

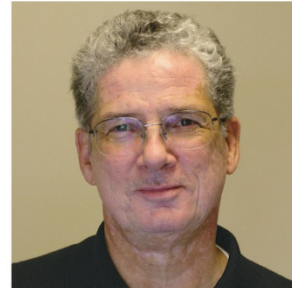


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Sundown

Change Solar's Story

James W. Johnston



High-growth economic sectors arrive every 30 or 40 years - like money trains. In the 1970s, a ready-for-something-new generation jumped on the fledgling personal-computer (PC) express. The technology sector around the PC made money, and then PC users invested their innovative and productive capacities, ushering in a whole new era and creating new-wealth fortunes across all industries in the process.

I see the light of a new high-growth, wealth-creating sector coming down the tracks.

The next great frontier lies in the convergence of sustainability and generational awareness (i.e., balancing the need to extract resources from the environment with the equally important need to preserve a rich environment for future generations). That is the essential mandate for the 21st century.

Within this context, I assert that we'll sell more solar if we portray ourselves as central actors in a sweeping, epic story. The world - especially the American public - is ready to go. I suggest that the solar sector abandon the tech talk and connect the dots; contextualizing solar within the sustainability story paints a far more compelling and emotionally resonant picture.

"No one is trying to elevate us by taking us all, as a nation, on some daring new journey," said Thomas Friedman, reporting from the 2012 Republican Convention. "And, a journey is not just a speech. It has to come with a strategy to rally people behind it and generate the legislation and policies needed to implement it."

Contrast the 2012 convention agenda of shifting a tiny sliver of swing-state voters from one camp to another with Kennedy's "going to the moon" declaration. The latter launched the U.S. forward with a powerful, inspiring and grand vision.

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Sustainability is such a frontier - one capable of spawning breakthroughs in science, medicine, computing, and physics and making our country and the world a better place.

The money side is clear. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development projects the world's middle-class population will grow from 1.8 billion in 2008 to 4.9 billion in 2030. These rising people will want to live American lifestyles. The problem is, the U.S. model doesn't scale - 4% of the global population consumes 19% of the energy.

If the iron law that states economic growth and energy are inseparably connected is true, then if we as a world have access to unlimited energy, economic growth is, likewise, unlimited.

Further, some experts estimate that \$33 trillion worth of "free" services are provided by planet Earth each year, including soil, fresh water, breathable air, pest control and a livable climate. Viewed through the prism of generational awareness, this suggests the way is open for a new era of prosperity and growth, provided we do not diminish those services through continued dependence on fossil fuels.

From the standpoint of energy, we are moving from the hydrocarbon era into the solar-plus-hydrocarbon era. Through solar, we are democratizing access to energy. Energy-efficiency technologies and practices are helping us develop a "sip it, don't guzzle it" philosophy with regard to the hydrocarbons that we do use. Community solar is an example of how we expand access to solar. LED lights are an example of the sort of "sip it" technologies that will help us maintain - and even enhance - the quality of life on Earth at a lowered energy cost.

Sustainability creates new jobs, prosperity and wealth.

The strategy addresses multiple constituencies. Business people are getting it. An EthicalCorp study reports that 79% of executives polled said their CEOs are convinced of sustainability's value. Consumers are ready to do the modern equivalent of hunting and gathering with regard to energy choices. As a sector, we can be the key in influencing these constituencies to embrace solar power within a new context.

The solar sector has talked tech for decades. The result has been that 80% of people say they want solar, and 1.5% have bought it. If we want to change the world, to paraphrase Michael Margolis, we need to change our story.

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