

Logocentrism

What's in a name?

The great idea in advertising... is in the realm of myth.

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It is perhaps surprising that, when Procter & Gamble (P&G) is willing to spend US \$57 billion buying Gillette, and McKinsey can state that 'intangible assets make up most of the value of M&A deals [and that] brands account for a considerable portion of these assets',² there is such a degree of uncertainty as to what is being purchased.

Uberconsultant Tom Peters has proclaimed that we are in 'The Great Age of the Brand'.³ Yet if you ask Google, the oracle of said age, it pulls up dozens of different definitions of brand, ranging from 'trade name: a name given to a product or service' to 'the personality of an organization' or 'the symbolic embodiment of all the information connected with a product or service'. The 'Great Age of the Brand' would seem to be an age of great uncertainty.

Things were not always this complex. Brands used to be simple, as any cowboy (or cow) could have told you. But society has evolved at a remarkable pace in the last century and brands have evolved with them. Brands seem to chase our own needs up Maslow's hierarchy: from badge of origin to transformative experience. What was a signifier of product quality can now be shorthand for a service, an experience, a 'sign of me',⁴ a celebrity, a country and you, gentle reader.⁵ Brands are everywhere and everything is a brand. We live in a logocentric world.

Brands are the most recognizable and ubiquitous cultural force operating today. Children are named after them,⁶ and their encroachment on public space is detailed with gleeful vitriol in books such as *No Logo* (1999) by Naomi Klein. Brands are reference points we use to define ourselves ('I am irresistible, I say, as I put on my designer fragrance... I am a juvenile lout, I say, as I down a glass of extra strong lager: I am handsome, I say, as I don my Levi jeans'⁷) and identify other people ('Only chavs wear Burberry'⁸). Our comprehension of these meanings 'demonstrates the rise to prominence of the brand in the last century'.⁹ How are we to resolve this contradiction – that as brand influence has grown, what brands are has become less certain?

The apparent confusion is a function of the nature of the role that brands now play. I believe that brands perform the role of myths in modern society and therefore must be complex. Even the simplest brands, which seem to provide only origin information or navigation assistance on the shelf, have multiple constituent parts. Their nature reflects their ability to capture attention.

We are 'meaning-seeking creatures'.¹⁰ We have imagination and this leads us to wonder about the larger context in which we exist. This can lead us into existential despair, and since the beginning of human culture we have constructed stories that place us in a larger setting, and thus give us the sense that our lives have meaning. 'Reality leaves a lot to the imagination', as John Lennon once quipped. These stories resolve the contradictions between different types of human experience, providing our lives with a meta-narrative to explain them that is integral to all human societies. This role is now performed by brands, which 'enable us to make sense and create meanings for ourselves in the social world of consumption in which we participate'.¹¹ Brands are 'ideas to live by',¹² which we look for due to our 'tradition hunger'.¹³

The emergence of brands as myths has been triggered by the decline of standard myths in Western culture. This is also why brands began in the West, and are spreading East, as the adherence to mythology as an organizing principle is breaking down. Western modernity is 'the child of *logos*'¹⁴ (the opposite of *mythos* in the Hellenistic tradition, it represents science and facts). Science became the dominant paradigm for understanding the world. But *logos* alone is unable to give us a sense of significance – it was myth that gave life meaning and context. Thus society unconsciously cried out for and ultimately created its own myths around the newly dominant force of consumerism, allocating disproportionate amounts of attention to the ones that

best filled these needs. This is why modern brands are more complex than their older counterparts, because the role of brands is changing to fulfil the need for, the evolutionary niche left by, myth. *Logos* led us to logos.

The most powerful of today's brands developed a cohesive mythology. Brands in the modern world are inseparable from the companies whose 'soul' they manifest: Larry Page and Sergey Brin from Stanford, vowing that Google would not be evil; Innocent Drinks's cute packaging and grass-covered vans; the baristas/partners at Starbucks – these are all elements of the brand that are held together by a philosophy that guides behaviour. This combination of narrative and values is myth.

