

THE BRAND AS JIHAD

An excerpt from "The Book of Deals", a novel by Stanley Moss

Some mornings she would wake up positively dying for a ciggie, and she would think she didn't have any, and she'd walk angrily through the house only to find that, yes, Douglas had hidden a pack away somewhere just for this emergency. He had seen enough times her mood swing into darkness when she learned there was not a Kent for her to smoke anywhere in the house. Cigarettes, Douglas had quickly discovered, were a reliable pacifier, that major catastrophe could be averted if he made certain there was always a smoke to be had. He also quickly learned that her first two hours of the day were delicate, barometric and tentative, and that she reacted badly to any intrusions in her routine. He took to setting her a place at the table each morning, having the kettle hot, and a cup and spoon and the instant coffee out and ready for her. Philomena let him do it. He wanted to do it, and it did not bother her, in fact it was quite convenient. Besides, then he would cook her an omelette or two eggs over easy, and it was just like having her own restaurant, because he seemed to be able to cook anything she wanted perfectly.

The only thing she consistently hated to buy was cigarettes. She resented paying money for them, and she did not spare the clerks and cashiers who sold them to her. She hated the know-it-all health warnings and the superior tone of the medical research she was forced to read in the newspapers. People should be allowed to enjoy tobacco any way they like and not be subjected to so much prejudice against smokers, she thought. She often tried to quit, Raymond tried to quit, she tried to make him quit, but they could not quit. It made her skin dry and wrinkled. It gave her terrible teeth and breath. It made him wheeze and cough uncontrollably, and it hurt his lungs. Her system craved the nicotine, and she needed to smoke more and more to satisfy the urging. He always left home with two packs in his pockets if he possibly could, because by noon he would need a fresh smoke and he did not like to run out. It disturbed her when they bought by the carton, because it made her smoke more, for a time she forbid him to buy ciggies that way, so he bought cartons secretly and kept them hidden under the maps in the glove box of the Porsche. It caused quarrels when there weren't any Kents, and quarrels if there were too

many Kents. But however did Raymond and Philomena become so well-addicted to Kents? The answer was a simple one: advertising and expert public relations.

There are those who believe that wars are won with bombs and swords, but that is a presumption not entirely accurate. Real wars are won with messaging, with the ultimate gaining of what is called mindshare, for people can be subjugated only if they accept what is told to them as true. If not, by nature they will resist or rebel. Raymond and Philomena did neither when it came to messaging about Kents. They listened, absorbed and did not question.

The holy war for Phil and Raymond's minds and bodies first became known at a confidential briefing held at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City, on March 19, 1952. The sponsor of the offensive, the P. Lorillard Company, announced their new secret weapon, named in honor of their supreme leader, President Herbert A. Kent. Lorillard's new brand capitalized on the culmination of months of covert research: the development of an enhanced filter material, code-named *micronite*, which had originally been used to extract radioactive particles from the air at atomic energy plants. Lorillard's propaganda machine claimed the *micronite* removed harmful elements, while it retained the effects of tobacco combustion which provided taste, flavor and aroma. It was, in essence, a chemical weapon shrouded in messaging. But Raymond Bender knew none of the back story, and at that time Philomena was too young to understand.

The sole detail Raymond did learn came to him in a Rockaway Beach drugstore on March 26, 1952, when he saw a colorful poster which read, "Stop to think and you'll start to smoke Kent." He puzzled over the strange correlation between thinking and smoking, and he asked himself why he should *stop* to think. Couldn't one think and smoke simultaneously without stopping? It mattered not, because the campaign of doubletalk and disinformation had begun, and Raymond's mind had been successfully siezed for the first time. Later coded messages would effectively add to the deception.

The success of the jihad for Kent became clear in less than a month, when announcement came of a test-marketing operation for Kents with a "prestige filter." Raymond trusted that the improved cigarette was better, easily swayed by the encrypted message. In June, while watching the "Life of Riley" television program, Raymond sang

along with the commercial for Kent whose lyric went, “No extra cost.” Public loyalty grew: in July a rival brand, Winston, emerged, but Kent easily held on to its mindshare. Lorillard had destabilized the resistance, and continued to send out messaging which upheld its position as market leader.

In 1956 a parallel event occurred as Kent sponsored the television program “The \$64,000 Challenge.” Raymond watched the show in Long Island with his parents. At the very same moment Philomena watched the show in Connecticut with her family. Mr. Bender insisted there was something fishy about the contestants, which later proved true. Philomena asked her father if \$64,000 was a lot of money; her father, puffing away on his Camel cigarette, answered it was too damn much money to hand over to anyone at one time, especially common people like that.

The subsequent game show scandals proved to be an unwanted diversion from the Kent brand awareness. Immediate steps were taken to destabilize the opposition, first by introducing a crush-proof box; next Lorillard revealed that the confidential filtration system had been improved and secretly on sale since May. To defuse any objection, Kent switched over to the message, “What a wonderful feeling.” Raymond Bender now believed that cigarettes made everything okay, but he was still not old enough to buy them. He could see the future: one day he would hold a smoke in his hand to signal to the world he was a true hipster.

Kent had created a consumer mole and his name was Raymond Bender. In 1960 Raymond fulfilled his destiny and began smoking, even though Kent’s market share was then declining, partly attributable to the Surgeon General’s ban on health claims in tobacco advertising. Two years later the slogan “Treat your taste kindly with Kent” seduced young Philomena, who hungered for compassion in her existence. Those destined to embrace the brand did so, and Raymond and Philomena were among them. Somewhere at the edge of their consciousness the slogan, “Light up a Kent – you’ve got a good thing going,” reassured them.

Thus, Kent’s final broadcast message, the last words borne by television which the Surgeon General allowed, spoke loudly to Ray and Phil: “To a smoker, it’s a Kent,” which ran the year of their marriage, and reinforced a deeper bond between them.

Lorillard had little else it could claim. “More taste and fine tobacco,” merely held on to the existing nicotine mujahadeen, but gained no new converts.

The tide of war had turned. The Surgeon General successfully limited the transmission of coded messages, the market flooded with Salem and Newport and Merit and More and Now. It was a time of desperate appeals. Kent attempted a suicide action deploying 100mm “Kent expansives” in the Devnver market, but cowboys won the skirmish. Only loyalists remained, Raymond and Philomena and a dwindling army that would never again rise, barely aware of a 70-foot long smoking Kent cigarette on a billboard in Times Square, which in vain attempted to reassure them “Longer Kents taste good longer.” It was false bravado, a fabrication which Raymond and Philomena left behind as they headed to California, blindly brand loyal to the last, but tragically oblivious as Kent foundered in the cruel marketplace. Desperate times, desperate measures, desperate claims. Lorillard, unknown to its loyal smokers, chose exile, and began to manufacture Kents in Yugoslavia. Raymond and Philomena, consumed with their search for wealth in Los Angeles, moved to the Asian house on the hilltop above Mulholland Drive, where an ungodly silence reigned, and where they smoked automatically as their systems demanded. “In a matter of minutes you’ll be able to say... What a good time for a Kent.” To them the messaging no longer mattered. Their minds and bodies had been won, but the holy war for Kents had long been lost.

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