

Wellbeing: a new religion?

As wellbeing becomes big business **Claire Langham and Lucy Blakemore**, Synovate, look at the role of marketing in fuelling this new trend

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ONCE, RELIGION FORMED the cornerstone of society. It gave us values to live by, a crutch to lean on, rituals to follow, mentors to guide us and communities to bond with. Today, our quest appears to be for a different and altogether more selfish kind of fulfilment: physical and emotional wellbeing.

The focus on me (and, at a push, my family) is at the heart of our modern-day obsession with yoga, massage, counselling, self-help and other individualistic, self-focused pursuits. For many, organised religion is being superseded by the more achievable wellbeing and the altogether more convenient spirituality.

This trend has by no means emerged independently of manufacturers and brands. Not only have they responded heartily to it, they may well be driving it - providing a raft of products that promise to help us look good, feel great and achieve enlightenment with the minimum of effort.

In 2004, Synovate carried out some research in the UK and other European countries to explore views and aspirations surrounding health, wellbeing and spirituality. Key opinion formers and industry experts - namely shiatsu masseurs, homeopaths, life coaches, personal trainers, yoga therapists and Christian youth leaders - were also consulted, in order to gain a more comprehensive view of the wellbeing industry and to identify potential trends for the future. Their input was combined with a wider look at how these trends are reflected globally, and the results reveal a dynamic and fast-growing industry in which the consumer is affluent, typically loyal, but always ready for the next feel-good therapy to be launched.

A nation on the edge

A TNS survey conducted in June 2004 showed that 20% of the UK population have taken time off work in the last five years due to backache, fatigue, depression or anxiety, with those suffering from depression taking an average of 36 days



off over five years. Further afield, as many as 10% of the Dutch population are on anti-depressants. Over in the US, an OECD study illustrates that health spending grew 2.3 times faster than the economic growth rate, rising from 13% of GDP in 1997 to 14.6% in 2002.

Clearly, we are feeling the strain of modern life. But at the same time, consumer and media obsession with the topic has undoubtedly made it more culturally acceptable to be stressed. Once the preserve of high-earning executives or burned-out city workers, stress is now cited in relation to everyone from young school kids to pension-panicked baby boomers. One Italian consumer summed up this point perfectly: 'The more we hear in the media that we're stressed, the more we believe it. People talk about stress all

the time - we're bombarded with it every single day. My grandparents never used to talk about stress - just the other day my grandma said, "what is this stress thing?"'

In search of wellbeing

Whether our symptoms are real or imagined, we are alleviating them in the most weird and wonderful ways. These include not just spa weekends and Yoga retreats, but hedge-laying weekends in the countryside and organised detox holidays.

Early adopters like the UK and the US by no means have the monopoly on the craze for wellbeing. In France, *épanouissement personnel* (literally personal blossoming) has recently entered common vocabulary as a way of describing an ideal state of wellbeing that encompasses physical, professional and spiritual



Claire Langham is a director within the international qualitative department at Synovate.



Lucy Blakemore is a senior research executive within the international qualitative department at Synovate.

dimensions. Meanwhile, in Japan, the word *iyashi*, meaning healing, has become the buzzword of the moment - it's not uncommon to find *iyashi* restaurants, *iyashi* music and all kinds of *iyashi* products, from organic foods and herbal teas through to bonsai trees.

Then, in Italy, some of the countryside thermal spas or *terme* (subsidised by the government until the early 1990s) are leading a revival in rural treatments such as wine baths and hay baths (*bagnidi fieno*) - the latter subjecting the client to a bizarre ritual of immersion in fresh, fermenting grass.

Clearly, consumers are only too eager to try alternative means of rejuvenation and enlightenment. Perhaps the most extreme example of all comes in the form of Street Retreats in New York, where stressed executives can part with hard-earned cash to spend a few nights living rough in order to regain perspective on their hurried lives. Likewise, litter-picking holidays in Egypt. Interestingly, these back-to-basics concepts are not intended to be short, sharp shocks to remind us how comfortable we are - rather, they are positioned as a kind of personal journey: a fundamentally self-oriented experience with spiritual overtones. As one UK respondent said: 'All this back-to-basics stuff is about stripping yourself back and building a stronger foundation.'

Is wellbeing the new religion?

It is here that we begin to understand the link between wellbeing and religion. While we are not suggesting that consumers are consciously rejecting religion in favour of health and wellbeing, it is certainly starting to play a quasi-religious role in life. Instead of worshipping a higher being, we are now worshipping our own minds, bodies and spirits. Many Western Europeans, bereft of a spiritual anchor, are following the rituals and values aligned with whichever diet, exercise regime or even skincare programme they have chosen to follow, with something akin to religious fervour.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs can help us better understand this behaviour. His theory holds that when the lower-order needs of physical and emotional wellbeing are satisfied, human beings become concerned with the higher-order needs of influence and personal development.