Myths are inherently complex and polysemous; they can be interpreted in a number of equally valid ways. They cannot be compressed into a single, particular essence but are rather the sum total of interlinked elements. Thus, brands cannot simply represent a single core value. Claude Lévi-Strauss (the anthropologist, not to be confused with the founder of the denim brand) called the constituent parts of a myth *mythemes*. He argued that myth is a language of its own, not just a subset of language, as it can be broken down and restructured, irrespective of the language it is delivered in.

I would argue that brands are a language of their own, expressed via word or image or sound, via television or print or mouth. Brands are a bundle of inextricable, irreducible parts we can call *brandemes*.

Coca-Cola is not *just* about happiness or refreshment. Its brandemes might be redness; youth; Father Christmas; sharing; the liquid; the shape of the bottle; 'the Real Thing'; new/classic versus Pepsi; teaching the world to sing; and many other connected ideas. Some of us will only engage with some of these meanings. Like myths, we apply interpretation; we construct the meaning for ourselves – and this flexibility is crucial, increasingly so in the global brand marketplace. This is what allows so many different iterations of a brand to all hold true. The story of the myth is distinct from its form:

That story is special, because it survives any and all translations. Lévi-Strauss says that myth can be translated, paraphrased, reduced, expanded, and otherwise manipulated – without losing its basic shape or structure.¹⁵

Lévi-Strauss posited that: 'it is likely that languages exist in which an entire myth can be expressed in a single word'.¹⁶ There is – the language of brand.

Myths are constructed in a space that is both real and imagined, where reality is magical and the impossible is real. They are experienced ritually,

via purchase or use or interaction with brand communication, which provides a bridge to the brand's domain.

Holt suggests that we 'buy the product to consume the myth'.¹⁷ I agree, but would argue that brands are not the icons of myth, but the myth itself (the logo is not the brand), and that any interaction with brand communication can function in a similar way. The Marlboro man lives in Marlboro country, but this can no longer be directly communicated, since tobacco advertising has been banned in much of the world. Marlboro therefore created 'installations' in bars, with red sofas in front of video screens showing scenes that evoke Marlboro country.¹⁸ Whilst this may not feel ethical, it is designed to provide subliminal access to an established, mythic, brand space.

The *brand* is itself a myth. This is why it is so hard to pin to a definition, because many definitions are true and make up, collectively, what the brand myth is. This increasingly blurry word can be used in a variety of cases in a single meeting. It can refer to a mark, a set of values and guidelines, a set of associations in the mind, a type of advertising, a product from a certain company or the company itself. They are the brandemes of *brand*. And the *brand* brand helps to resolve the contradiction between influence and clarity that we observed at the outset: the function of myth is to 'provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction'.¹⁹ Brands are both dominant and vague, because the things humans look to for meaning must be open to interpretation, to allow them to resonate with everyone individually.

The theory of brand/myth leads to a number of new ways of thinking. It suggests that we must abandon the reductionism that attempts to hone brands to a single point and instead embrace complexity. We have to leave our onions and look for guiding principles that connect the brandemes and corporate behaviour. It suggests we should look to develop meaning and narrative in communications.

There are a number of parallels between advertising and literature.²⁰ This is because literature is the expression of stories, as advertising is the expression of brand. Stories have characters, events, settings, beginnings, middles and ends, styles, subtexts, twists and turns – and each episode should leave the audience wanting more. This is how we should also think about constructing communication; conceptually and over time.

The launch campaign for mobile brand 3 (UK) demonstrated this well: each ad shows us more of Planet 3 (setting); the Critters (characters) are locked in unending comic battle (plot) that exists at the peripheries of the Japanese 'reality' of the brand ads; there was even a website where you

could visit Planet 3 yourself.²¹ It helped to drive the brand from a standing start to a major player in a crowded category.

