



Just Business: Roo Rogers on Collaborative Consumption

Roo Rogers , Julia Taylor Kennedy

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[Roo Rogers](#)

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Welcome to Just Business, a series of interviews on global business ethics. I'm Julia Taylor Kennedy, and today on the program we're talking about collaborative consumption with author and eco-entrepreneur Roo Rogers.

Rogers began his career working in the developing world with UNICEF, later started a series of media ventures, and is now an eco-entrepreneur in New York City. He earned notice for an alternative towncar service, called [OZOcar](#), which has a fleet of hybrid cars. Rogers has recently co-authored a book called [What's Mine Is Yours](#).



[Julia Taylor Kennedy](#)

Today we'll talk about the concept of collaborative consumption and the implications of the trend.

Roo Rogers, welcome to Just Business.

ROO ROGERS: Thank you for having me.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: First, tell me what is collaborative consumption.

ROO ROGERS: Collaborative consumption is, very simply, bartering, trading, and sharing, but on a massive scale. While the behaviors are something we've been doing since the dawn of time, the capability and reach has been massively expanded through the Internet

and technology.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Give me some examples of collaborative consumption sites.

ROO ROGERS: The ones I use are things like [Zipcar](#). I have a house in the countryside. Usually, I would have to rent a car and stay online for a very long period of time, or I would have to own a car that I would only use on weekends.

Zipcar comes along, and it's basically a car-sharing network that allows me to rent a car on the hour that I need it and for the hours that I'm going to use it. It's done on a scale that is now global and that's extremely convenient.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Zipcar comes to mind, eBay, Craigslist—so many that are popping up.

How did you notice this trend and then work with your co-author to make it into a book?

ROO ROGERS: My co-author and I—she was working with me at OZOlab—we first just noticed ourselves using these services a lot.

You mentioned eBay. I used eBay to pay for the move I made from one apartment to another. So when I moved from one apartment I sold a lot of stuff that I no longer needed and it paid for my move. I thought, This is so sensible. In the old days I would have just put it into storage. I just thought, Why do we need all these goods? So my co-partner and I said, "There's something to this."

There's more and more businesses emerging. At the time, we thought there were a lot of businesses because we could count 500. Now you can count 5,000 in a second.

We started thinking, What is it that really creates a dichotomy, the definition of what these businesses all have consistently? That's what led to the book.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What are the benefits of this kind of consumption?

ROO ROGERS: My favorite thing about this movement, or this form of consumption, is that it's an emerging movement, meaning that it's coming from the bottom-up.

Bottom-up movements are much more exciting than top-down because they're fueled by a human or consumer need. Consumers are flocking to collaborative consumption because they offer a more practical solution than the old solution of hyper-consumption.

In the postwar period, we were persuaded that it was our duty to buy as much as we could and that in buying as much as we could we would find happiness. We've learned through a number of financial crises and a doom-and-gloom outlook on the environment that hyper-consumption is not a practical solution.

Consumers are looking for an alternative way. They still want the utility. I still want to go to the countryside, I'm not willing to give up the idea of using a car, but I don't necessarily need to own it.

Consumers, very naturally started to identify ways and methodologies by which they could have the utility of the product without the hassles and the burden, both financially and practically, of owning the product.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: How did you come to care about eco-entrepreneurship and come into this field?

ROO ROGERS: I've always been very social and political. I grew up in a very politicized house with four older brothers and a lot of debate at the dining room table. I don't see the environment and environmental issues separate from any other social or political issue. I see it as one overarching challenge for us.

On the one hand, it's our responsibility to our children. But, on the other hand, I just feel a very logical, practical sense of responsibility to everybody, like we're all connected. Our outlook has to be very different.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You mentioned in an [interview with Planet Green](#) that one of the things you'd most like to change in the world is inequality. I'm curious why that stood out to you as what you'd most like to change.

ROO ROGERS: Lots in life is luck, and I had the great luck to be born into a very loving family that happened to live in the First World and who happened to be upwardly mobile and successful. I don't see that as a birthright. I see that as an opportunity to share.

From a very young age I traveled around the world, and I have since worked in many developing countries, including South Sudan, Kenya, and Rwanda. You realize that there's really no difference between myself or anybody else who has the good fortune to be successful and somebody who's born in one of these countries other than politics. Politics, fortunately, can change and our point of view can change.

