Guest Editorial

Five ways branding is changing

INTRODUCTION

As a practitioner at the brand consultancy Wolff Olins, I see many signs around me that branding is changing. The work we're doing now, the preoccupations of our clients, and above all the technological climate in which everything happens, are substantially different from the world I encountered when I started as a brand consultant 20 years ago.

Of course, many things also remain the same, and practitioners tend to over-emphasise change, in the interests of keeping what they do exciting and urgent. Nevertheless, there are big tectonic shifts, which the theory of branding is struggling to keep up with.

These shifts are happening in many ways, in many places, in many sectors – and at different speeds, and to varying depths. But our experience as practitioners suggests five things are happening, all with the potential to be revolutionary.

And this special issue of the *Journal of Brand Management* amplifies these experiences, through preliminary findings from other people at the front line. The first two pieces are by practitioners: both are opinion-pieces, thought-provokers. The other four come from academic researchers, and are based on substantial new research.

FROM PERSUASION TO PLATFORM

The first substantial shift that we observe is the result of the changing consumer. As consumers become better informed, more ethical, more sceptical, they are less ready to be persuaded by brands to buy things, and are much more interested in using brands to do things. Brands act much less as persuaders, much more as platforms. This shift is particularly vivid in the broad area of social media, where none of the big new twenty-first-century brands behave in the old ways. Google, Facebook, Twitter, eBay, Amazon: none of these aims to seduce us. They earn our support by being, simply, useful. For example, eBay has created 178 000 entrepreneurs: people who earn their living through the brand platform of eBay. The peer-to-peer lending business Zopa has attracted a significant share of the personal loan market through a brand that cuts out the banks – by being, simply, more useful.

The overriding message is that branding is changing its role – from persuasion, a form of rhetoric, to something new. Alan Mitchell explores this shift with great energy, in *McKitterick's Conundrum*.

FROM POSITIONING TO PURPOSE

As practitioners, we also find ourselves talking much less about positioning, and much more about purpose. Some clients still ask us to help define their positioning, or even to 'reposition' them, but many more – seeing themselves not as corporate citadels but as corporate citizens – are concerned about creating a sense of purpose, to share with employees and customers. The idea is now commonplace that the best way to achieve profit is to

have a purpose beyond profit. Grameen has built a business by loaning US$11 billion to get micro-businesses off the ground in Bangladesh. Zipcar is building a big business in car-sharing, and claims that every Zipcar takes 15 cars off the road. Neither has a traditional 'positioning'.

In this context, the idea that a brand can build and maintain a 'positioning' looks increasingly old-fashioned. In *Is It Time to Reposition Positioning?* Henrietta Jowitt and Giles Lury show that brands need instead to think about purpose (which they codify as vision, beliefs and personality). The old idea of 'propositions' (the tools of persuasion) still plays a role, but a secondary one.

FROM CONSISTENCY TO EXPERIMENTATION

Third, and this is the most visible change, brands are less obsessed with consistency. These days, brands are much more relaxed about varying their visual identities – think about Google's pop-up logos, or the thousands of variants of the new MIT Media Lab logo, or even the variants on the Tate logo, which we first designed back in 2000. And they are less obsessed with rolling out a formula: Starbucks is actively trying to vary its offer by location, even creating covert brands like Roy Street Coffee and Tea. Rather than policing for consistency, we're today advising our clients on how to achieve coherence. They're looking not for a monotone, but a theme with variations; not a slogan, but a story; not a message, but a pattern; not a set formula, but constant experimentation.

Rather than permanent items created by a marketing department, brands increasingly see themselves as continuously changing things, co-created with users. In *Open Source Brands and Their Online Brand Personality*, Gareth Haarhoff and Nicola Kleyn explore the co-creation of meaning with consumers, using terminology from software development, 'open source'. They propose a way

to assess how close a given brand gets to open source principles, and they analyse the kinds of brand personality that work best in this new world of co-created brands.

FROM CONTROL TO LIBERATION

Fourth, we find our clients less concerned now to use their brands as a means of control inside their organisations, more as a means of liberation. They no longer conceive of brands as a mindset or ideology, more as a starting point for individual people's initiative and innovation. We saw this first working for Jeff Immelt at GE in 2004, where the brand idea is as open-ended as 'imagination at work'. Brands like Lego have also used an inspirational brand idea to generate innovation and create new value, through initiatives like Lego Serious Play.

In *Bringing the Corporate Brand to Life*, Benjamin Golant looks at this new role of brands inside organisations. He discusses the co-creation of meaning with employees, building on Shotter's idea of 'practical authorship'. Golant shows how important it is for leaders to give their people space to construct their own meanings, not to have an ideology thrust on them.

FROM OWNERSHIP TO BOUNDARYLESSNESS

Finally, brands are becoming more relaxed about ownership. Brands were invented as marks of ownership – burned on to cattle, originally. But today, as organisations are forced to collaborate more, brands are being shared. They serve less to divide organisations apart, more to multiply them together.

We saw this first when we worked in 2006 for Bono's charity (RED), which links with brands like Apple, American Express and Gap to create special red products, and a proportion of the profit from those products goes to fight Aids and HIV in Africa. The (RED) brand and the Gap brand, for example, multiply each other's power, and

their two logos get fused together. In our work for New York City and the London 2012 Olympic Games, both in 2007, we made logos that allowed other organisations to place their colours and images inside the symbol, creating something shared. And probably the biggest multiplier brand today is Android, shared by 30 handset makers, and thousands of app developers.

Brands today, of course, live in the boundaryless world of social media. Elaine Wallace, Isabel Buil and Leslie De Chernatony examine the ways consumers interact with brands in the context of the most powerful social media platform on the planet, Facebook. In *Facebook 'Friendship' and Brand Advocacy*, they show the power on that platform of brands that appeal to people's growing desire for self-expression.

And finally, Bernard Cova and Bernard Paranque examine the new porousness of organisations, in the context of value creation. They see value being created in the inter-relationships between consumers, marketers and financiers. And they describe brands as the intellectual, social and cultural medium connecting inside and outside of an organisation.

Brands started in the 1660s as the definers of the boundaries of an organisation: now, in the 2010s, they're becoming the means by which owners, consumers, employees and financiers can transcend those boundaries.

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