

# New age branding and modern parenting

**Brian Mansfield**, Blue Marlin Brand Design, argues that brand managers need to chill out and act like modern parents, not family dictators

**'O** SH\*T, it's the brand planning season again!' Such was the sense of dread I used to feel every year as we embarked on the ritual three months of data analysis, segmentation, positioning refinement, communications planning and endless bloody meetings. Even today I know a fair few of our clients who believe that 'brand management' is a command-and-control activity. You define the target audience precisely, craft your brand's proposition to appeal to these people and place your communications with military precision to win them over.

## Victorian parenting

I liken it to Victorian parenting. An immutable set of values, strong discipline and an audience that should be seen and not heard.

Traditionalists pore over masses of data to understand customer segmentation - through this they aim to understand key consumer drivers and value by segment. This was overlaid by qualitative and quantitative research to understand consumers better and how to reach them. All this was used as input to develop, test, quantify and craft brand propositions. If it sounds very process-orientated, it is - and this can be restrictive in developing new products or where the product is less fmcg - for example, services.

Once a brand is defined and created, then key messages are pumped again and again through brand communications around the core 'essence', 'benefits' and 'reasons to believe'. The targeting of these messages and the tracking of their effectiveness and of a brand's 'health' is done through quantitative means.

So, lots of analysis, lots of money spent on research and tracking and modelling - but it assumes that brands behave in predictable ways and consumers are motivated by easily defined factors. In reality, brands have far more complex relationships with consumers, and we cannot prescribe or control all of these communications, 'moments of brand truth' or their cumulative effect - brand equity.

Any notion that you can 'manage' a brand in this fluid, consumer-empowered

and media-diffracted age is simply ridiculous. Today powerful brands are made and consumed by the same people - their customers. As a recent *B&T* article observed, The upsurge in social networking and user-generated content has, by definition, handed a significant amount of control back to consumers.'

I can no more control my brand like a puppeteer than I can prescribe every action, spoken word or decision of my teenager and, in reality, should I want to?

## Consumer brand shaping

New channels, brand experiences, personalisation and modes of consumption mean that today's consumers can engage with and shape their preferred brands in ways that were unthought of even five years ago. Think Apple Stores, viral marketing, online customisation of everything from jeans to mobile phones, cars, holidays and home furnishings. Blog sites from dissatisfied customers and YouTube uploads of brand experiences from delighted Emirates first-class passengers that achieve more than the last well-planned and executed campaign.

Another great example is adidas last year, when it spotted two Chinese teenagers on the Chinese equivalent of YouTube. They had posted a video of themselves lip-synching to the Back Street Boys. The 'BackDormBoys' became a huge viral hit, with over one million hits in a fortnight. Adidas jumped in and asked them to reshoot the clip bedecked in adidas gear. Huge impact, minimal budget, great example of finding new channels for your brand - and acting fast.

User-generated content (UGC) sites have become the kings of brand communications, and will no doubt continue to grow and prosper as consumers of all ages and backgrounds get a taste for shaping the brands they have an interest in.

This is a new world and your brand is engaged in a constant, uncontrollable dialogue with consumers in a thousand contexts at once. Linear, well-defined, brand journeys are a fallacy - as unlikely to materialise as my pored-over brand plan.

## Difficult transition

This is forcing change on all agencies, but particularly those that have prospered >



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on 60-second TV commercials. As communication channels to consumers have fractured, so agencies themselves have needed to develop, but traditional advertising agencies have found the transition difficult.

We are currently seeing the potential demise of conventionally structured and executed above the line (ATL) agencies. They have been, and too often continue to be, too focused on 'old' communications and revenue models. The additional opportunities created through digital communications have further clouded the picture as they sit alongside the multitude of ways for brands to engage with consumers - sponsorship; sampling; community engagement; cause-related marketing; corporate social responsibility (CSR); production of branded content and 'owned media'; stimulation of word-of-mouth and direct consumer advocacy. The list goes on and the point is that the mix you use and how you 'place' your brand is fundamentally fluid and only semi-controllable.

### Lessons from modern parenting

Which is where the parallel with modern parenting kicks in. In reality much of a child's personality, some experts say 60% or more, is hard-wired. There is also strong evidence to suggest that peers play a greater role in a child's development than their parents. So what are the lessons for modern branding?

> Set values and be consistent, but do not try to micro-manage your brands.

^- Understand the context they are consumed in and seek to inform their behaviour to be appropriate in each setting.  
^ Listen as much as you dispense wisdom and opinion. Invite dialogue and co-creation,  
^ Forget brand tracking - there are much better measures of salience/relevance.

The parallels between parenting and brands are uncanny. We are now in a situation where kids are reckoned to be involved in some 80% or more of family decisions. In the same way, brands are now involved in a symbiotic relationship with consumers and inform their decision-making. If I shop at Body Shop as a reflection of my ethical principles, how do I react when it is bought by a major beauty multinational? Or how do I react when McDonald's buys a stake in Fret A Manger?

Brands are in dialogue, as parents are with their kids, far more than ever before, so they can act as adviser, counsellor and supporter - and not just dictator. We now expect more openness from the brands we consume - in how they are produced, what they stand for and how they behave. But parents know they can't live their kids' lives for them, and enlightened 'brand managers' also realise their role is to align internal resources around the delivery of the brand's promise (I call this brand choreography), and to communicate with smaller and smaller audiences in ever more meaningful ways.

### Kindness, love and benevolence

As Clive Burcham of Australian agency TCO puts it, 'Like parenting, brands

need to act with more kindness, love and even benevolence to their consumers. Brands interrupt my valuable time - often with dumb, dumb, dumb, expensive messages for the clients. Brands are trying to control all their communications to consumers, but the reality is they cannot. So, perhaps now more than ever, brands need to be acting more like caring, loving parents to their families - the consumer.'

So get out of the data - the insights and the reality of your brand will not be found by poring over spreadsheets, sales data or research studies, any more than you can learn to be a parent by reading a book. The key to new-age branding is to be found in the engagement between your brand and its peers, that and the relationships that consumers construct between your brand and themselves.

As Phil Hayden of bellamyhayden sums it up: 'Modern parenting suggests the removal of the parent as the archetype authority figure, and a relationship based on a more egalitarian approach. Branding has evolved to a point today along a similar line. Fundamentally brand communication is about listening and not shouting. Gone are the days where the best marketer simply had the loudest voice. Brands now thrive on interactivity and understand the need to reward positive behaviour and self-expression as opposed to the didactic messaging of old.'

When my first child was born, a wise /o-year-old neighbour, and mother of three, gave me two pieces of advice that have proved to be spot on: 'Relaxed parents make for relaxed children' and 'Parenting is a gradual process of letting go.'

These seem ever}' bit as appropriate for today's 'brand owners' and 'brand managers'. So chill out, spend more time with the kids and listen more. They do not belong to you and they grow up fast!

Finally, by way of illustration, Table i shows how parenting styles are reflected in some major brands.

TABLE 1

### Parenting styles and major brands

Parenting types	Relationship with consumer	Example brand
Modern	Egalitarian relationship; interactive; provides inspiration	Innocent
Victorian	Talks at consumer; authoritarian	Mercedes
Dysfunctional	Fails to communicate coherently or consistently	Phillips
Teen	Works on same level as consumer; talks the same language; encourages rebelliousness	Apple
Single	Very appreciative of consumers but struggles to be effective in its communications; inconsistent	Pepsi



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