This is Your Buyology

Martin Lindstrom

Mark couldn't wait for the opening. It was an event that had kept him awake for several nights. Recently, he spent most of his time preparing for the big day, and it had cost him his entire fortune. Of course, most of his bedroom was stuffed with his collection. As a true Apple fan, Mark now anticipated the opening of the new Apple store in Sydney, Australia.

DEVOTION

Mark isn't just any kid. He's an especially devoted Apple fan. He'd flown to Sydney from his home town of Palo Alto in California. He made the 15-hour flight to Australia to attend the opening of Apple's latest store. And this wasn't the first time he'd gone to such lengths to be there on an opening day. As he excitedly waited in the queue of 4,000 other people, many of whom, like Mark, had camped out overnight to be at the head of the line, he told me that he'd also flown to Tokyo for the Apple store opening in Japan's capital. But Sydney was extra special. This was the opening of the 40th Apple store, so Mark was sharing a special anniversary with the brand he loved. What did he expect to get out of this? I asked him and he replied, "a T-shirt."

Coincidently—or perhaps ironically—the opening of the Sydney Apple store took place the week before World Youth Day and the arrival of Pope Benedict. If you had just landed on planet Earth from somewhere in space, with no idea of what humans worship, you might easily draw comparisons between the thousands of Apple fans and the thousands of Catholics who were converging simultaneously on Sydney. Yes, the Catholics identified themselves as pilgrims, and Apple fans would describe themselves as loyal customers. But is this distinction merely a matter of semantics? Each member of the group, in their own way, was driven by the community of faith in which they were a part. The Apple fans are just as excited about the day that left them with an iPod as the World Youth Day's pilgrims were to receive a souvenir commemorating WYD 2008.

So here's my question. Is there a correlation between brands and religion? Is the drive behind Mark's tour to Sydney the same as the motivation attracting some 100,000 Catholics from all around the world?

OBSESSION

I have spent years talking with brand fans; from obsessed Harley Davidson riders to young Japanese Hello Kitty admirers (one of whom, incidentally, owns more than 12,000 pieces of Hello Kitty merchandise) and devoted Irish Guinness beer drinkers. Time after time, I've been struck by the apparent parallels between the power of religion and of brands over followers. But, in reality, would such a claim possibly hold up? Is it possible that some brands have managed to create their own religion by, coincidently or deliberately, adopting triggers and tactics from the world of religion? The question became an obsession for me.

PROOF

In 2004, I embarked on a four-year quest to find the answer. But, rather than initiating another classic market research study and asking thousands of people in focus groups and through questionnaires about their thoughts, I decided to pursue a methodology few have explored on a large scale. I was interested in testing the effectiveness of a non-verbal research technique in revealing consumer thoughts. I turned to neuroscience and sought the expertise of neuroscientists versed in deploying the world's most sophisticated brain scanning technology, pursuing what has become a neuromarketing project. Uniting the expertise of neuroscience with marketing, we recruited hundreds of research subjects—volunteers from all over the world—who count themselves as Christians. My objective was to use neuroscience to examine whether the same brain activation evident in the brain of a devout Christian, when exposed to faith-related triggers, was also evident in the brains of fans of emotionally powerful brands like Apple, Harley Davidson and Guinness when they were exposed to the iconography of their brand preferences.

In contrast to most quantitative or qualitative research projects, neuromarketing research cannot be accomplished overnight. From the project's beginning—when we planned the test procedures, hypotheses and test stimuli—to the completion of this portion of the study's brain scanning took an intensive six months. Project Buyology, as the research project was called, has delivered the foundations for my forthcoming book and was based on fMRI, or functional magnetic resonance imaging technology. Project Buyology made use of the most advanced and expensive brain imaging technology available in the world to examine and shed light on the truth and lies about why we buy. Project Buyology aimed to examine the desires of consumers.

So, testing the possible correlation between branding and religion was one aspect of this research. The Christian test volunteers were both hopeful and concerned as they arrived at the neuroimaging laboratory near Oxford, England. "Will they be able to read my thoughts?" "Can they detect my religious belief?" "Will I lose my faith after all this?" These were among the questions our volunteers

posed to each other as they gathered at the lab. Three months later I received the astounding results of the tests we conducted. My suspicions were confirmed. It turned out that, when exposed to faith-based triggers, the Christian volunteers' brains evinced activity in the same region of the brain as that activated in the brains of brand fans exposed to brand stimuli. In contrast, brands that don't fall among the rarified group of highly emotional brands revealed almost the opposite brain response. Brands like BP and KFC provoked less brain activity and engaged fewer brain regions than brands with fan bases. For the first time ever, Project Buyology delivered hard scientific evidence of some correlation between emotionally engaging brands and religion.

