

‘Laughing out loud’: Interview with Richard Ashton, cofounder of Adapt

Maddyness is collaborating with environmental publication Ours to Save to bring readers fresh perspectives on sustainability. In this piece, we speak to Adapt - a startup using design to communicate climate issues in a new way - about the role of humour in climate activism.

Whilst many continue to source news from Instagram and other forms of social media, access to reliable information concerning climate change remains limited. On top of this, it can be incredibly emotionally draining to read about the rapid decline of our planet.

Adapt is a creative organisation that uses a combination of graphic design and humour to discuss climate issues. It was founded in 2017 by two freelance designers, Josie Tucker and Richard Ashton. Their goal is to ‘share knowledge, encourage action and build a community of motivated activists’. With over 22K Instagram followers, Adapt is paving the way for interactive climate activism. To find out more, we interviewed co-founder Richard Ashton.

Can you give me a bit of background as to why you and Josie decided to launch Adapt?

We started Adapt about three years ago. Officially, it has been running as a company for about a year and a half. When we started it, the climate crisis was becoming progressively worse and the vast majority of media outlets were choosing not to cover it. We wanted to try and find another way of communicating the climate crisis using humour and fun designs.

And why do you call yourselves a 'climate club'?

We have always been community-driven. Adapt started out with meetings in our living room with lots of different people and then it somehow snowballed. We also collaborate with lots of different people on different projects. It is a fun way to try out new things. Sometimes they have done work to do with climate change, sometimes they haven't. So, we are bringing them into the conversation and giving them the platform to do work. It is not like a literal club but more of a community.

How has the pandemic impacted your work?

It has impacted us quite a lot. In the past, we would fund our projects by working with other organisations for a set fee. We had quite a few projects cancel when the lockdown first started. We had to completely rethink what Adapt will look like next year and how it can become more self-sustaining and more resilient to outside forces. Part of that was launching our Protest Gear. We had to come up with a more solid business model and reinvent what we are doing. It did impact us a lot, as it did everyone else. But also in a good way. It allowed us to really think about the business and reevaluate things.

Why do you think that humour is so

important for engaging people in conversations about climate change? Are there any negatives to this approach?

I wouldn't say there are any negatives, but you have to be sensitive to the topic and sometimes we choose not to use humour when communicating certain issues. But, whenever we can, we choose to. A lot of that stems from Josie. As part of her Master's programme, she looked at the role of humour in graphic design. There is an Oxford study she found that explored memory retention in teaching, and I think there was a 50% higher rate of retention rate when humour was used. That is part of the reason why we started and why we think it is really effective. The best way to defeat something that you are scared of is often to laugh at it. So, we thought about applying that to climate change and to see how it worked.

And do you think that the combination of humour and design is an effective way of engaging people in climate activism?

Yeah definitely. It is very useful. The combination works well. The style of our designs complements humour. It will be interesting to see how things move forward, especially on social media. We are pretty sure that Instagram is on the decline and that a lot of people will soon switch over to TikTok. TikTok is more focussed on video and animation whereas Instagram has been really great for the design and illustration industry. It will be interesting to see our that shifts and how things are communicated going forward.

So, could an Adapt TikTok account be on the cards?

It is definitely something we are looking at. Whether we can reach different people and different audiences. We need to figure out which is the best way for us to do it. Whether we can incorporate that into another project. I think we want to do it, but we want to do it well.

You have recently launched a line of Protest Gear. Where did the idea for this come about?

We wanted to create a platform that explored the ways that climate messaging could be carried outside of general conversation and into real life. We found that there were strong similarities between football crowds and protest crowds. The thing with football crowds is that they are there to support a team but there is also a strong sense of community. In protest crowds, things are a bit more jumbled, and that is kind of the beauty of it. It is very DIY. But, we wanted to explore the idea of what it would look like if everyone in a protest crowd had a strong sense of identity. We then invited different artists to come together to create their own protest scarf.

Why did you choose scarves?

We chose scarves because you can hold them up and you can reuse them in and out of protests. We then invited six artists to make their own scarves, to pick a cause of their choice and interpret it in their own way. On the back of that, we created two scarves which we are selling to fund Adapt and raise money for Client Earth. We have two scarves, a 'Climate Justice' scarf and a 'Fuck You CO2' scarf. Then it kind of just snowballed. We ended up shooting the campaign at Dulwich Hamlet F.C. which is a club in South London who are quite socially active but also have very strong community around them.

The football element is part of it but it is not the main focus. Over the next year, we are going to experiment with different forms of protest gear. We are also looking to reuse other forms of clothing and to reinterpret them in different ways.

Do you think that by launching a product that has these sorts of associations i.e. community, unity and identity will help increase accessibility to the climate

movement?

I think so. It shows it in a different way. The climate movement does have a particular problem with how it is perceived. I think generally it is quite white and middle class. We need to find different ways to engage with other groups. I think maybe protest gear could be something like that. We don't want to say it WILL do that because it is not something we can guarantee. But it is another way of exploring an avenue to bring people into the conversation. The artists and designers that we collaborate with are also important. They can open up new doors to different people.

What are your views on conscious consumerism? Do you think it is a vital part of the climate movement?

Yes. I think you have to be conscious when consuming. In an ideal world, everyone has to consume less. It is important to reduce waste as much as possible and to be more circular in your consumption. That is what we have been trying to do with protest gear. Conscious consumerism has to be a huge part of it because trying to get the industry to change is really difficult. Fashion Revolution do a lot of work on that. But it is quite a big task, especially for the fashion industry.

What are some of your top tips for conscious consumerism?

Looking at the materials and how things are produced is important. Because even companies that are focussed on sustainability can still use materials like acrylics. But, you should always try to educate them. You do not have to shame them or cancel them in any way, especially if they are small and independent. Also, always try to buy used things. Most of the clothes that Josie and I buy are used. This will massively decrease the amount you are contributing to the climate crisis.

All images courtesy of Adapt.

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