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Built To Fade

The Birth of Brand

It's been almost a half-century since *The Image* was published. In it, author and former Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin presented a disturbing shift in the American psyche. He believed that, as movies grew in popularity in America, so did citizens gravitate towards them, until they came to exercise an overall *preference* for commercial images over reality.

Boorstin also coined the term “pseudo event:” staged situations that serve no purpose other than to be reproduced through publicity. Things like movie premieres, press conferences, and football games. Our vicarious involvement in these events gives us a conditional sense of belonging, a temporary sense of pseudo-place.

In 1962, two years after Boorstin's book hit the stores, Andy Warhol came up with his Campbell's Soup Cans: 32 identical images of a can and label of Campbell's Tomato Soup. With it, mundane consumer brands were recognized as pop icons. Brands were it; the age of Branding had officially arrived.

Branding is the art and science of impressing a company, product, or service on a public. Repeated exposure to a specific experience, through logo, advertising, or usage, makes us recognize the brand. The stronger the branding, the stronger, and more persistent, is our association with the brand. How to achieve this persistent association was a riddle that brand builders were paid to solve.

In the past 50 years, we've made a far deeper investment in the Image than Boorstin could have imagined. We now stand in direct alignment with corporate messaging as we stare at the logos lighting our city nights—and as we pull on our sweatshirts, as we pick out our handbags, our running shoes, our jackets. Rightly or wrongly, brands give us a sense of alignment. Now it's normal for us to pay for the opportunity to advertise not just our apparel manufacturer, but also our favorite corporation. Whether I'm wearing a replica Manchester United sweater, a jacket with the US flag on the back, or a cap with the Nike swoosh, I have arrived. I am with the Image.

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The Problem of Persistence

Branding has to do with impressing a company, product, or service on a public. Branding has another, and equally relevant connotation: branding is the act of burning with a branding iron to indicate ownership.

The image of a Coke can or Campbell soup can leaves an impression on us; repeated exposure to specific, targeted advertising messages burns a more lasting impression. We buy into the brand, pay extra to get it, and our attention is owned.

Over repeated impressions of branding, language that's common to all of us all is slowly appropriated. Coke is "Refreshment," Ford is "Tough," Eveready is "Lasting" company, Allstate is "Safe Hands." By the same token, the term "safe hands" belongs to Allstate, "lasting" belongs to Eveready, "tough" belongs to Ford, and "refreshment" belongs to Coke.

The success of conventional branding has been measured by the persistence of the literal and graphic associations that it forges. The idea being, if we hum tunes half-consciously, we will reach for products instinctively. At the checkout, we will pay a premium for brand x without much thought about it.

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Green Leads the Way Forward

So far, environmentalists have focused their attention on the traces that products leave. Social critics like Naomi Klein (*No Logo*, *The Shock Doctrine*) have criticized the social and environmental physical cost of these products. We need to hold these same products' branding ethos under the same scrutiny

Apollo 11 sent us a profound, high concept image: a look back from the moon, an enduring image of our fragile-planet-as-home. The next year, Earth Day was launched as a pseudo-event, contrived to embody a new planetary consciousness. Organizations like Greenpeace and the Sierra Club sprung up as flag bearers of the Environment. In the process, they established themselves as quintessential green brands. And we've responded with donations to the cause and the purchase of souvenirs—eco T-shirts, sweatshirts and hoodies that either compete against or accessorize favorite conventional brands like Nike and American Apparel.

It's natural that, in our image-conscious consumer society, Green would be characterized as a consumer niche. There are now green brands from companies as powerful and diverse as Whole Foods, Wal-Mart and Chevron—brands that are genuinely pleased to offer a bridge to a better tomorrow. In many respects, this is a conventional message—much like the Chevrolet ads from the 1950's—with a conventional effort towards brand recognition using appeals to emotions and belonging. These messages are repeated multiple times until they persist in our consciousness.

For instance, 2007's Toyota hybrid ad gives us the brand proposition that their environmentally friendly Camry gives people "The power to move forward." Here, Toyota brand builders are generating a buzz in a familiar way. What harm could there be? Sustainability is a worthy goal, after all. More power to all of us, right?

No, not really. There is a harm done here, and the harm is double edged. It harms the consumer, or target, and also undermines the company that the brand represents.

