

2006 Global Brand Letter

from Stanley Moss

Interviewer: What do we need to make things right?
Buckminster Fuller: Integrity.
Interviewer: That's all?
Buckminster Fuller: Necessary and sufficient.

update on last year's hot topics

Corporate Social Responsibility – Still at the forefront of dialogue, and essential to successful branding. A proven, winning strategy, despite some skeptical press. The fact is, larger companies all have included CSR in their business plans. If it's absent, something looks awry.

Sustainability - The ecology of conduct. A key to clear brand-building.

Retention – Companies get this by consistent delivery of promises.

Valuation – Last year I postulated that the internet and events were the best venues for applying conventional metrics about brand's value. Recently there has been talk about correlating brand value and internet performance. See this article from IHT, January 2, 2006: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/01/01/business/ad02.php>

the following highpoints to debate and discussion predicted for the coming year

On contemporary brands -

John Cage reported a story about a visit with Isamu Noguchi: 'There was nothing in the room (no furniture, no paintings). The floor was covered, wall to wall, with cocoa matting. The windows had no curtains, no drapes. Isamu Noguchi said, "An old shoe would look beautiful in this room."

I believe there is room in the commercial space for ugly brands. I believe that brands are a journey, living entities, organic, fractal, and grow at their own rates no matter what grids or matrices or order or values we impose on them.

I think the iPod is fraudulent packaging of a small chip, with high principles of functionality added in. People were prepared to pay a premium for the feel good aspect of the product. I think the aesthetic of Mad Max is more authentic, while the aesthetic of iPod is seductive veneer.

The war will be fought between veneer and content.

Any aggressive, intrusive carrier prevents the content and meaning of a brand to get through.

We have the choice to look at brands idealistically or cynically.

Our task is to reinstate a harmonious chorus of ideals.

I believe that the most meaningful brand interventions occur person-to-person, and that advertising as we knew it in the past erected a psychological barrier between the stakeholder and product, service or institution. The most powerful brand statements are made human-to-human.

Thoughts on the death of advertising

Neoadvertising will nurture interpersonal branding.

One of the great pollutants of the modern world is noise. Advertising is an inorganic population of the natural environment. A healthy dose of silence would be good for the collective consciousness. In the future, advertising will maintain a lower profile and speak in a softer voice.

Did anyone see the article last June in the Wall Street Journal about Universal's promotion of its remake of 'King Kong'? A 2 ½-minute teaser ran simultaneously at 8:59:30pm on June 27, on 9 networks owned by their parent company: NBC, USA, SciFi, Bravo, CNBC, Telemundo. This is what is popularly known in the ad business as a "roadblock."

What would be the strategy to create a "thoroughfare"? In this scenario the advertising doesn't accost you and stop you in the road and hit you over the head. On a thoroughfare stakeholders understand, discriminate, opt in or out, and go on their way unimpeded.

Old advertising is just thin icing. The most effective new avenues are

- personalized
- free of psychological artifice
- interactive
- authentic and sensitive
- unobtrusive
- diverse
- and quieter

I wonder if the greatest disturbances to the natural/organic environment are the most extreme examples of advertising today. What the future demands is quieter, individualized statements, which afford us elegant choices.

Luxury rebounds – the luxury category has definitely rebounded, by necessity a category compelled to continually reinvent itself. We buy luxury goods primarily to assert our own identity and individuality, attaching the brand's attributes to ourselves. "This is me." The category is exhibiting a lot of co-branding (jewelers owning hotels, couture making housewares for chain stores, fashion brands accessorizing high end automobiles), and much in partnership with tourism, a growth category. May be some correlation to the graying of the population and the demographic's access to disposable income- more time shares, vacation homes, property-related ventures.

Primary advocacy - The most resonant brand statements are made by primary advocacy, face to face, person to person. So a primary intent of branding may be to promote people telling other people directly one-on-one about a brand's promise.

Guerilla Marketing – Historically this referred to employing unconventional approaches to market, targeting key influencers and early adopters. But people are more sensitized or used to this technique – especially in some categories (technology, music, apparel and footwear). Thus, it's now become old news, predictable, not unusual, and best employed judiciously.

On-demand media and products – continue the trend in customization and personalization, what Eric Pfanner called the “*you*niverse.” It is also smart economics, utilizing just-in-time delivery strategies. Previously this was largely the domain of luxury brands- but technology now enables mid-range brands to offer greater flexibility of product delivered.

Brands transit the digital world, acting as talismans of meaning in the landscape. People have become prisoners of the internet and mobile telephony, even though it's just filters. We constantly check our personal communicators, using them to massage interactions and validate ourselves. All this to oppose the isolation technology often brings.

What is a brand? Everyone knows they need one, but people still can't say what it is. I'll close this letter by listing some concepts that have been put forth over time:

“A brand is a promise.” –Ian Ryder

“A brand is a conversation.” – Stephen Rappaport

“A brand is a set of expectations.” – Nicholas Ind

“A brand is the symbolic glue [that holds people together.]” –Colin Morley

“A brand is the means through which an organization symbolizes, differentiates and communicates itself to all its audiences.” – Jack Yan

Recently I have thought about brand as **a locus of intention and action.**

More on this in the coming year.

A great 2006 to all!