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## Trend Watching

by [Bruce Piasecki](#)  
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### Better Products For A Better World

Ever since Henry Ford introduced the Model T, Americans have been infatuated with the grace, force and splendor of cars. More than simply providing transportation, the automobile offers freedom, mobility, convenience, power, status, and comfort.

Today, the notion of personal transport is undergoing profound changes in response to environmental, social, and economic pressures. The mounting war in Iraq may indeed accelerate these changes as concerns about accessible and affordable fossil fuels come back to haunt us once again, and as a new age of efficiency in transport and post Enron energy development emerges. Some think this may harken European and Americans back to a post WW II kind of social frugality and fear based buying patterns.

Price and performance have been the traditional chief considerations of most consumers when purchasing a product such as a car. In the 21st century, a third factor -- social pressures -- is playing an increasingly important role. Products are being designed to respond to growing social pressures about the need for long-term sustainability and the preservation of our environment. I believe this "social response product development" trend is the key new driver behind real and lasting environmental progress.

Did you know that the automobile industry is the world's largest manufacturing enterprise? Each year it produces more than 44 million cars and trucks. A large part of the success of the auto industry is due to the built-in need for cars that has been systemically assembled since World War II by leaders of all nations in cooperation with the petrochemical, development and tourism industries.

Yet automobiles are also a primary contributor to environmental degradation. Consider that there are 700 million vehicles in operation worldwide, with 150,000 more added every day. America cars and trucks produce roughly one-third of the nation's smog, and Californians alone are estimated to lose more than 400,000 hours each workday due to traffic congestion. These facts are becoming so well known by the readers of GreenBiz.com that we sometimes see the trees but not the forest.

Forward-looking companies such as Toyota already recognize the need to respond to social pressures with new types of cars such as the Prius, a hybrid electric/gasoline vehicle that sums up what the near future of transport is all about. Hybrid technology combines existing fossil combustion technology with the new clean electric propulsion systems. It is a quintessential hedge. The profound uncertainties of the near future are intelligently contained by the knowledge of the existing technology and the platform that it provides. The changes are substantial, but the underlying structure has many common features and functions with the conventional designs. In short, hybrids offer both the old and new at once.

The fact that Toyota plans on converting its entire fleet of vehicles to a mix of hybrid platforms over the next few decades speaks to the seriousness with which this corporation values the concept of social response product development.

It is Toyota's grasp of the nature of social response product development that offers insight into how its depth and durability of knowledge can be transformed into a competitive advantage. Hybrid technology in automaking will become the knowledge

platform upon which all future cars depend. While all of the major car companies are now pursuing greener technologies, Toyota is the only one with a product available today that delivers on the promise of a better world while meeting American consumer expectations on range, performance, comfort, and safety. But can we continue this link of post war thinking into the design of new computers, homes, and appliances?

Like an expertly written book that is never read, knowledge by itself is close to nothing. It is only when companies such as Toyota or BP or Anheuser Busch or Intel put their knowledge to use with social response product development that the information is translated into environmental progress and handsome profits. It is only then that the market grows based in its dependence on your product, and suddenly your car, or computer chip, is everywhere, transforming entire product markets in the process.

The breakthrough of social response product development is the ability of corporate leaders to push solutions forward in the near future in anticipation of long-term market share. In the process, forward-looking firms create better products for a better world. These products not only encourage fundamental shifts within industries, but society as a whole.

This "middle-of-the-road" approach of hybrid cars can help the world disengage from the Middle East, and begin to step past the petrochemical treadmill where and when appropriate. The fact that a single corporation can edge the US and other nations closer to energy self-sufficiency speaks to the supreme power of socially responsive products. It also speaks to the growing role the private sector will be playing in our lives as catalysts of sustainability.

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*Bruce Piasecki is the president and founder of the American Hazard Control Group, a management consulting firm specializing in energy, materials, and environmental corporate issues. He is also the author of several books, including In Search of Environmental Excellence, America's Future in Toxic Waste Management, and Beyond Dumping. His most recent book is titled Better Products for a Better World.*

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