What makes me most frustrated and most angry is inequality, because we see it as a sort of indomitable force, as something that can't change. But that's just because we don't have the will and the energy to do it.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: One critique of a lot of eco-entrepreneurship and green consumption is that it can be only accessible to people with a certain level of income. How does that fit into your fight against inequality? How can those two can be brought closer together?

ROO ROGERS: Again, it's politics, right? We choose to give oil companies massive subsidies. We choose politically not to deal with the issues. If we wanted to, we could make eco-products very cheap and we could make non-eco-products very expensive through simple methodologies of subsidization and taxation.

For me, it's not an economy of scale. I don't believe we live in a world that has true market clarity and efficiencies. We live in a world where the market is manipulated. That's okay, so long as it's manipulated for the right reasons, and those reasons should not be to promote inequality, to make the rich richer, but to create a healthier and more responsible society.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Let's talk a little bit about your big venture that got you a ton of headlines, which was OZOcar. Tell me about OZOcar and how that came to be.

ROO ROGERS: Again, it's a little bit of luck and a lot of hard work and strategy. It was 2004. My business partner at the time called me up and he said, "Look, these Priuses are amazing. They really are the next evolution of environmental technology, in the sense that they offer more responsibility without much sacrifice. They're a little bit smaller, but they really are a great car. Let's find a way to go out there and really tell the world about them."

At the time, I lived in New York and I used a car service a lot. We decided that the best way to do that was to launch a car service that was exclusively hybrid and, therefore, the first environmentally-friendly car service in the world.

It was a challenge, because what you're doing is persuading our biggest clients, such as Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan, Credit Suisse, and UBS, to get out of big, black Lincoln towncars and get into a smaller Japanese car.

We did it through PR and marketing and really making it seem like the cool, chic-est thing to do. In that sense, it was a really interesting experience. We knew that people did not want to be berated to do the right thing. We felt like they wanted to do the cool thing. So we put Apple computers in every car, we put power strips in every car, we were the first car service to have WiFi.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: In 2004 it was a pretty big deal to have that in a car.

ROO ROGERS: It was a really big deal, and it was really exciting. That's how we got it going.

Today, it's really interesting. Several years later, we're almost in danger of becoming commodified, which is to say green cars on the road is not that unique anymore.

The challenge now, and for environmentalists in general, is to go away from thinking of it as a product solution and to think of it as What is the next system evolution?

Zipcar is less about the cars than it is about the system, about consumers coming together to actually create a community that shares cars. While OZOcar is a very old model, where I call up a car service and I get a car, what is the next evolution of that, how do you create a new system? We're trying to think about a new system for that.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Any ideas?

ROO ROGERS: Not yet. No, we have some ideas.

There's a really interesting question, which again comes down to how do you maximize utility? Every car service will tell you that weekends are dead. So how can you offer your cars back to your clients? Is there a way that you can create car sharing? You say: "You use us as a service on Monday to Friday. On the weekends you can use the cars yourselves, even if it's just for free. It's a benefit of the service." There are lots of ways that you try and think of how to innovate, and that might be one of them.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Was OZOcar your first eco-venture?

ROO ROGERS: Yes, it was my first eco-venture. Before that I ran a television production company, which was one of the ten largest companies in the UK for television, that provided documentaries about political and social issues, and we did some environmental programming. But from an exclusive point of view, that was the first environmental venture.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Was it a little scary to take that leap? How did you decide to make the shift?

ROO ROGERS: An environmental business in the end is the same as any other business. If I think about OZOcar, the really hard thing was to learn how to do a car service. It's really hard to figure out how to get people picked up and taken from A to B. It's really hard to figure out how to deal with New York regulations.

The environmental side of it was buying a Prius instead of buying a Lincoln towncar and knowing how to communicate and articulate that.

That's really important to anybody that wants to get into business, no matter what the reason is, which is that it may look very easy and straightforward, but actually you really have to understand that industry and that sector if you want to make a change.

The greatest environmental businesses are started up by very good businessmen. That's not to say you have to come from Harvard Business School. My favorite thing about collaborative consumption businesses is most of them are started by individuals just saying, "What do I do with all these excess kid clothes that they grow out of every six months? I know, let's create a redistribution system. What do I do with all these second-hand products that I know have a value but I can't sell? I know, I'll create Craigslist or eBay."

