

2008 Global Brand Letter

from Stanley Moss

“The improvement of the world must be highly contextualized.” –Hans Rosling

A strange year musing on brand, with prevailing enthusiasm, increased interest, and an undercurrent of cynicism. Everyone knows they have or need a brand, everyone wants one, yet many people still cannot say precisely what a brand is. One professional I interrogated asked me if I wasn't fed up with it all. “Maybe you should stop querying people about what brands are,” he told me. “Maybe you need to find a new term for branding. Maybe you need to give it a rest.”

I said, “It sounds to me like you are suffering from brand fatigue.”

Later, on a visit to friends in San Diego, I observed their 8-year old daughter reading two books about fairies. I asked her to tell me about them. She began by saying, “Well, they are both the same brand,” and pointed to the Disney's Fairies logos on the covers. I found it remarkable that a child her age cited that aspect first, using the correct commercial term to qualify her preference. If the child makes the brand differentiation before describing the conceptual quality of the product, could it indicate a case of brand overkill? Brand recognition at the expense of healthy fantasy? Brand valued as more significant than the true, emotional experience?

[update on last year's hot topics](#)

Semiotic society - I am still convinced that at their most fundamental, brands are symbols we exchange to discover common territories of understanding among our contemporaries. No conversation is free of them. See how long it takes for a brand –any brand- to surface in a discussion (“Let's meet at Starbucks.”), observe how we take ownership of the brand, use it to define ourselves. We adopt the values the brands express, and we use them to contextualize our counterparts. The most successful brands somehow capture essential statements of value. We ‘osmose’ the brands, then regard them as extensions of our selves. We trade them back and forth to find points of tangency. This set of common beliefs and stereotypes tells our contemporaries who we are, and sheds light on the identity which we recognize in them.

Innovation – Twelve months ago innovation seemed to be taking the lead as a prime area of brand definition. After Apple repeated their winning strategy with the introduction of the iPhone, everyone ran workshops on what could be learned from it. More recently I have heard corporate managers talking about leadership returning to the discussion, the sense that innovation cannot occur without someone at the helm driving the process. Paul Rand told me essentially the same thing 25 years ago when I asked him what he thought was the key to IBM's brand success. He said he couldn't have done any of it without Watson's support. Can Apple score again without Steve Jobs?

Place branding – A prominent American graphic designer says the first thing brand USA needs to fix is “rhetoric”. Doesn't mention culture at all. Her favorite media is two-thirds CondeNast-centric: The *NYTimes*, *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*. She also says the eagle is

an undesirable national bird: Asks, "Have you ever been in a room with one?" Prefers the Statue of Liberty as a symbol. Loves the flag. **Israel** rolled out a new ad campaign featuring svelte Israeli Army women, Sabra cowboys and tony health spa images; the best place brand news for the country surfaced in January 2008, when Olmert and Peres announced a joint venture with Renault and Nissan to promote electric cars and charging stations nationwide. **China** has its share of bad news/good news days in the run-up to the Olympics. Pollution issues, the Three Gorges Dam, tainted pharmaceuticals and toxic paint on kid toys. Mickey Mouse in traditional Chinese costume hasn't fixed the problem. **The City of London** had its own heartache over the UK Olympics logo flap, with Wolff Olins taking it on the chin for their graffiti-influenced signature. Nobody liked it, and its creators defended it. **Liverpool** showed real progress in its campaign as this year's European Capital of Culture. Opening ceremony appearance by Ringo brought international attention- the city hopes to attract two million visitors who will boost the local economy by £100m.

Est! Est! Est! - Last year I wrote about the use of words to express incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs. Perhaps it is time to name January 7th as International Brand Irony Day. On that auspicious date in 2008 Matsushita introduced the world's 'biggest' flat screen at 150" and Tata introduced the world's 'cheapest' car at \$2500, opposite ends of the consumption spectrum. A week later Apple introduced the world's 'thinnest' computer. Companies frequently try to deliver the utmost, stretching our expectations to accept only the extremes.