Project Buyology also interviewed fourteen religious leaders from across the world with the intention of establishing a list of components for a powerfully engaging religion. This part of the study revealed agreement among these faith leaders about most religious communication. Let's explore the building blocks that this research revealed.

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THE INGREDIENTS

First, a clear vision. This is the cornerstone of religion. It can inspire great actions and firm convictions. But how does this translate into a brand? L'Oreal provides a clue in the wording of its brand mission: "We sell hope." Then there's Apple's 1982 brand vision: "Man is the creator of change in this world. As such he should be above systems and structures, and not subordinate to them." These are examples of brand convictions that, more than twenty years later, are alive and as relevant as ever. These visions drive and guide these companies.

Next, a sense of belonging. What do Tupperware, Harley Davidson, LEGO and Apple have in common? They're all based on communities. Once a LEGO fan—always a LEGO fan. I'm one of them and I have been since I was twelve, or younger. Considering LEGO's sizeable brand equity, you'd think the company's marketing budget would count in the billions. Not so. In fact, it is so modest that if I recorded it here, you'd think there was a typo in the article. LEGO doesn't do the talking. The brand lets its fans do it—their LEGO Maniacs, or pilgrims perhaps. Without them, no LEGO.

Then there's power from enemies. Imagine playing a football game without an opponent, or playing drafts without white counters. Imagine Pepsi without Coke. Impossible, right? A brand's enemy, or competitor, is a valuable tool. Yet almost no brands advertise their enemies. As a French novelist once said, an enemy defines who you're not. It makes things black and white, creates a well-defined line in the sand. A clear brand competitor unites a company from within and, most importantly, pushes the brand's boundaries. But few brands have understood that an enemy is just as essential for a brand's success as its logo and all other identity signals. The enemy shapes the brand.

IT'S ALL ABOUT STORIES

Storytelling. Don't get me started. The bible, the Koran, the Torah… the world's holy texts are built on oral traditions. The power of word-of-mouth has ensured stories have been, and continue to be, passed from generation to generation. Storytelling has driven faith and religious practice, keeping them alive for millennia. Some brands understand the power of storytelling—Disney is one—but few brands have taken the storytelling tool to its extreme to test its power. Just as every vessel, piece of furniture, hymn, window and scent that you encounter in a Catholic church is linked to an all-embracing story, brands have the potential to build identity holistically. And the brands that do engage consumers truly stand out.

Consider grandeur. It's all about thinking big—really big. Moses parted the waters. Jesus walked on water. Cathedrals are massive in scale. The propaganda to inspire awe seems to be working. Today, building regulations in Rome forbid the erection of any building that exceeds the height of St Peter's dome. Not even a flagpole can stretch into then heavens beyond the height of the cupola. And, in the world of brands, this point is particularly relevant and, perhaps, more significant than the other religion-related characteristics. Think about the 5th Avenue Apple store in New York, the latest Prada store in Tokyo, or Burj Al Arab—the world's first 7-star hotel. It's been so expensive to build that the hotel will, apparently, not break even until 2121.

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How about evangelism? This phenomenon has lived offline for centuries and has moved online. But in the world of branding, it takes place in chat rooms and through videos. I don't think anyone disputes word-of-mouth power. It's trusted, engaging and cheap. Yet, in 2008, few brands make use of the power of evangelism and the inclination of consumers to be convinced by friends. The Brazilian brand Natura, and Vodafone in India, have mastered the potential of evangelism. By knocking on new doors both brands have, in record time, established vibrant networks of brand supporters—or pilgrims, perhaps believers. These are people who don't argue over price but who converse about the spirit of the brand.

Symbols. Let's imagine a smashed stained glass church window, a page loosed from a bible, a snippet of choral singing. Would you recognize where any fragment of those elements came from? Most likely you would. Few brands, however, reflect this consistency. Not many can stand alone and be recognized without their logos. Apple's iPhone can. If you examine it you'll discover that you have problems finding the logo. Yet, its design is so in tune with the brand's identity, and is so unambiguously original, that you know an iPhone when you see it and feel it. Hold it in your hand and its identity is revealed in the tactile experience. Use it and the iPhone stands out in its navigation, color and graphics. Ronald McDonald is also distinctive, in his every part: red shoes and hair, red and white stripes. McDonald's also makes use of symbols to express brand.