A lot of these businesses are started up by just people seeing a fundamental need or frustration in their own life. But then they really immerse themselves into the business of that business itself.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: It seems like what's changing is there used to be more of a gulf between people who felt like changing the world and people who felt like running a business. Why do you think that gulf is closing?

ROO ROGERS: I'm not sure if the gulf is changing. What's changing is that if you want to be in business that has a sense of social responsibility, the expectations are different.

When I was getting out of college, there was a huge craze of corporate social responsibility. It used to be good enough for the business to take very holistic, grand approaches and produce corporate socially responsible reports that would have these very complicated analyses that I don't know if they really did anything or meant anything. It was on a very corporate macro point of view.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Give me an example.

ROO ROGERS: I believe in the whole bottom-line: economy, environment, social. But you also have a responsibility if you want to be a truly environmental business not to say, "I spew out oil or I do bad, but at the end of the day I invest in credits, or I invest in good businesses" or "I might be bad for the environment, but I'm very good for the community spirit within my business."

That is all integrated and included. That integration and inclusion has gone from being something that's expressed from a CEO level in the corporate social responsibility report into being embedded into the product itself.

What's happening today is if you really want to be a responsible business, you have to include your consumers. Really smart businesses, like Zipcar, are treating the consumers as members of their business that almost feel like they have a sense of ownership over the business, a sense of responsibility to the business, and the business has a sense of responsibility to them.

The whole dichotomy between the elite leadership of a business and the consumer has been leveled out. That is creating a more democratic and transparent relationship that's actually leading to more liberal goals from a business point of view.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You see it more coming from the consumer-business relationship rather than the business owner?

ROO ROGERS: Yes. Unfortunately, I still to this day think that the world needs governments to act—I'm a very big believer in big government—but I don't see it happening. Unfortunately, I don't see it coming from government. I would like to see it come from the business community, and there are examples of it. It would be great if it came from consumers, and there are great examples of that, and many of those are based on collaborative consumption.

The most exciting changes that you see today are when businesses and consumers merge, to come together to create change. That's really interesting.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Tell me about what you've grown from. You started out with OZOcar. Now you have several different products. We're sitting in the offices of [Redscout Ventures](#). I must admit when I was researching it was a little hard to follow the trail. Tell me what the company looks like, where your offices are, et cetera.

ROO ROGERS: Redscout Ventures is a venture group. We create and invest in new businesses. The businesses are based on my personal experience and personal insight. They have a combination of everything from my environmental work in OZOcar to my collaborative consumption insights in *What's Mine Is Yours*, the book.

We look at very early seed-stage business opportunities. We have a ton of people coming every day with "I have an idea," and then they just throw it up on the board and we brainstorm it. There are some people who come in with a business plan. The ideas are always better than the business plans.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You just gestured to this enormous whiteboard wall that you have facing your desk.

ROO ROGERS: Yes. I'm a very visual person. I would prefer somebody to map out a business idea visually than I would have them send me a Harvard business plan.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Got it. People come in with these great ideas, and then putting it into the plan is the harder part.

ROO ROGERS: Yes. Obviously you want to make sure there's a business there. But does the person who's coming in have the ability to operate that business, does he have the ability to take it to market? That's what we really look at.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Tell me about some of the ventures that you've worked on.

ROO ROGERS: The one I'm most excited about is Happify, which is an online application both for the iPhone and for the Web that helps people track and identify the things that make them happy and make those recommendations to other people. So you can have a live feed as you're going through your day of the experiences that your friends and your community are enjoying as a recommendation to yourself. You can also track the things that make you happy. For example, I would say that having Stumptown coffee every morning makes me happy.

The result is two things. One is if I'm unhappy, I can see what's made me happy in the past; I can see what has made my community happy. The second thing is I can send out an S.O.S.: "I'm not happy today. Send me recommendations."

But the bigger picture, and the reason it ties into everything I've done, is that to really find happiness you have to actually first stop and think about it. You have to say, "What are the things that really make me happy?" You have to try and get conscious about it.