One marketer who was cognizant of crafting a myth is Phil Knight, the founder of Nike. Naomi Klein accuses Nike of ‘creating a corporate mythology powerful enough to infuse meaning into... raw objects’²² – and it has. Here’s how a young man explained his decision to get the Nike ‘swoosh’ logo tattooed over his navel: ‘I wake up every morning... look down at the symbol, and that pumps me up for the day. It’s to remind me every day what I have to do, which is, “Just Do It”.’²³

CASE STUDY

Google became the world’s biggest brand,²⁴ without using any traditional advertising (until their first television commercial in the 2012 Super Bowl). Casual observers often maintain that Google built a better mousetrap, that their superior search results naturally drew them users and positioned them as smarter and faster.

This disregards the skill with which the Google myth was constructed. In tests, Google rarely outperforms other search engines. The 2012 Bing campaign, BingItOn, highlights the fact that the Microsoft search engine seems to outperform Google in blind tests. According to their research, people choose Bing web search results over Google nearly ‘2 to 1 in blind comparison tests.’²⁵ Yet this seems to make very little difference to Google’s market share, which is actually increasing.

One of the core constituents of Google’s myth – one of its *brandemes* – is ‘being smarter’: built on its founders’ frozen PhDs, its name,²⁶ its adoption by the geek community and a careful seeding strategy. Google has always stated a clear developer origin story, which makes it empathetic to geeks – and geeks are the early adopters and cultural disseminators of the internet.

The young hero takes on the might of the evil empire – a classic myth. Google’s stark homepage made the implicit statement that they weren’t in it for the money, in contrast to all the cluttered portals of the time. They cemented this by running the site for years without monetizing it, building the brandeme of benevolence – ‘Don’t be Evil.’²⁷ Its logo can change daily – eventually codified as the Google Doodle – and yet still be Google, because the brandeme isn’t the look of the letters, it’s the fact that it can change.

It used products like episodes, unleashing them to a fan base in carefully staged instalments. In 2004 it launched Gmail on 1 April, which generated endless PR. Gmail also fostered the mythic positioning of Google as Skywalker against Microsoft’s Evil Empire: it offered 1GB of storage for free, whereas Hotmail was charging for anything

over 10MB. Earth, Maps, Drive, Glass, Inbox, even the abandoned Wave – each episode had its own facets and staging. Demonstrating a clear understanding of Knight's maxim that 'product is the most important marketing tool',²⁸ Google released products to build its myth. In the years since, Google has grown to become one of the largest companies in the world, sprawling across numerous products and acquisitions, and ultimately dropping its internal maxim not to be evil in its mission statements. As it grew, the original positioning became untenable since it had superseded Microsoft as the most pervasive consumer technology brand. In 2015, Google suddenly announced it had renamed itself Alphabet, turning Google into a subsidiary. This allowed the company to continue to expand far outside its traditional domains, with acquisitions like connected home company Nest. Larry Page gave the public explanation for the name, suggesting that letters represent the first great technology, which is at the core of how Google indexes information. That said, someone at Google once told me that internally it was also understood as making 'bets on alpha', or above-market financial returns, which suggests a very different brand than the original young upstart.

Modern brands have evolved to fulfil the role of myths for modern consumers, the role of soul for modern corporations – and it is incumbent on the advertising industry to evolve with them.

Brands are socially constructed ideas

The definition of a brand used most often is Paul Feldwick's, the former sage of advertising agency DDB:

A brand is simply a collection of perceptions in the mind of the consumer.²⁹

This is great because it reminds us that:

Brands... are made and owned by people... by the public... by consumers.³⁰

This definition is part of the orthodoxy of advertising. It also led to a conceptual rift between two kinds of brand equity – that which exists in someone's head and that which can exist on balance sheets as a form of intangible asset.