MYSTERY AND RITUAL

What about mystery? Many years ago, the story goes, Unilever released a shampoo in India. During production, the copywriter's mock-up text was, mistakenly, printed as the final copy on the label. Millions of bottles entered the market stating that the shampoo contained "the secret X7 factor." No one knew if it was true, or what it was—so they left it there. The mistake wasn't really picked up until the label supply ran out. The new labels were corrected, without the "secret formula." Sales plummeted. Complaints arrived by the hundreds, all demanding to know what had happened to the secret X7 factor. Apparently consumers believed that the identical product wasn't as effective as before. The great success of the secret X7 factor indicated that Unilever was on to a good thing. So the secret X7 factor was reinstated.

Rituals. What more can I say? No rituals, no religion. And, the same holds true for brands. Rituals build brands. How about the Corona beer ritual—a wedge of lime in the bottleneck helps sell those beers. And where does this ritual come from? It was invented by two bartenders in California to see how fast a ritual can spread across the world.

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By now you'll understand why I believe there is a correlation between emotionally engaging branding and religions. Mark was willing to wait in the line for 48 hours, after a 15-hour flight. For him, the product expresses more than a brand. The brand has become a focus of his faith. And this isn't some empty claim. Project Buyology's neuroscientific research proves that powerful brands can become much more than logos or products. They can become life journeys for people. But this is far from the full story. Close your eyes and come with me into a church, or a mosque, or a synagogue. The cool environment, the quiet, the smells and sounds will tell you where you are before you open your eyes. Places of worship seduce the senses: the ringing bells, the rumble of the massive organ around you, the incense. Visit any supermarket, retail chain or store and you'll struggle to experience any sensory stimuli, other than visual, that tells you, uniquely, about where you are. And isn't shopping all about a holistic experience? But this is far from the full story. In fact, even with your eyes opened, you'll often struggle to know where you are, which leads me to a theory I call "Smash Your Brand."

LET'S KILL THE LOGO!

"Make it bigger!" the executive screamed from the corner of the room as I was desperately seeking a sign-off for an ad for a major fashion brand. It wasn't the first time, in fact every meeting I had always ended up in discussions about the placement and size of the logo. It was like that one by one inch of space over time had become the holy grave of branding—the rest was more a less an add-on.

Let's be frank—we live in a logo obsessed world. Pay a quick visit to Time Square and you'll remember what I mean. But is the magic in the logo anymore as we are exposed to some 2 million TV commercials throughout life until we reach the age of 66—or have we been caught by a format which once worked but as time has gone (and the entire media picture has changed) has passed its due date?

I decided to find out. Over the years I've been stunned by the fact that we smoke more—not less. Admittedly, the biggest increase of new smokers takes place in Asian and Eastern European countries. That said, even in the U.S. many segments are steady—not decreasing as we all want to convince each other—and all this despite the fact that we all know that it is unhealthy, that it is almost impossible to light up a cigarette indoor. Let us also not to forget that advertising in most countries were banned decades ago. Yet, brands like Marlboro happen to be ranking in the very top of the most valuable brands in the world. Why?

The only way to find out was to understand what really goes on in our subconscious mind. Buyology seemed to be the only way to find out. By scanning consumer's brains, we wanted to answer exactly that question. What are the tricks the tobacco industry knows that the rest of the world somehow has missed? Estimates today claim that 85 percent of everything we do every minute takes place in our subconscious mind. Was this the place where the battle was taking place?

The answer was to be found in a small region in our brain called the neuclus accombens—also called the craving spot. It is a small area in our brain that controls our pleasures—and addiction too—like when smoking. It is also a lie detector. You may claim not to be affected by ads for tobacco smoking, but the neuclus accombens will tell the truth.

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Over the years I've observed (and admittedly admired) the way tobacco companies has crafted their clever brand strategies. Marlboro's solid sponsorship of the European Formula 1—a race somewhat similar to Nascar race in the U.S.—had become iconic for the brand with its red Ferrari cars. Can cigarette cravings be triggered by images tied to a brand of cigarette but not explicitly linked to smoking—say, the sight of a Marlboro-red Ferrari or a camel riding off into a mountainous sunset? Do smokers even need to read the words Marlboro or Camel for their brains' craving spots to compel them to tear open a cigarette pack? In the U.S. the cowboy did his job. Joe Camel and the Camel Trophy race—not to forget the Camel or Marlboro merchandising line—all seemed to play an important role in building a brand in circumstances where advertising was totally banned. But how powerful was it?

With the support of one of Britain's leading scientists—Dr. Gemma Calvert out of Oxford—and the use of MRI, arguably the most sophisticated brain scanning technique in the world, our objective was to discover the answer.

One by one we would expose smokers, former smokers, people considering smoking—in short, a raft of different audiences all with some relationship with smoking—to the iconic pictures as we scanned their brains in order to understand the activation in the neuclus accombens.