"I don't believe in marketing. Marketing was a job invented for people who didn't know what else to do."
-Karl Lagerfeld

Differentiating branding from marketing and communications - A conference scheduled for February in Barcelona concerns itself with internal branding and employee engagement, and promotes a list of speakers who advocate workforce orientation as the first line of brand defense. Not a new idea at all. What is telling, however, is that most of the speakers come from marketing and communications, which underscores the perpetual dilemma for brand professionals: we are mistaken for marketing types, which is broadly off the mark. At the risk of repeating myself, brand is much more dimensional than simply marketing. Brand concerns itself with a range of issues across the spectrum. If you think that branding is marketing, you are living in the dark ages. On a recent brand audit project some of the following questions were posed: *Is the brand on message? Is the brand in line with the strategy, aims, shareholder wishes, management? Is the brand appropriately structured? Is the brand platform robust & future-proofed? Is the brand present in the organization, in its behavior, at all levels?* So brand needs to be regarded as a strategic tool, a force which informs marketing and communications.

"If you can't say something good about someone, sit right here by me."
- embroidered on a pillow in the sitting room of Alice Longworth Roosevelt

New heroes and the cult of celebrity - A.O. Scott, writing in *The New York Times* on November 21, 2007, commented, "From Andy Warhol to Lonelygirl15, modern media culture thrives on the traffic in counterfeit selves. In this world the greatest artist will also be, almost axiomatically, the biggest fraud." This brings to mind the tragic example of the truly unremarkable brand named Britney Spears, relentlessly goaded by insatiable sensationalists. She, her mother and unfortunate sister deserve to be left alone- not debated, hounded, discussed, idolized or reviled. When the inevitable crash occurs, the media will discover itself complicit in her destruction. There's little humanity left in her battered brand, now that a web site is taking bets on the date of her death. Poor Britney

long ago ceased to be a real person. She has been reduced to inanimate status, simply an economic entity there to enhance the incomes of her handlers, managers, record companies, and the tabloids.

Personal branding – A recent research survey reported that 40% of Americans now have tattoos, indicating that a “tipping point” has been reached. More proof: a national chain of tattoo parlors is slated to open in 2008.

“The children now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise.” – **Plato, 392 B.C.**

Social networking –The behavior evolves. In days past, if you did not have a presence on the internet you did not exist. Next, web cred was contingent on a MySpace page. Today your existence is defined by a Facebook page, which has trumped YouTube as the digital watering hole. A new add-on at Facebook enables pageholders to build vast, networked games of Poker, Life, Monopoly, other group amusements. Friends compete virtually. I just read an article in the local Seal Beach paper, whose young author encourages people to game on Wii as a weight-loss strategy. How one regulates one’s social networks also evolves. An 18-year old female asks a 20-year old male friend for his IM name. He gets evasive. Later he says they can message through Facebook, a less intimate, more public interaction.

“The possibility of loss is what makes things valuable.” –**Wallace Stevens**

Luxury – The ever-adaptive luxury category experienced another year of transformation, growth and record profits. With rumblings of recession, the low end falters, the fallout after luxury’s attempt to garner downmarket clientele. The weak Yen has dampened the Japanese market. But the top tier responding to 10%+ growth continues to offer even more expensive products, which account for 25% of luxury sales, fueling the hyperluxury category. Hermes reports third quarter ‘07 profits up 12%, attributable to exotic leather goods performing well in Europe. Luxury also learned to love the web, after initial resistance to the medium. There’s a degree of unevenness to brands’ sites (Has anybody looked at the Hermes site lately? It can’t be helping their surging numbers.) In a white paper authored for *CondeNet*, Dee Salomon cites several brands successfully exploiting web-based videos: Chanel messaging through style.com mobile phone feature, Cartier using its video assets to pull users to its LOVE campaign on its website, Marc Jacobs allowing fans to populate a virtual field by planting a signature daisy which grows when its owner interacts with the site. And all eyes are fixed on Tom Ford, to see if there really exists the business to propel his ambitious launch into high-end, branded bespoke couture.

[the following highpoints to debate and discussion](#)
[envisioned for the coming year](#)

Accountability and outcome – These are the new critical buzzwords when talking over sustainability and CSR. In a January 7 special section, *The Economist* again discounted the practice of corporate social responsibility, arguing that profit was a company’s first objective. (Did anyone read Gates’ speech at Davos urging companies to get more humanistic in their conduct?) The section also cited the famous December 2006 *Harvard Business Review* paper by Michael Porter and Mark Kramer on how, if approached in a strategic way, CSR could become part of a company’s competitive advantage, deconstructing the practice into Strategic CSR and Reactive CSR. What with improved transparency, greenwash is a lesser probability. Constructive change is seen as the result of

“disruptive innovations,” a term I like very much. In a paper I recently authored with Thomas Gad, Scandinavian companies are examined for their sustainability practices, in place for two decades or more. In Scandinavia, CSR is expected as component part of organizational policy. Companies now return to emphasizing their core values and product attributes in brand-building.

