

A brand new future

Will brands step out of popular culture to lead the way forward in a new, gentler form of capitalism?

By Richard Cordiner, *RKCR/Y&R*

The future of brands is, in many ways, the future of business. Well-managed brands are the most efficient and effective creators of sustainable wealth. Understanding the value of brands, and how to create more value, is an essential requirement for sustained competitive advantage - and yet brand management is often relegated to a marketing discipline, rather than holistic business practice.

The future of brands is also inextricably linked to the future of society. Brands have a value above and beyond their ability to make money for shareholders; they also have a critical social importance, and this role, too, will be tested in the future as environmental and social issues are increasingly laid at the door of big business.

The recent global economic meltdown - the first full crisis of globalisation - has thrown this debate into sharper focus. The ugly truth of what happens when private institutions are allowed to pursue profit above all else has been revealed. The future of brands is wrapped up in the future of capitalism, as brands give meaning to the social world of consumption that fuels the capitalist system.

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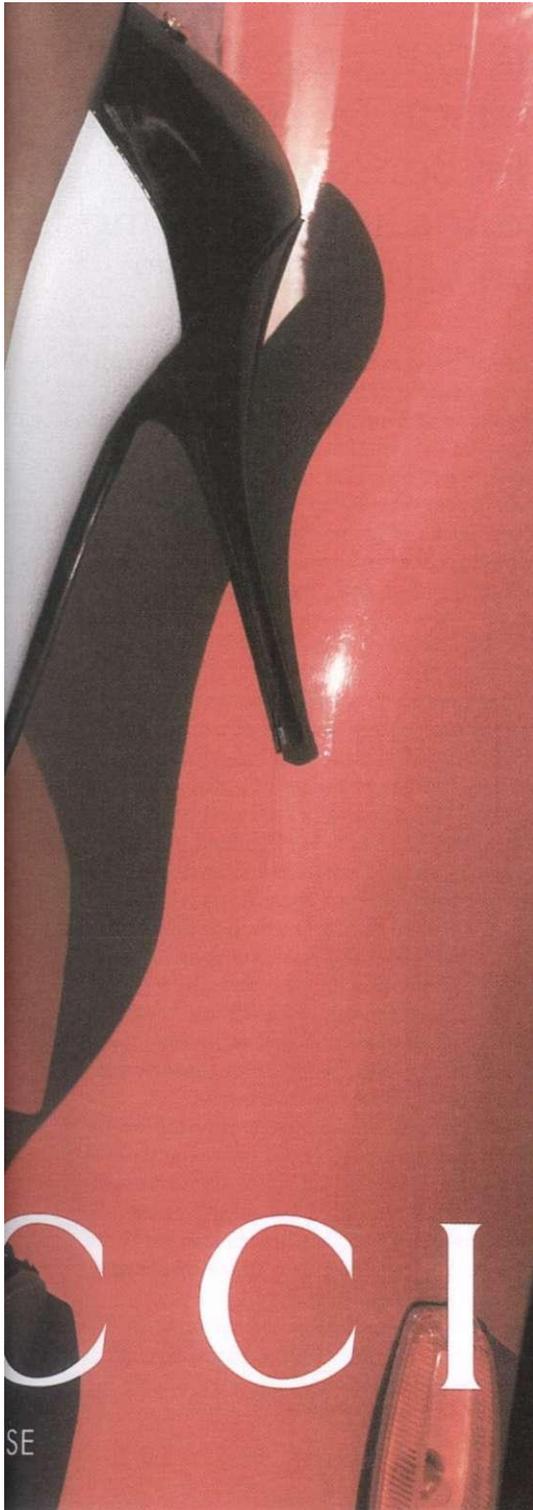
In addition to this, pop culture - the totality of our ideas, perspectives and attitudes, everything that reflects who and what we are - has been authored as much by brands as anything else in the last century. Any discussion on the future of brands is therefore a discussion of the future of people. Brands tap into our dreams and desires, playing on deeply emotional criteria to charge products and services with meaning; as our dreams and desires change, so too must brands.

