

THE BRAND CONUNDRUM

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Company of Friends Meeting - Happy – 15th June 2004

Thousands of companies seek access to a space in our minds. We work hard to keep them out. Those that stay out are weak brands and the ones that get in are strong brands. So what's the difference? Beyond Branding explores this conundrum and two of its authors gave CoF a glimpse of its insights.



A matter of perception

Brand is all about perception – no it's not. It's about the way employees feel about the company - well sort of. It's about the feelings employees and customers share about the product - getting warmer. As with the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, the moment you think you have understood what a brand is (or a nun), it becomes something else. Beyond Branding's somewhat academic definition of a brand is, *"...something that is owned by buyers and other stakeholders."* Significantly, this gives consumers propriety over brands, not the companies that own them and provides the context for any attempt to change a brand or launch a new one.

There are individual brands and corporate brand images, and the two can conflict, conflate or complement each other. Brand is about reputation, share price, staff retention and your ability to get planning permission. While a brand can be a force for good, it may also be a symbol for globalisation and exploitation. Brands wield tremendous power and accrue great value: as much as 85% of a company's assets may be its brands. Brands are also vulnerable and can be irreversibly damaged by scandal or incompetence, viz Enron and Parmalat.

Now, if anyone knows about brands it is John Moore and the elegantly self-branded Swede, Thomas Gad, two of several authors of the highly acclaimed book, *Beyond Branding* which "*Challenges, in a very practical way, the narrow, short-termist, shareholder-focused approach to marketing that drives many companies today.*" Other authors include previous CoF presenters, John Caswell and Chris Macrae.

You're never alone with a brand

John Moore reminded us that we are bombarded with brand messages, most highly counterproductive to the company's cause. The brand becomes a contrivance, a chimera almost cynically created in the hope that we will somehow fall for it. And there's too great an obsession with brand management, which can develop into a narcissistic infatuation with the brand. Consumers should not be seen as the passive recipients of brand messages: we actually help to create the brand. When we go into Prêt à MacBucks we become part of the 'theatre of the brand' that those on the outside observe.

Inevitably, as companies become successful and ambitious, someone decides the brand needs fixing even if it isn't bust. From that point forward, there's an ever complicating spiral of nip and tuck operations until the brand resembles the Bride of Wildenstein. So lesson one, don't embark on a re-branding exercise unless it's essential and don't kid yourself that you can change a brand by tinkering with the advertising. And another thing, don't grow your company through mergers and acquisitions. A brand is an expression of a company's culture and company cultures don't mix.

And if you are really pissed off press 9

Anger and frustration emerged as CoFers reminisced about the brands they had felt betrayed by in various ways; a bad experience with Orange here, a falling out with Barclays or Virgin Trains there. How many times have we hung on the phone to our bank, having exhausted all numerical options, in the hope that an operator probably in Mumbai (oddly re-branded Brian or Brenda) will accidentally pick up the call while dialling out for pizza? Exactly. So what's to be done? Most people have given up complaining; half the time there's no one to complain to. Our first instinct now is to switch brands, but that's the rub – which one?

Life becomes a merry-go-round of thwarted brand relationships as we chop and change suppliers. Whatever happened to brand loyalty? A quote from Nicholas Ind, editor of *Beyond Branding* sums up the crisis:

The message is blunt: brands are in trouble. They still act as shorthand for the often complex ideas that are combined as the manifestation of a company, its products and its interactions with its customers, but their power in also conveying trust to customers is failing.

The conundrum of brands

Companies tamper with brands at their peril. What most should do is simply remind themselves why they started in the first place and to try to conduct business in a more humane and engaging way. What needs to be sustained and improved is not the image, but the conversation with the customer. One of the conundrums of brands is that we're prepared to love them simply if they acknowledge we exist. If someone gets on the phone and grovels an apology they can transform their appalling service into a positive, life-enhancing experience.

Beyond Branding reveals that most conceptions of brand are now hopelessly outdated especially, and rather crucially, in worlds of advertising and business communication. But perhaps it has always been so. Brand management reminds me of the old adage about economics: only two people in the world understand it and even they disagree. The subject also arouses great passions, as we experienced.

A matter of belief

Branding is very much a matter of belief, and the believers hold very firmly to their conception of brand. Unless you know what you are talking about, the best form of dialogue with a brand believer is to listen, smile and nod enthusiastically. Anticipating this, I formulated the most anodyne question, "What would you regard as the successful outcome of a brand consultancy exercise?" But again I was wrong footed; "We don't do outcomes," said John Moore, "we like to have conversations with people in the hope that they will realise things that will enable them to see their company in a different light" Well, if that isn't an outcome what is? But never mind.

Brand leadership

We learned from Thomas Gad that companies require something called brand leadership and that behind very successful brands such as IKEA and Nokia, you are likely to find a founding zealot. Such was his obsession with cost cutting that Ingvar Kamprad (the founder of IKEA), when unveiling his own statue insisted that the ribbon not be cut but carefully rolled up for later use. Ingvar is now reputed to be even richer than Bill Gates, historically also a bit of a tight arse (who used to fly standard), though clearly Bill's sphincter has loosened up in recent years. Incidentally, I recently saw an in-house Microsoft video in which one of its senior VPs admitted that, like the average male (apparently), he thought about sex once every six seconds but about Bill Gates once in every five. It's remarkable that in the remaining four seconds he manages to hold down a responsible job, but Bill's extraordinary grip on his employees' nether regions is clear testament to the power of *'Managing Brand Me'*, the title of another book co-authored by Thomas Gad.

Set the product free

So what else did I learn, apart reminding myself never to ask a silly question? Thomas made the interesting point that while you need a product to have a brand; you sometimes need to wrench the two apart and look at each component separately. We assume that brand always has the upper

hand in dictating the quality of the product and/or service, as is the case with say BMW (for whom Thomas has been an 'intellectual partner'- apparently they don't do 'consultants'). But sometimes the product can actually become stifled by the brand and needs to be set free.

Some companies are more controlling than others when it comes to managing their brand image. You won't see many fly-on-the-wall documentaries about life behind the scenes at say Unilever. But as John remarked, when Easy Jet lets in a film crew to document the daily slanging matches with passengers at the checkout, while some might regard it as brand Hari Kari, others could see it as a highly intelligent perception of what a brand really is. Equally, when a well-known chain of high street chemists told its customers that sun blockers don't work, guess what, sales of that product rocketed. Perhaps you also need to brave to be a successful brand.

Winning mind space

So what's the secret of winning that precious piece of mind-space? Be open and honest with consumers, acknowledge them personally, especially if things go wrong, and then work hard to make your product interesting. Enable your own people to see the virtue in what you do and above all stop believing you can manage people's expectations. It takes two to tango and without your customer being in step, you don't have a brand and without a brand you don't have a product.

For more information about the Beyond Branding and the work of The Medinge Group please visit:

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