Anatomy of a trend – Ever wonder why advertising now appears on the packing materials holding your new technology purchase? In 2007 clever marketers saw YouTube videos of people **“unboxing”** their new Xbox game consoles. (There weren’t enough units to meet the demand- lucky folks shot footage of how they unpacked their new toy and posted it online.) Immediately our friends in the Marketing Department seized on the opportunity for a new venue. Reminiscent of those POP video monitors at the airport, bank and grocery store, which do nothing more than add unwanted visual and noise pollution to a crowded environment.

Measurement – Didn’t take long: researchers are trolling the social networks, surveying, sampling, building their graphs and pie charts. Next they’ll be interrupting your mobile phone calls.

“I find I have no faith, none at all, in progress. I do not expect a better future... I pray that I am wrong, but nearly every amenity of life has declined in my lifetime. Only technology has improved, and even technology disappoints, breaks down, and is impossible to get repaired.” – **Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.**

Trendseekers alerts- terminology and concepts entering the mainstream in 2008:

Gériatruc- A Franglais term I made up to describe products created especially for the aging population. This reflects the trend towards a renewed interest in design. Expect products with larger typography, better legibility, ergonomic design, easy to hold and operate, rounded edges. In apparel, accessible pockets, bigger buttons, easy closures.
LEE7-Speak – Pronounced **“leet-speak”**, homonym-based internet argot, which fuses numerals and letters.

Telepresence - According to *Ask Dr. Nerd*, this is what’s so great about the new killer app **“Halo”**, which replicates or somehow synthesizes **eye contact** during video calls.

Transcreation – A concept reported in the October 16, 2007 *Wall Street Journal*, which describes the retrofitting of Powerpuff Girls cartoon characters specifically for Japan **“...designed with one audience in mind to [really] resonate in another culture.”** Essentially, fiddling with the brand to cultivate another territory.

WiMax – a next-generation wireless technology which enables Internet and other data connections across much broader areas than Wi-Fi. Allows a device to hold a connection while in motion via signal handoff from antenna to antenna.

What is a brand? Or better yet, what is attractive about them? After all, brands have a certain allure, a particular bravado which appeals to us. They express personal affinity, consequently brands are tools of self-expression. This contradicts the idea of a brand as something **externally** driven. In fact, the idea of brand has morphed into **“something inside me.”** This year I queried a wider group of practitioners, whose replies, as always, lend tantalizing controversy to the ongoing debate.

“A brand is a kind of engine that creates energy.” – Pierre d’Huy
Pierre is a principal in eXperts consultancy of Paris, and a Director of the Medinge Group.

“A Brand is the Truth, revealed over time in numerous ways.” –Mike Keeler
Mike Keeler is a former ad professional who edits the often-acerbic *Quicksilver* newsletter.

“A brand is sometimes cerebral and sometimes emotional, [an idea] which sometimes makes a simple statement of key attributes and sometimes triggers a complex burst of emotion by association.” –Manas Fuloria

New Delhi-based Fuloria is a recognized authority on supply chain economics.

“A brand is a wooden idol.” –Joshua Berger

Josh is a founder of the Plazm design studio in Portland, Oregon.

“A brand is the DNA that separates a product from a commodity.” – David Michaelson

Dr. Michaelson is a principal in a New York City-based brand research firm.

“A brand is unwilling to commit to its future... or at least a future that is propitious.”

–Michael Marckx

Michael is VP Brand and Strategy for Globe International, a footwear manufacturer.

“A brand is what allows people to have a conversation around a product even when the product offers nothing remarkable.” – Filippo Dellosso

Dellosso is a strategic planner for Chiat Day, based in Paris, France.

“A brand is a mindset.” –Sascha Löetscher

Sascha is a principal in the Zurich office of graphic designers Gottschalk+Ash.

Recently I have thought about brands as memes which express common beliefs. More on this in the coming year.

A great 2008 to all!

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