Over a two-month period, our smokers filed in and out of Dr. Calvert's London laboratory. What parts of their brains would light up as they watched these logo-free images?

All of our subjects were asked to refrain from smoking for two hours preceding the test, to ensure that their nicotine levels would be equal at the start of the experiment. First, both groups were shown subliminal images that had no overt connection to cigarette brands—the aforementioned western style scenery, including iconic cowboys, beautiful sunsets and arid deserts. Next, to establish a comparison, they were shown explicit cigarette advertising images like the Marlboro Man and Joe Camel on his motorbike, as well as Marlboro and Camel logos. Dr. Calvert and I wanted to find out if the subliminal images would generate similar cravings to the ones generated by the logos and the clearly marked Marlboro and Camel packs.

To no one's surprise, the fMRI scans revealed a pronounced response in the volunteers' nucleus accumbens—the area we now know to be involved with reward, craving, and addiction—when they viewed the actual cigarette packs. But what was more interesting was that when the smokers were exposed to the non-explicit images—the red Ferrari, the cowboys on horseback, the camel in a desert—over a period of less than five seconds, there was an almost immediate activity in the craving regions of their brains as well, in the exact same regions that responded to the explicit images of the packs and logos. In fact, the only consistent difference was that the subliminal images prompted

more activity in the volunteers' primary visual cortex—as might be expected given the more complex visual task of processing those images.

More fascinating still, when Dr. Calvert compared the brains' responses to the two different types of images, she found even more activity in the reward and craving centers when subjects viewed the subliminal images than when they viewed the overt images. In other words, the logo-free images associated with cigarettes, like the Ferrari and the sunset, triggered more cravings among smokers than the logos or the images of the cigarette packs themselves—a result that was consistent for both Camel and Marlboro smokers.

But why is that? Come with me—we have to go to the doctor's office. Let's say you have a terrible headache. Let's imagine we enter the consultation room, which to our surprise is packed with Panadol logos on the wall, on the desk, there's even a neat decoration of the latest Panadol packs displayed behind the doctor as he's sitting writing notes wearing a Panadol hat. As you explain your terrible headache, the doctor replies "hmmm… I'd recommend Panadol." What would your reaction be? Guards up! That's exactly what happens in today's world of advertising. In order to survive, our guards go up. This is not just the case with tobacco smoking, but for almost every category—this is our defence mechanism.

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So what does this mean in practical terms? Let's take an express train back to year 1915—the year the original counter Coca-Cola bottle was invented. The original brief was to develop a bottle so smart that, if you dropped it on the floor and it smashed into thousands of pieces of glass, you'd still be able to recognize the brand. Grab any iPod and you wont be able to find the logo on the front, yet the iconic look is enough for you to know what brand it is. The same is the case with any picture from United Colors of Bennetton, a McDonald's roof, a Tiffany's robin's egg blue box or Marlboro's cowboy.

I call my theory Smash Your Brand. It very simply aims to move on from the logo and begin to own what I call "Smashable" components—a color, a shape, a sound, a smell, you name it. They're all indirect signals that tells a story about the brand without having to show the logo. So why is this so much better? Because you bring the consumer with you on a journey, you engage the consumer in figuring out who's behind the message and, most importantly, you talk to our subconscious mind. The logo is not yet dead, but I would claim that its days are counted. The fact of the matter is that the battle is no longer to take place in our conscious mind. Instead, the true decision making process happens at a level in our brain which, until recently, was impossible to reach. Thanks to the marriage of science and marketing, we've now finally begun to understand what our true Buyology is all about.

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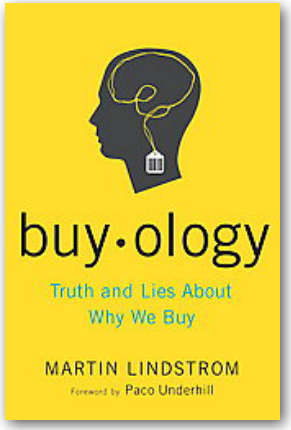

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Martin Lindstrom is one of the world's most respected marketing gurus. With a global audience of over a million people, Lindstrom spends 300 days on the road every year, advising top executives of companies including McDonald's Corporation, Procter & Gamble, Nestlé, Microsoft, The Walt Disney Company and GlaxoSmithKline. He has been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, *TIME*, *The Economist*, *The New York Times*, *BusinessWeek*, *The Washington Post*, *USA TODAY*, *Fast Company* and more. His previous book, *BRANDsense*, was acclaimed by the *Wall Street Journal* as one of the five best marketing books ever published. Lindstrom's latest book, *Buyology*, was published by Doubleday. Visit MartinLindstrom.com to learn more.

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