But how did we get to this point? How did the concept of branding manage to weave itself so thoroughly through the fabric of every aspect of our lives? How did we end up in a situation in which any discussion of business, culture, people or power, becomes impossible without touching on the rock stars of consumerism - Apple, Nike and Coca-Cola?

THE APE THAT LOOKED FORWARD

Though a walk through some town centres on a Saturday night might lead one to conclude we haven't really evolved all that much, the truth is that human beings have made extraordinary progress since our dark beginnings. And our ascendance has been due





to a genetic gift no other animal on Earth has - a by-product of an over-developed frontal lobe: imagination.

It was our imagination that came up with agriculture and the shift from peasant farming to large-scale capitalist farming. This generated a rise in agricultural productivity that, in turn, fuelled industrial development. The industrial revolution gave birth to factories where products were mass-produced for the first time and branding emerged as a way of establishing the ownership and manufacture of goods and services - a language in the new international culture of commerce. Markets emerged and capitalism went into overdrive; as a result, we all became consumers.

THE RISE OF BRANDING

Although brands can be traced all the way back to bison paintings on cave walls thousands of years ago, it was only when companies began mass-producing stuff and trying to sell it to people that the brand really came into its own as corporations replaced the local shopkeeper or craftsman.

Advertising came to prominence around the same time. Brand names were secondary because the advertised products were often unique and the goal was simply to communicate what these new products offered. But as product ranges expanded, product parity became prolific and the role of branding and advertising changed significantly.

Advertising began imbuing brands - and products by default - with meaning. Commodities became concepts, and the brand as lifestyle was born. Advertising became the prince of pop culture, raising the standards by trying harder, giving us the best a man can get, and the make-up of make-up artists. Impossible was nothing; we could taste the rainbow and just do it, if only we were prepared to believe in the power of dreams. The future was bright.

Weaving powerful stories charged with cultural meaning into products and services turned the brand into the greatest success story of the 20th century - the biggest asset many corporations had. But all good things come to an end, and the recent economic meltdown may be a mere precursor to a much bigger problem. Economics has run riot,

completely divorced from social context. With inequality surging and resources diminishing rapidly, capitalism-at-all-costs may no longer be a viable model - and it may fall to brands to lead the way forward.

I THINK, THEREFORE I SHOP

A few years back, I went to Las Vegas to watch a boxing match. I stayed in the Bellagio Hotel, an enormous, grotesque wedding cake of a place. Directly across the Strip from the Bellagio stood Bally's Casino & Resort, above which was an electronic billboard with a message 'Shop The World', followed by a series of brand logos advertising the stores lurking inside the hotel complex, where you could do just that.

A month later, I was walking through Britain's own Mecca of consumerism, Selfridges, during the January sales. Looking up from the chaos of orange-faced girls spraying perfume into the flight paths of innocent passers-by, I noticed a series of signs saying things like 'I shop, therefore I am'. I shuddered in horror, turned around and fled the store.

The point is that, to a large extent, our insatiable appetite for stuff with logos on it is a very new phenomenon - a century old, really, and something that has gone into warp speed only in the past 30 years or so. The explanation for this hunger is simple, and it is rooted in sociology. Human nature is neither static nor universal, but reflects the social orders of the world around it. Throughout history, dominant institutions have sought to recreate us in their own image in order to establish roles that support their own self-interest. When the church ruled, we feared God and knelt at the altar for forgiveness. When feudalism came about, we joined manors and worked the land. When democracy prevailed, we went out and voted. And when the corporation came to rule, we went shopping.

Brands have played a critical role in creating this new model of human nature, using narratives charged with meaning around products and services to tap into something fundamental within all of us. We have within us an itch we can't help but scratch, an ego that is constantly working to create our sense of self. Our egos seek to defend and glorify us by separating us

Left: *Economist* Noreena Hertz named the era of unregulated market dominance 'Gucci Capitalism'

from the outside world, and it is within this separation that we find our identity.