Conventional, persistent brand messaging has a good track record, but for green products, the claim that the product is principled or good can easily give way to cynicism. An entire planet isn't threatened because of a lack of progressive market choices. It has reached this place because 10% of the world has not owned up to a fundamental disjoin with the planet, consuming it at an unsustainable rate. And selling one more car as a "sustainable brand" flies in the face of this. For instance, hybrid vehicles and solar panels might be better products than their oil consuming alternatives. But they are not "good" personified. Instead of buying these brand new green products, it might be better to simply drive less, or put a sweater on in the cold months instead of turning the thermostat up. Conventional branding, however, is designed to short-circuit this kind of critical thinking. In the process, it undercuts our connection to the environment.

I might feel good about myself as I sip on a mouthful of "green" this or that, but this sanctimoniousness should be seen as more than an innocuous behavioral tic. The diversion of attention into a me-brand-good pseudo experience, the holy grail of brand building, is actually part of the problem.

When green brands manage to nurture egocentric self-cherishing among its users through packaging and advertising, a fundamental, environmental disjoin has taken place. Huddled with my coffee, whether it's fair trade certified or otherwise, I am indulged in an intimate branded moment. I rise above the pedestrian concerns of the depressed, middle-aged woman as she walks past the café. Later, I take a sip of my organic chai latte, place it in the drink holder and accelerate through a busy intersection. My "green" brand consciousness is anything but that. The phenomenon of being wrapped up in a brand idea is displacing my attention and connection to the environment that surrounds me right now. A low-footprint product that's branded in the conventional way may not be "green" at all.

As the marketing of environmentally friendly products reaches for second gear, branding footprints and physical footprints need to be aligned. Respect for the environment is about relationship, not self-cherishing around brand moments. It follows that marketing “green” the old way is bound to result in cynicism towards the brand.

If marketing is to be consistent with the principles that green products purport to embody, a new type of branding has to be explored—one where brands exist as signifiers, but don’t persist as havens of false refuge. As consumers who have grown up in the shadow of the Warhol’s Campbell’s soup can, a brand that does this is hard to imagine.

“The richest and best-educated people in our economy are shifting, and pretty quickly. They’re just as willing to spend money as they always were, but now it’s not focused on fancy organic stuff at the Whole Foods Market or giant bulletproof cars from Germany or private jet travel. Instead, the market is trying as hard as it can to spend time and money without leaving much of a trace.

**I think this story has legs and is going to be around for a long time.
Zero is the new black.” — Seth Godin**

Social Objects as Space Junk

Mass media is in decline, and with it, conventional branding that pays the bills. For brand builders, a line of response has been to line Internet corridors with viral gadgets. These gadgets are intended to encourage people to assemble a memorable, and hopefully positive, image of the brand. Examples include sponsored YouTube videos and camouflaged blogs and comments. But, as we get better at filtering and as alternative, less commercial media abound, these hacks become serious irritants and the brand is often correctly implicated in the negative experience.

Mental Dioxins No More

Even for non-green products and green agnostic products, persistence in branding has always been problematic. Until now, we've just felt compelled to put up with them. We've known that, by design, persistent images and concepts such as the "toughness" of Ford trucks and the "refreshment" of Coke take language, in all its fluid possibility, and park it—attach it to a thing. And we've known that, even if this gives us a temporary sense of certainty and confidence, persistent associations are obnoxious because our lives are change and, to be healthy, our mental environment needs to keep step.

The truths that conventional branding purports, from catch phrases to fundamentalist beliefs, are the mental equivalent of persistent environmental toxins in the external world.

How do you brand zero?

It isn't news that the almost hypnotic effect of persistent brand messaging is bad for us. What is news is that there are alternatives—products with straightforward labeling and claims that don't present an Image designed to eclipse our immediate reality. Non-persistent branding, coupled with the mass adoption of self-directed tools for obtaining media, now makes conventional branding far less appealing.

One can observe, and foresee, persistent commercial branding as the nostalgic equivalent of junk food or bad television: a guilty pleasure that is transparently noxious, but acceptable to us only in much smaller doses than before.

Warhol's image of the brand-as-icon has had us for 50 years; its hold on us is bound to fade. And as it fades, a new marketing koan appears: How do you brand zero?™

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A former Greenpeace activist, John Dumbrille writes technical documentation and presentation materials for [MonkeyMedia Software](#). This spring he co-founded [bowegover.ning](#), a project for transparent governance in his local community. Keep up with him at his blog, [Green Sandbox](#), or [follow him on Twitter](#).

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