

shape the
agenda

This Is Your Life:

REAL BRANDS FOR REAL PEOPLE



Executive summary

Brands were once about trust. Today, brands differentiate themselves by developing an emotional connection with customers.

But customers are increasingly savvy. They are starting to reject the artificial lifestyles and aspirations that brands communicate to them. And they know when they're being sold something that does not have meaning in their lives.

To connect with real people, brands themselves must be real. Real people – real situations – and real benefits, that resonate meaningfully with customers.

- **The first stage** – trust (eg Volvo, Remington)
- **The second stage** – emotional connection (eg Mini, Marmite)
- **The third stage** – real people (eg Dove, Kelloggs Special K)

How can brands do this? One way is to use real people as part of the brand itself. Dove has used real women as part of a poster campaign for Dove Body Firming Wash. This campaign strikes a chord with customers who find beauty ads intimidating. Sales of Dove products doubled after the campaign.

Brands equal perception. So, brands can use real, bona fide people as per Dove, or they can create the impression of using real people.

Kelloggs Special K has moved on from an impossibly slim, gorgeous model in a red swimsuit to a 'real woman', weighing herself on scales and struggling to get herself down to the weight she wants to be. The implicit message 'use product X and you will look like this' has been replaced – because people don't buy into it any more. Now, it's 'we understand that you're buying this product to lose weight, and we can help'. More real – so more believable.

Real branding won't work for all brands; escapism has its place. But selling dreams has become tired. Impossibly gorgeous young men and women cavort on sand dunes... is this the truth? No, it's a fantasy marketers want us to buy into. Real people are demanding more integrity and reality from their brands.

By making brands more real, marketers can move from a time of hype – which customers hate – to a time of buzz – which customers like. The public must be part of the conversation.

And marketers who want to gain an edge can use this idea to leverage truly powerful brands – brands that deliver on their promise, have a true connection with customers, and deliver added value to shareholders.

ONE: THE THIRD WAY

Brands are a company's strongest asset. But it's widely acknowledged that to sustain them in the future, brands must be made more relevant to customers. And it's the responsibility of marketers to ensure that customers identify with and remain loyal to brands.

Branding was once about providing a product or service with a seal of quality – buy X branded shirts because they're more durable than competitor Y's shirts. Washing powder commercials showed how you could guarantee your clothes to be whiter than white.

Nowadays, a seal of quality can usually be taken for granted. So to differentiate themselves, brands attempt an emotional connection with consumers. The new Volkswagen Beetle, Häagen-Dazs ice cream and Apple are fine examples of brands which create a resonance with the customer that is not just function-based.

But as brands start to compete for emotional space, this factor too becomes a standard offering. Brands are left struggling to be seen and heard once more.

Furthermore, emotional promise by itself isn't enough. Sean Brierley, author of *The Advertising Handbook*, points out that it often fails because 'the experience does not match up to the emotional promise of the advertising'. [Source: Brierley, 2004, p.29] It's what David Ogilvy used to call 'selling the sizzle not the sausage'.

Successful brands are as much about perception as quality of offering. Thomas Gad, author of *4D Branding*, says, 'Tests have shown that simply telling people that a product, say a breakfast cereal, is made by a well-known company can make it seem to taste better than one made by a less well-regarded competitor.' [Source: Gad, 2000, p.24].

But customers are becoming more knowledgeable. They see through artificial messages and they know when they're being sold something that doesn't connect with their lives. This shift in consumer mentality is a wake-up call.

Brands must now make sure that customers stay with them. And as customers are deserting brands that seem unrealistic or phoney, so brands that portray unrealistic, phoney lifestyles need to smarten up and become more real. There's nothing more irritating than seeing brands pretending to be real and coming across as fakes. And customers are losing belief in brands that present an unattainable lifestyle or aspiration.

Johnnie Moore, a marketing consultant, says 'what irritates me about brands is that there is a gap between the marketer's idealised fantasy world and the one the rest of us live in.' [Source: Correspondence with Insights, April 2004]. Customers are realising as much, and things have got to change. The tenet on which aspirational advertising is based – 'buy this offering and you will become like this' – is being increasingly disbelieved.

To differentiate brands in the future, companies will need to do something that isn't merely focused on quality or emotional connection – a 'third way' for brands.

That third way must be to make brands connect more effectively with real people. In recent years, with the gloss of advertising, brands have lost their way to the extent that many people are not sure what a brand is any more. If a person cannot identify clearly and instantly what a particular brand's values are, how can that brand succeed?