I don't think this definition is entirely adequate. And I think, with a slight reformulation, we might also be able to begin to resolve the division between brands in our heads and brands that have a dollar value to accountants. In

the next few lines following the above quote in the article ‘Posh Spice and Persil’, Bullmore points out:

The image of a brand is a subjective thing. No two people, however similar, hold precisely the same view of the same brand.³¹

And of course this is absolutely true. And yet it is also not true. My image of a particular brand will be subjective and yet it will exist in relation to an understanding of the collective perception of the brand. Wittgenstein argued that there is no such thing as a private language. A language that is unintelligible to anyone but its originating user is logically incoherent: it couldn't function as a communication medium, there would be no way for a speaker to assign meanings to its signs.³²

Equally, an individual brand makes no sense. My understanding of any brand exists in relation to the collective understanding of the brand. That collective intentionality dictates what the brand means – it assigns a type of status function to a product. I may personally disagree but I know what I'm disagreeing with – the collective perception. Brands can only exist if there is a collective perception of what they stand for.

This is what allows brands to be used in defining, or constructing, an identity. If all that mattered is what I personally thought about the brand, it would be unable to perform any social functions at all.

So, let's put forward a reformulation:

A brand is a collective perception in the minds of consumers.

But how does this help to resolve the division between brands in the head and brands on the balance sheet? Because by making it a collective perception, we can turn a brand from an opinion into a fact.

Here I'm going to steal from the philosopher John Searle, who wrote about the construction of social reality. In essence, he argues that, collectively, subjective opinions can create objective reality.

This seems counter-intuitive: how can everyone thinking something make it real?

But in fact we do it all the time. The best example is money. Money is only money because we all agree that it is. Its status as money is not in any way derived from the physical qualities of the note and it is no longer linked to a gold standard. Most money nowadays exists as magnetic impressions on hard drives, but that doesn't matter as long as it functions as money. As long as it can be used to pay debts, it is money – objectively.

If I go into a shop and buy something with some cash, my belief in its value is no longer required, it simply is *money*. This also can be seen to apply to government, property, political parties, wars. All these things only exist because we think about them in a certain way – and yet they do exist.

Similarly, a brand is a form of socially constructed reality that has attained an objective reality, which is why it can have a monetary value that is dependent on the totality of perceptions held about it – the total amount of attention that has been allocated to it.

How much is that brand in the window?

Beyond purchases and goodwill on balance sheets, there are various industry reports that measure the dollar value of the ideas we call brands. The BrandZ report by research company Millward Brown is one of the most respected, but most share a basic methodology compounded with some proprietary data.

The BrandZ valuation uses discounted cash-flow analysis. This is the sum of all future earnings attributable to the brand discounted to account for risk over time. This is pretty standard accounting stuff, but, as with all financial modelling, if you look closely, it is basically certain opinions, assumptions and predictions, structured into a spreadsheet.

The ‘brand multiple’, for example, is derived using the proprietary *brand voltage* metric, which ‘takes into account how many people are very loyal to the brand (the brand’s bonding score) and claimed purchasing data for the category to produce a single Brand Voltage number’.³³ This means asking lots of people what they claim to do and then using it to guess what they will do in the future, which, as we shall see, is not a very reliable predictor.

The final formula is this:³⁴

Brand value =

Step 1 – intangible earnings: intangible corporate earnings allocated to each brand, based on company and analyst reports, industry studies, revenue estimates, etc.

Multiplied by:

Step 2 – brand contribution: portion of intangible earnings attributable to brand. This is driven by the BrandDynamics Loyalty Pyramid and category segmentation, part of brand voltage study.

Multiplied by:

Step 3 – brand multiple: brand earnings multiple. Calculated based on market valuations, brand growth potential and voltage, the proprietary metric.

