and so on. The talks would sell out, but they were really preaching to the converted. Other people did not want to come and listen to speakers talking about things that they already know but things where they don't know what to do about them. So Anti Apathy was devised – a cultural campaign designed to connect the politically drained and disengaged citizens with key issues of our times, to help create a more just, democratic and sustainable world through awareness and action. What Anti Apathy tried to do was to occupy the space between Westminster and Reclaim the Streets, the anti-globalisation activists, because neither traditional politics nor activism was engaging the right range of people. Anti Apathy was an alternative that began with club nights where we had film, music and talks. We set up a website and found people round the world asking if they could set up their own Anti Apathy. Anti Apathy then moved on to self-help, giving people a tangible list of simple things they could do to overcome what some people call apathy but what we thought was more not knowing how to get engaged. It then set up some simple social actions. What Anti Apathy did was it got a dozen people to boycott supermarkets for a month and keep an online journal of how it felt. It got an incredible response from people logging on to the website and these were some extracts from the journals:

*"I'm realising rather sadly that I'm much less dedicated to ethical consumption than I thought I was."*

*"I thought I'd be back in Sainsbury's like a shot but actually haven't been to a supermarket yet. Seem to feel like I don't want to – I guess I've got into a new habit without realising. Hurray!"*

*"I have been doing my calculations and have worked out that I personally have diverted from the supermarkets £400 for the month of January. Multiply that by 12 (though I don't presume you all spend £100 per week on food) - that's £4800 spread over London. Not bad at all."*

One person said that it now takes two hours to cook every night, because their organic box needs so much cleaning, but that they got a kiss from the local shop owner: that's the social capital element.

In summary, it is not about telling people what to do and saying they have to do more to help the world: it is about reinforcing the fact that people have choices and opportunities. It won't just have a positive influence on someone halfway round the world; it also has a big impact on individuals. We're doing another action with the next set of elections – we've got a number of people who have opted out in the past to speak to local politicians alongside people who are new voters. So it is not about apathy but about recognising you have a choice, that there are alternatives and that the value back to you as an individual of exercising choices is enormous.