Nicholas Ind, author of *The Corporate Brand* and editor of *Beyond Branding*, agrees. 'Brands should be about real people and real benefits. However, marketing gets in the way of this. Market research encourages abstract thinking, marketers indulge in wishful thinking and advertising agencies get carried away with hyperbole.' [Source: Correspondence with Insights April 04].

The way out of this, for Ind, is for companies to 'break down the barriers between the organisation and its customers.' Those barriers include overly aspirational role models or unconvincing, unrealistic advertising.

It's essential that companies move on from a seller-centric base to one that is 'more customer involved at a meaningful, day-to-day level' according to Cameron Watt, co-author with Ind of *Inspiration*. [Source: Correspondence with Insights April 04].

So how can marketers find this third way? To connect with real people, brands themselves must be real. Real people – real situations – and real benefits, that resonate meaningfully with customers.

TWO: REAL PEOPLE

One way to make brands resonate more is to use real people. Consider Dove. In mid-2004 the brand received much publicity when it asked real women to strip down to their underwear to advertise Dove Body Firming Wash. Together with the strapline 'As tested on real curves', the poster version proclaims, 'After all, it wouldn't be much of a challenge to firm the thighs of size 8 supermodels, would it?'

The Dove campaign strikes a chord with customers who are tired of brands that use overly aspirational ideals that are impossible to achieve. They're not motivated to buy a product or service as a result of being offered these ideals any more, and are feeling increasingly disconnected from the artificial, idealistic world suggested by many brands.

Daryl Fielding, Dove's client services director, quotes research indicating that real women are self-conscious about curves and find beauty ads intimidating. 'Most fashion models don't look like they need firming creams – they look like they need a good meal,' she says. [Source: Shepard, 2004]

Conspicuously, the women in the Dove campaign are not impossibly beautiful, unattainably perfect models. The implicit communication 'use this product and you will look like this' is, as a consequence, more believable.

Dove widely publicised the fact that it was using real people. It ran features in magazines and media interest was such that there were newspaper interviews with the women concerned. Sales of Dove products doubled after the £4million campaign, 'even rising fivefold in some cases' according to Unilever. [Source: Shepard, 2004]

Using real people could be a key way for brands to leverage themselves in today's overcrowded marketplace where branded and own brand goods now struggle for attention.

Diagram 1. Brand stages

THE FIRST STAGE: TRUST

Brands give the customer confidence that the product or service will deliver on its promise.

E.g. Volvo = safety

Remington = a closer shave or your money back

THE SECOND STAGE: EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

With many brands on the market, most are known to be trustworthy.

To differentiate themselves, brands now have to connect emotionally with the customer.

E.g. Mini

Marmite = my mate

THE THIRD STAGE: REALITY

Many brands now engage at an emotional level. Brands have to be relevant to real people and real life events, or they will die.

E.g. Dove body firming wash = As tested on real curves

Bold non-bio = Part of the fabric of life

Kelloggs Special K = Surely there's an easier way

Virgin Active Gyms

Governments, countries and other entities seeking to brand themselves are also doing away with the all-gloss, all-spin approach to branding.

Government organisation Sport England, for example, has decided not to use a celebrity or a sporting hero to act as the figurehead for its anti-obesity campaign. Instead it is looking for an 'everyday family' to spearhead media campaigns and be featured in promotional material. [Source: Cann, 2004, p.16]

And 'Connie', the irritatingly artificial 'cyber-character' used by AOL as the figurehead to their brand since the mid-1990s, has suddenly been ditched in favour of advertising which will 'illustrate the lives of normal, everyday people using the Internet'. AOL has recognised that reality is a way forward.

THREE: REALITY BITES

Companies which use real people, and let everyone know that they're real people – could leverage their brands with great success because of the element of truth and honesty that is communicated. That honesty will be picked up by customers, who will be attracted to the brand.

How could a company like Holland & Barrett increase the connection of the brand to the benefits offered? By taking photographs of real, healthy looking people and using these in advertising campaigns or in window displays. Not models – and not people who look like models. Ordinary people, but very healthy looking ones. Holland & Barrett differentiates primarily on price. Its 'better than half price sale' in a bold, red block dominates the brand values. Whilst that drives turnover, surely more effective value would be generated by showing the results that using the products can have on real people.

FOUR: REALITY AND PERCEPTION

As we've seen, perception equals reality. Brands in the future can use real, bona fide people as Dove has done – or they can create the impression of using real people.

Kelloggs Special K is indicative of the move away from aspirational, unrealistic branding. For decades, Special K has been identified by an impossibly thin woman in a red swimsuit, who would transform into the red 'K' logo. The brand was inextricably linked to this image, one might have thought; any company would have to be convinced of a major need for change to dispense with such a closely woven brand identity.