The 2014 study indicated that the most valuable brands in the world were:³⁵

- 1 Google – \$158,843,000,000
- 2 Apple – \$147,880,000,000
- 3 IBM – \$107,541,000,000
- 4 Microsoft – \$90,185,000,000
- 5 McDonald's – \$85,706,000,000
- 6 Coca-Cola – \$80,683,000,000
- 7 Visa – \$79,197,000,000
- 8 AT&T – \$77,883,000,000
- 9 Marlboro – \$67,341,000,000
- 10 Amazon – \$64,255,000,000

For comparison, the 2020 study anointed the following:

- 1 Amazon – \$415,855,000,000
- 2 Apple – \$352,206,000,000
- 3 Microsoft – \$326,544,000,000
- 4 Google – \$323,601,000,000
- 5 Visa – \$186,809,000,000
- 6 Alibaba – \$152,525,000,000
- 7 Tencent – \$150,978,000,000
- 8 Facebook – \$147,190,000,000
- 9 McDonald's – \$129,321,000,000
- 10 Mastercard – \$108,219,000,000

This paints an interesting picture of recent shifts in culture, as technology brands have consolidated their dominance while Chinese brands have risen to global prominence and smoking continues to decline. Interestingly, Amazon was also the world's largest advertiser in 2020. We should

remember, however, that any such number is, despite its specificity, only a numerically expressed opinion.

Persistently irrational behaviour

The financial values attributed to brands are indicative of the economic value they create for companies. This value is caused by creating persistent irrational behaviours, or seemingly irrational behaviours, in customers.

Alongside the balance sheet, strong brands have been shown over time to create price elasticity of demand. That is to say, the company can charge a premium for the product without dramatically affecting market share. People will pay more money for the same product. Additionally, stronger brands with large market share, also, with very few exceptions, have more buyers within a certain time period, and more loyalty as measured through repeat purchase. This is known as the law of *double jeopardy*, which seems to be an empirical fact in marketing (or as close to one as we have).

Initially observing popularity of Hollywood actors and media products, researcher Andrew Ehrenberg demonstrated that the double jeopardy law generalized for brand purchases and applies across categories as diverse as aviation fuel and laundry detergent.³⁶ Indeed, laundry detergent Tide's brand is so potent at maintaining a price premium that it has come to be used as a currency (see case study below).

CASE STUDY

In 2012, investigators were trying to understand why supermarkets in the United States were being robbed every month of Tide detergent – and *only* Tide detergent. As with every investigation, they 'followed the money' only to find that Tide *was* the money. Bottles of Tide had become an ad hoc street currency, with 150-ounce bottles being exchanged for \$5 or \$10 worth of drugs, earning it the nickname 'Liquid Gold'.

As *New York* magazine pointed out: 'this unlikely black market would not have formed if they weren't so good at pushing their product'.³⁷ It turns out that despite being considered a 'low interest category', people have very strong feelings about their detergents. Tide came in the top three brands that consumers were least likely to give up during tough times. This bond has allowed the producer, Procter & Gamble, to charge 50 per cent more than the average detergent and yet it still outsells its nearest competitor, which is also produced by P&G, by more than two to one.

So, what is it about Tide that means more people will pay 50 per cent more for a functionally parity product from the same manufacturer?

The investigating sergeant puts it well: 'I'm a No. 1 Tide fan', he says. 'I don't know if it's all psychological, but you can tell the difference.'³⁸

The dark side of brands

Brands and their purveyors have long longed for authenticity, or at least to be perceived as authentic.

Bizarrely, when discussing authenticity, and the desire that real people have for relationships with real things, what usually happens is that advertising people end up equating authenticity with grass roots, real life, non-commercial stuff. This is odd because, by its very nature, a commercial brand cannot be that, which means any attempts to be so are not authentic.

Being authentic as a brand, or person, is really simple. Stand for something, establish a consistent mode of behaviour and then express it through everything you do, communications and commerce. It's when you say one thing and do another that you stop being authentic. To thine own self be true. (When a brand tries to fake a grass-roots movement, which has been done many times, it is called *astroturfing*.)