The reason is because the world is filled with macro-messaging, especially from advertising, about what happiness should be. We've always equated happiness with consumers and consumption, because we've always had this image that having a white picket fence, a Hoover, a wife who stays at home and cooks for you, having a perfect roast meal, having a really big SUV—whatever that definition that was fed to us over the last 60 years—we've always thought that will lead to happiness. We've thought it because our celebrities and our role models have told us that's the way we should be.

What Happify is trying to do is to say, "Think about it for yourself."

What's interesting is in many analysis and statistical research we've found that consumption doesn't make us happy. If you really plot it—and this is across demographics—going to the shopping mall is not a source of happiness.

Sitting down and reading a book is a source of happiness, but so is a conversation with somebody else, so is a cup of tea on your own, that there are actually places of happiness. It's very individualized and personal, that if you know about it you'll treat your life and you'll manage the time that you have in this planned, innovative way.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: The idea then with this social network is other people can help you figure that out as well. Is that it?

ROO ROGERS: That's exactly it. And that you actually learn from it yourself.

Last week I found that going to a restaurant for lunch makes me so much happier, and I haven't once identified going to the shopping mall as making me happy. So you learn from it.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You have a lot of ventures and you're moving from place to place. Do you see a continuity of something that you're working on overall that has led your decisions to do development, eco-entrepreneurship, social networking, and work with media companies? Do you see a unifying thread?

ROO ROGERS: It's a constant struggle to find a way to make a better planet. I fundamentally believe I've done it as a member of *Médecins du Monde* and UNICEF in South Sudan, working in development; I've done it in television on documentaries; I've done it as a paralegal working against the death penalty; and I've done it in numerous businesses.

It doesn't matter what you want to do. You can do it in the arts. You can do it in any way. But my thing is: how do you actually make your time on this planet make a difference not only to yourself but to the world around you? I don't see it as two separate things. I see helping somebody else and making somebody else happy as a way for me to be happy too. It's not a totally selfless act. It's not about being [Mother Teresa](#). It's about actually deriving happiness from others.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What is next for you?

ROO ROGERS: I'm very interested in possibly looking at building more collaborative consumption businesses. The next thing is to see how we can either create a stronger network or a larger set of businesses that work within the space of social networks and collaboration.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Are there any pitfalls that you see in some of these collaborative consumption businesses that exist, places where you say, "I don't want that element in the collaborative consumption venture?"

ROO ROGERS: Next week I have somebody coming to talk to me who runs a massive private jet business who wants to know how he can harness collaboration and maximization to improve his business. Private jets and private boats are about the most evil things on this planet. So the answer to that is probably 99 percent going to be "stop selling and offering private jets."

There are forms of collaboration that are not good for the world, but they are very few and far between. It's hard to think of very many of them.

I feel incredibly optimistic about collaborative consumption. We have tried for a very long time to find a solution to our environmental and social challenges. We've tried government, we've tried business, and now it's time to try the consumer. Collaborative consumption is a consumer-led movement. Because of that, and because it's so decentralized, it's going to be very hard to stop.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What about—and this seems to be fading as these collaborative consumption businesses get more popular—but what about the trust issues that people had initially coming to places like eBay, saying, "How do I know that that picture is actually of the object that I'm going to receive?"

ROO ROGERS: Reputation capital is at the heart of collaborative consumption. If we couldn't somehow regulate trust, reliability, and responsibility among strangers, the whole thing would collapse. Your star and ranking in eBay, for example, or on Amazon, is incredibly important. It's as important as your credit card score and your credit rating.

The system has found a way to regulate itself, and users regulate each other, to the point whereby I'd rather not do the sale than lose my reputation because reputation is more valuable.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: The last question I want to ask you is: Do you have any recommendations for people who are looking to start an eco-business? Where should they start and how should they proceed?

ROO ROGERS: I really believe an entrepreneur can come from anywhere. They really do. It's a really beautiful thing. Today more than ever, anybody can be an entrepreneur.

I also don't think that necessarily means that everybody should be an entrepreneur. The cult of the entrepreneur, the celebrity status of an entrepreneur, has created a sort of new trend where everybody thinks I'm going to go create my own business and I'm going to be like eBay.

Being an entrepreneur is an incredibly hard thing to do. I encourage people to try it, but to make sure that they have the right business, and to also make sure that that's where their skill sets are really best applied.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Roo Rogers, thank you for all those insights. It's been wonderful talking to you.

ROO ROGERS: Thank you very much for having me.

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