

Brand Baloney!

Ty Francis (2000)

If you want to be in the vanguard rather than the old guard, it's time to express the essential agenda for Branding today. After all, getting more creative with your brands and your branding has to mean more than changing the Advertising Agency every few years.

Who's holding the baby?

With the collapse of traditional market boundaries, Brand Managers have good reason to reach for the aspirin these days. After all, technological, geographical, legal, social and commercial barriers are crumbling all around us.

In the high street right now, you can buy tellies from Tesco and money from Marks & Spencer. In the Utilities sector, gas companies sell electricity. Spurred by price inequalities in the UK motor trade, more people are purchasing cars directly from other European countries. Business models developed by commercial companies are adopted by public sector organisations. Even the Government promotes UK plc.

Add to this the fact that with more and more outsourced working, strategic partnerships, flexible contracting, 'co-opetition' and the like, the dividing line between customers, suppliers, staff – even competitors, is blurring. And the internet is completely overhauling the way we think about channels to market, pricing, promotion... add the dot.com explosion to all the rest of it, and what's a Marketer to do?

The impact of such massive market changes makes better brand building a business imperative. We still need to be customer-focused of course, but there's a seismic shift in the way large companies are moving from being marketing-led to being brand-led. The problem is that most corporate managers – dare I say it, even many Marketing Managers – are not at all clear about what "The Brand" actually is these days, let alone how to build it. It's not news that the structure of our companies and the ambition of our people compounds the problem – Product Managers and Agencies alike move on after a year or two, and who's left holding the brand baby?

Raising the curtain on the confusion

Just what do we mean by the brand? Is it the company name or the product name? What about the brand called You – in CV terms, aren't people brands as well? And let's not mention megabrands, sub-brands, flanker brands, brand depth, brand stretch, brand weight... what do all these unhelpful micro-distinctions actually mean? What is the difference between brand image and brand identity? Is it good for the brand values to be

different to the corporate values? We've parsed the language enough. Is anybody else screaming yet?

Even textbook definitions suggest answers that don't bear up to scrutiny. *The highest order need you are able to deliver in a differentiated form that customers want.* Well you might get good marks for that one in a CIM Diploma exam, but does it point to better practice? *A mixture of tangible and intangible attributes symbolised in a trademark which, if properly managed, creates influence and generates value.* Better, but arguably too sophisticated to be useful and too mechanistic to be true (does it really capture the magic and spirit of the brand for you?).

There's fuzz in the terminology and the application of branding, so let's simply acknowledge the confusion here. I am reminded of the fable of the three blind men, who had never seen an elephant before. One stood at its leg, and thought he was touching a tree trunk. The other stood at its trunk, and believed he was hearing the blast of a trumpet. The third, stood at its ear, was convinced he felt the draught of a great fan. They were all on to something, of course...

Truth is, the brand seems to be all things to all people. We talk about brand as a glue that holds the company and customer together. We talk about brand as the soul of an organisation. We talk about brand as a gateway, a person, a vital spark... Actually, there's such a rich range of imagery about branding you can't help but reflect how far the practice has come since the days when a brand was an ugly mark of ownership seared on to the flesh of a beast or a slave.

But I don't think the term serves us any more. Although branding is a vital survive-and-thrive discipline, perhaps the very word "brand" has become a barrier that gets in the way of better marketing practice. It would be presumptuous of me to suggest a better alternative, although it would start a cracking good debate! However, this might achieve nothing more than digging us even deeper into some already entrenched positions. I'm more interested in two alternatives. Firstly, trying to shine a torch on some of the puzzles and paradoxes, the dilemmas and difficulties, the gaps and gloryholes of brand practice, and secondly through raising questions that help us think differently. Answers are needed, but first let's get clear about the confusion!

Puzzles & Paradoxes

#1 *The brand runs the company, not the CEO*

Once upon a time, the brand used to be a promise – a simple, clear and compelling statement. It was part of the *we know best and we make the rules* mindset. Not any more! A brand is a living thing, a relationship, a way of exploring connections between the company and the customer base. Companies are getting too big and markets are getting too complex for the CEO to keep in touch with it all. But the brand touches everyone, everything – it connects products and services, departments, offices in different

parts of the world, even the past and the future. That's far more powerful than the average Managing Director. What brands are going to have to do in the future is get back to relationship, responsiveness, reality – if the promise isn't kept, the brand will bite your bum. Remember Nike and cheap labour?

#2 Strong brands stifle innovation

Create a strong brand and chances are you'll create a huge commercial success. But one of the unspoken downsides is that strong brands can stifle innovation. There's often little leeway to innovate outside the formula – look at what happened years ago to New Coke, or consider the flex-potential of great brands like Planet Hollywood. If you're not careful, as soon as you get recognition in the marketplace, corporate arthritis sets in – your brand will get creaky, your entrepreneurialism will fade, your creativity will wane, the life expectancy of both your products and company will shorten... unless something is done, the prognosis isn't good... Add to this the fact that brands are more about helping to deliver lifelong customer value rather than single transaction value. Trouble is that customers change over the course of their lives, and the brand needs to stretch to accommodate this. What kind of stranglehold does formulaic branding have on your company's innovation potential?

#3 Build the business, break the brand

Although businesspeople try to have their cake and eat it (big slices please!), there can be a troubling difference between building the brand and building the company. Mergers and acquisitions can show this beautifully. How many financial decisions are made in relation to the effect on the acquiring company's brand proposition? Some financial growth strategies can actually weaken or kill the brand. Consider the recent brand carnage at Unilever...

#4 Arrest the Brand Police!

The Brand usually comes out of marketing, but marketing has to come out of the brand. Branding is a wider business issue now than applying the logo, enforcing the typestyle, managing the corporate identity and reputation. There's still an important role for the Marketing Department to act as custodians of the brand – effectively, being The Brand Police. However, there needs to be more discussion and clarity about the brand and its relationship to products and services, the company and the customer interface both at Board level and across the company. Somehow, internal marketing doesn't seem to have gone beyond a simplistic re-interpretation of the 4Ps (remember when all we marketers had to worry about was product, price, place and promotion!) and opened up the brand issue in a generative way. It needs to!

#5 Brand values don't align with corporate values don't align with social values

Globalisation has made huge demands on the integrity of companies and the promises made through their brands. Interbrand's recent report on The Future of Brands makes it clear that successful brands in and of the future are going to have to start contributing to society in order for people to want to do business with them. We're talking way beyond

cause-related marketing here. Whether your values match or enrich the customer's personal values is becoming a business-critical strategic issue and looks set to become an important element of commercial competition in coming years. Will Marlborough man still be riding into the 22nd century when the world stops smoking? The new business of business has a much more vital social agenda. Even inside the company, the gap between rhetoric and reality is shortening.

10 Questions to blow your mind about brands

- How do your brands help you to innovate?
- How can you turn your brand platform into a brand springboard?
- How can the brand encourage shifts in your company culture as well as in the marketplace?
- How can the brand help you pull the future forwards?
- What's the gap between the behaviour of the Board and the values of the Brand?
- What's the gap between the brand values communicated to customers and their lived experience of the company?
- How is your customer proposition different to your brand proposition?
- What needs to happen in the space between your brand, your culture and your customers?
- Where does brand power flow from?
- What is the future of branding in YourCo?

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