One way for brands to feel more authentic in how they act is to embrace their dark side. I first encountered this idea from Adam Ferrier, a trained psychologist, strategist and author of *The Advertising Effect* (2014). He pointed out that in the 1980s brands were all yang: superficial, aspirational, glossy – think any Pepsi commercial, think huge logos. In the 1990s brands developed a more authentic voice, reflecting our actual values not our aspirations, trying to stand for something beyond themselves: think Dove, Innocent, Body Shop, Big Brother.

Following on after this manufactured authenticity then, brands can look to embrace their shadows. Shadows are qualities deemed socially unacceptable and thus are usually hidden, by brands and by people. But if brands could tap into them, they would allow consumers to express and normalize the negative feelings they all have, and thus build much stronger relationships.

To create stronger, robust, believable brands, we can turn to the dark side, exploring a broader range of emotions. One aspect of this can be seen in the emergence of 'sadvertising'.³⁹ Pushing against the hyper-positivity and

levity modes that had once again come to dominate advertising, a raft of advertising appeared that tried to squeeze some tears from the eyes of the supposedly cynical consumer. Humour is a powerful advertising tool – it captures attention through disrupted expectations, which also triggers memory formation, and people like to laugh, so it drives favourability. But humour is perceived as being a shallow emotion, while tragedy is the ‘highest form of art’.⁴⁰

P&G created its first-ever television spot for itself – rather than one of its brands – with its tearjerker announcement of its Olympics partnerships, claiming to be the ‘sponsor of moms’, in an ad called ‘Best Job’.⁴¹ Dove’s ‘Real Beauty Sketches’⁴² – showing women describing themselves to police sketch artists to demonstrate how critical they are of their own appearances – brought tears to eyes all over the world, becoming the second most viewed ad ever on YouTube.

However, it is not in the *either/or* that the power of myth lies. As Lévi-Strauss pointed out, and as was later discussed by Adam Morgan in his book *Eating the Big Fish* (1999), strong brands solve contradictions. This is because they operate in the realm of myth, and the cultural function of myth is to resolve contradictions. The most obvious example that many myths try to resolve is the fact that we are alive but one day will be dead.

This thinking was enshrined in the thinking of Crispin Porter + Bogusky – ‘agency of the decade’ (the noughties), as a ‘cultural tension’ to be solved by the brand, or the idea, and subsequently spread throughout the industry.

Apple makes computers *human*. Persil makes dirt *good*. Dove makes beauty universal. Nike makes everybody an athlete. Google makes infinity manageable. Kodak makes moments last forever. Honda makes (the power of) dreams physical. Starbucks makes luxury affordable. Virgin is a giant that takes on the giants for the little guy. Coca-Cola makes ubiquity unique. At the heart of many cultural tensions is the dichotomy of social beings: how to be unique as part of a group.

Life is full of contradictions. Brands, like myths, provide a meta-narrative that helps people to find meaning and resolve these contradictions imaginatively, since they cannot be solved rationally. Which is why we have Dark M&Ms. Probably.

Brandgrams

In Daniel Schacter's book, *Searching for Memory* (1996), he puts forward a curious description of memory. According to Schacter, memories are encoded in the brain as engrams – essentially a neuron-firing pattern – that captures certain elements from the experience. Certain kinds of encoding are more likely to promote higher recall – specifically, elaborative encoding that allows you to integrate new information with what you already know.

This explains why successful advertising often leverages existing referent systems by making our brain process information and link it to things already in our heads, which means there is a much better chance that we will remember it. Something you know is linked to something you don't.

So brand experiences will build *brandgrams* in our heads.

So far so good, this all feels pretty logical. But then Schacter veers off. What he suggests is that the act of remembering is not really a recollection – it is a new experience: 'The cue combines with the engram to yield... an experience that differs from either of its constituents.'⁴³

So the cue, the piece of communication, combines with the brandgram to create a new experience that 'differs from either of its constituents'. People are not simply experiencing the communication but the gestalt of the communication and their pre-existing brandgram.

Now that's what I call consumer-created content.