

What the Gurus Said

A Report from the Medinge Group Meeting in Amsterdam, January 15-17, 2004

Mid-January in freezing Amsterdam, an atmosphere of mystery and espionage of one kind or another, where a group of international brand gurus huddled in a luxurious townhouse on a quiet canal to debate the serious issues of their craft. Brand thinkers have been under assault of recent, with a regiment of highly verbal critics leading the charge against their clients, not to mention challenging the very ethic of their practices.

The gurus therefore debated their own relevance, repeating the saws about brands as signaling devices, bringing a promise of performance. But John Moore of London was not convinced. Brands, he argued, were about the performance and definitely not the promise. The hope was repeated that brands could at the very least be effective agents of change. After all, isn't brand the largest piece of uninsured equity in the world? The bean-counters have certainly taken it under their wings, while controversy rages over how to best measure it. Pierre d'Huy, a delegate from France asked the group how he could help shareholders better comprehend the value of brand. A misanthrope from the USA grumbled that smaller brands have less of a chance going up against the powerful, especially when 99% of media perception of international brands is decreed once a year by Interbrand, who have set themselves up as some kind of a global standard; what their metrics consist of is a closely guarded secret, much like a perfumer's proprietary formulae. That is the dilemma: how to measure brand, state its value, quantify its effectiveness. Besides, one fractious guru ventured, nobody cares about branding, really. Clean water might be a more powerful issue to advocate in the collective unconscious.

That having been said, higher theoretical questions eventually surfaced. In olden days, brands were all about limiting risks by imposing rigid standards. Now, with such a fiercely competitive business environment and companies under such intense scrutiny for every claim they make, brands may need to take some risks to distinguish themselves. One must be vigilant, so as not to be caught in a greenwash scenario, for example, where a company claims to have some eco attribute it really does not. The marketplace is volatile and lively, and today branding has few constants. Branding is a transformational ideology, where knowledge gets old fast. This begs the case for less rigid structures and more organic thinking on brand issues.

At the prior Medinge meeting six months ago, a pilgrimage to a secluded location outside Stockholm which occurs every August, the gurus were consumed with the idea of returning humanity to branding. They were so energized with the concept that the group publicly named a list of Top Brands with a Conscience in November. At January's meeting the talk turned to the trend of a renewed emphasis on internal branding, helping employees to truly live the brand. In effect, internal branding is a company's insurance, evolving the concept that the performance of the workers is the ultimate measure of the brand. This could explain the trend with businesses dedicated to making the work environment good for their employees above all else. It doesn't matter what the product is or who receives it, the new wisdom goes, and it is less important what we say about it. Brand needs to be an entity which enables workers to do their best. The result is a win on all sides. Thomas Gad, from Stockholm, suggested naming 2004 the Year of The Workforce, signifying the trend in employee contentment-building. And Patrick Harris of London reminded the group of two other reasons besides share value that the dot coms branded: to attract good people, and then retain them.

Somewhat battered from all the intense interaction, the gurus dragged out of Amsterdam, past seedy coffee houses and architectural treasures, determined to fight the good fight for mindful branding until next August, when the aquavit and crawfish return. While it remains to be seen what next will be invoked in Stockholm, you can rely on the scrapping as a vital component, an apt metaphor for the building of dynamic brands of the future.

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