This ego draws power from the identity charge brands invest in products and services. We choose Apple over Dell because of the brand's promise of individuality; we wear Nike to indulge in our action hero personae, the Just-Do-It facets of our personality; we fly Virgin to stick two fingers up to the corporate fat cats. Whether by accident or design, brands and advertising have fuelled our 'hunger for self brilliantly.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES

However, there is another school of thought that believes separation and individualism is not our default mode, but an inheritance left to us by our Greek forefathers.

Ancient Greece was built on shipping, and this maritime culture no doubt brought a sense of separation into sharp focus; the Greeks also placed a great deal of stock in reason, rationality and individual responsibility. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle established organising principles for our view of how things work in this world that were incorporated into Judeo-Christian philosophy, where significant emphasis is placed on the roles of spiritual leaders and their vertical relationship with God.

Eastern culture has a very different take. The ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius saw society as an orchestra, with harmony achieved only through everyone understanding their role in the greater scheme of things. Individualism was not as important as group thinking. Mark Earls explores this brilliantly in his book *Herd*; we are an inherently social species, dependent on each other for our identity. The classical African concept of Ubuntu sums up this truth beautifully, a philosophy of interconnectedness proposing we are human only through each other - a person is a person through other people.

China may have abandoned Marxism and Maoism due to their bankruptcy as economic models, but its emergence as a true superpower - and the subsequent rise of big, powerful brands born outside the West - may well force the theory of branding into sharp debate. Anglo-American market dominance will increasingly be contested by not only China, but other emerging economies, such as Brazil

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THE RISE OF CO-OP CAPITALISM

Globalisation is about much more than merely allowing companies to trade freely around the world. It is also about the rights and responsibilities that come with that freedom. The global financial crisis has moved this debate around how to balance the rights and responsibilities of global business to centre-stage, and brands may come to play a critical role in this balancing act.

Noreena Hertz - an economist proposing a new, kinder form of capitalism based on co-operation, collaboration and collective interests - believes economics and business need to be put back into the human social context. She claims that the past 30 years has seen economics develop into a narrow field, completely out of touch with reality, reducing the world to a mathematical formula that overlooks vast complexities and allowing corporations to operate in bubbles based on overly simplistic Adam Smith principles. She suggests anger at banks for getting us into this mess will soon turn into anger at big business in general, as corporations seek to remain competitive by paying out millions to top executives while outsourcing to cut costs. In a media landscape where people are informed and connected like never before, this anger may find a new way of organising itself into directed, affirmative action.

In the wake of the financial meltdown, Hertz coined the phrase 'Gucci Capitalism' to sum up an era in which unregulated markets had more power than governments, risk was

seen as being in the public's interests, success was measured only in terms of GDP, and the aggressive expansion of Anglo-American capitalism led the world into an interconnected mess. Hertz proposes 'Co-op capitalism' as a new model, drawing on anthropology, physics, geopolitics and neurology in an attempt to synthesise successful business practice with a healthier planet, and a happier human race.

CONCLUSION

What, then, for the future of brands? Will brands evolve from symbols of ownership imbued by advertising with individualist identity charges to badges of social conscience? Will a strong brand name become more than just a promise of added value, becoming instead a statement of a company's wider contribution to society as a whole?

How an economy functions is about much more than markets anonymously distributing goods and services. It is also about how people relate to each other, how beliefs are shaped, and how power is distributed in society. Brands may evolve from a language based on consumption to one based more on contribution.

Ultimately, the future will probably be less about stuff, and more about providing services that add value on an individual and collective level simultaneously. As the socially acceptable face of big business, brands will act as the glue binding together many of the disparate elements Hertz talks about.

The future of brands is fundamentally secure, but it will be about creating synergy between the rights and, critically, the responsibilities of global trade.