Some societies, particularly affluent Western ones, have certainly achieved the lower strata of the hierarchy, and are now striving toward the pinnacle he identifies as self-actualisation. With conventional religion widely on the decline, it is no wonder that alternative and more spiritual therapies and doctrines have sprung up to fill the void. And more often than not these alternatives offer us some thing that we can see, feel and touch, as opposed to the more intangible nature of religious faith. As one UK life coach commented: 'Looking after yourself has become huge; our society [Britain] is so well-off now that once you've fulfilled your needs on a physical level, you start to look for something internal - "self-realisation", if you like.'

The blurring of boundaries between physical health and emotional wellbeing can also be seen in the proliferation of personal trainers: for many, the new priest at the confessional. Previously only associated with the rich and famous, personal trainers are now increasingly accessible to the less-affluent majority, and the trainers we spoke to talked of clients who use training sessions as a form of emotional as well as physical therapy.

One explained: 'People start to open up when you see them more regularly. It's a unique situation, there's no social stigma and it's amazing the things people confide in you while sitting on an exercise bike!'

Indications are that the most successful personal trainers in the future will take a more holistic approach to the services they offer, providing a qualified insight into the motivations and emotional background of their clients in order to achieve the best results.

Therapists in many other areas of the

wellbeing industry are also starting to look beyond the physical aspects of what they do and considering what can be offered to clients to help them understand what may be at the heart of their physical ailments. Forward-thinking masseurs, reflexologists and homeopaths are now looking at re-training in areas such as counselling and NLP (neurolinguistic programming) to be able to offer a more holistic approach to the services they currently offer.

This also reflects the current explosion in the life-coach industry, particularly in the UK and US, where such practices are beginning to lose their stigma. In the current climate, life coaches will continue to grow in popularity and specialise further in particular areas, from relationships to careers, in response to consumer demand.

The modern-day quest for spiritual enlightenment has also, inevitably, led some back into the arms of the church - note the remarkably popular Alpha Course, a series of informal discussion sessions addressing key issues relating to the (evangelical) Christian faith. Only time will tell if we are due to experience a religious revival in the future, but talking to consumers and key industry leaders tells us that this has not happened yet. Spirituality, not religion, is the modern obsession. Rather than bending to accommodate a religious faith, we want to cherry-pick the aspects that fit in with our existing lifestyles.

Wellbeing is big business

Whether the measures discussed in this article are valuable remedies for a time-starved society, or quick fixes that reinforce our individualistic mentality, or something in the middle, one thing is certain: marketers have long since known that looking and feeling good can be packaged and sold in much the same way as any other product. And they have responded to the upsurge of interest with gusto. It is no accident that it is now second nature for us to pay hard-earned cash for an organised walking holiday ►

rather than take a stroll in the woods; to buy a detoxing kit as opposed to eating healthily and sleeping well. The well-being industry has a ready-made solution for every modern condition.

But perhaps the ultimate marketing coup is to be found in the Bach Rescue Remedy product range. Celebrities and consumers alike swear by the product, which is positioned in recent advertising as 'yoga in a bottle', and claims to help 'release the positive energy you need to find your inner calm again' - presumably without the need to set foot in a yoga class at all. Without taking the advertising too literally, distilling well-being and inner calm into two quick sprays of a natural flower remedy does raise some key questions and implications about our modern propensity for quick fixes and easy options, and about the marketing industry's propensity to exploit it.

Marketers have certainly seized on the associations between wellbeing and religion, talking in terms of converting consumers to believers in their brand. This is not just about people purchasing products. It is about turning consumers

into evangelists who will recount their detox plans or diet regimes in a way that converts the most sceptical listener. And, to a large extent, they achieve it.

Some brands even go so far as to employ religious terminology in their communications. For example, ghd, a manufacturer of hair straighteners adored (by a niche minority) all over Britain, has been quick to capitalise on its consumers' devotion. The website (www.ghdhair.com) is a shrine to ghd products, with sections entitled 'font' and 'confessional', where you will find testimonials in which devout consumers rave about how ghd products have changed their lives. Likewise, the advertising pays homage to religious imagery with, naturally, the hair surrounded by a halo, and the strapline 'a new religion for hair'.

On this note, even the Church of England is not above using marketing campaigns to achieve its ends. The Alpha Course - currently running in 28,700 places worldwide - is a prime example of how repackaging and reselling religion for the modern consumer can reinvigorate its success. Then, according to a recent *Daily*

Telegraph article, a C of E Bishop has been luring fifty-somethings back to the church with personalised invitations, chocolate bars and church-goers' favourite hymns - all underpinned by PR! Similarly, the Church's 24/7 availability has recently been promoted using posters depicting angels in call centres.

To conclude ...

Wellbeing - a combination of physical, emotional and spiritual fulfilment - is undoubtedly more relevant to the modern consumer than is its predecessor, religion. Marketing is certainly fuelling this trend, and has created a wellbeing industry in its own right. But suggesting that marketers have created this phenomenon is perhaps a step too far. We are a (self-proclaimed) time-poor, stressed-out society, desperate for values to live by but too reluctant to compromise our lifestyles and too busy to devote the time to explore ideologies.

So if there is a quick fix that we can throw money at, great - we will just stick it on the credit card. •

Claire.Langham@synovate.com

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