But recent advertising for Special K shows what is perceived to be an ordinary person – plainly lit, no make-up – weighing herself on scales and standing on one leg to try to be lighter. Her ordinariness is emphasised by the fact that one of the tricks she uses to appear lighter is to take her glasses off – the red swimsuit icon would never have worn glasses.

The striking K of the brand has been replaced by an emphasis on the benefits the product brings to real people. While there is no implication that the new Special K woman is a 'real person' (i.e. not an actress) in the sense that the Dove women are, Kelloggs has decided that perceived realness is the desired trait. The aim is attainable, not unattainable.

Customers still buy the product because they think, rightly or wrongly, that it will help them lose weight. But this subtext is now associated more convincingly in the consumer's mind than the message communicated by the red swimsuit model. With that campaign, there was a believability gap between the potential consumer and the model. For its new advertising Kelloggs has distanced the brand from all the connotations carried by the red 'K'.

Kelloggs are creating a brand personality that positions the brand for a new kind of consumer – one who identifies level-headed, sensible, real behaviour.

Other examples:

- Vonage – photography of real people of all ages and ethnicities.
- Patagonia – a 'living the brand' example.

We think there will be more use of genuine, real, ordinary people in the future. But the perception of reality is a good start.

FIVE: INTEGRATED BRANDING

Kevin Roberts of Saatchi and Saatchi believes brand success will be based on turning brands into 'lovemarks'. A lovemark is a brand which inspires 'loyalty beyond reason.' That intangible 'x' factor can be found in a product, service, experience, country or person.

Can the lovemarks approach lead to increased turnover, market share or shareholder value? One success story has been Marmite, which has added considerable value since it adopted its 'love it or hate it' campaign, a lovemarks-oriented approach. Sales of Marmite increased 16% in the four weeks after the launch of the campaign.

But brands can't be all things to all people. For every person who loves a brand, there will be plenty who dislike it. Consider McDonald's – one of the most recognised brands on the planet, it was worth \$24.7bn in 2003 [Source: Anon, 2003, pp.48-51]. But on the lovemarks web site, there are far more people hating it than loving it. [Source: lovemarks.com, 2004]

McDonald's fortunes have been turned around recently not by abstruse desires for loyalty beyond reason; they've been helped by listening to real people, who are turning away from food that is perceived to be high in fat and unhealthy.

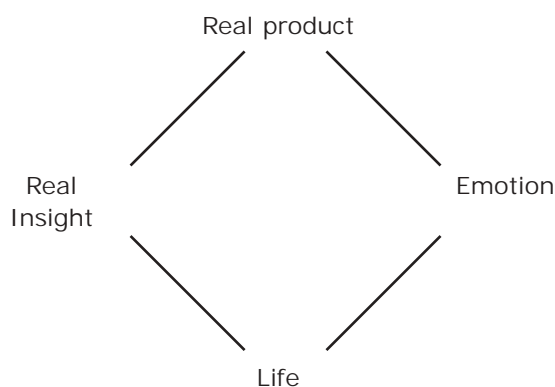
'Is lovemarking a breakthrough to a more democratic, sensitive way of seeing brands, or just a rather grandiose attempt to make us think brands are wonderful?' questions Johnnie Moore. 'I sense that we are being offered something rather simplistic, whereas our hunger is growing for organisation with more depth and subtlety.' [Source: Correspondence with Insights, May 2004.]

What real branding tries to do is a bit different, and hard to do well – to strike a balance between aspiration; 'I want to be part of that club' – and identification; 'this is for me, for my life'.

How can this balance be achieved in practice? For David Taylor there are three ways:

- Great consumer insight nuggets into peoples' lives: how they feel, what they do, role of the brand and product.
- Clear positioning, consistently executed.
- FANTASTIC execution, that is engaging.

Diagram 2: Brand reality



If brands are to be more real they need to resonate and trigger a connection with people. That may be through love – but it might not be.

Tim Kitchin writes about a new 'human reality', which demands that brands become more relevant to real people. Brands that promise 'a human experience at the heart of the brand... are not about being a lovemark in Kevin Roberts' terms. This is real people delivering real personal value to other people.' [Source: Kitchen, No Date, p.7]

A successful campaign of the 1980s and 90s, the Oxo family was described as 'integrated branding', where the product message and the emotional connection were woven together. 'People could relate to the vignettes of everyday life,' says David Taylor, 'e.g. kids growing up, need for husband and wife to keep some spice in their love life – but they were done in an entertaining and beautifully executed way.'

SIX: WHO IS THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL?

To what extent will real branding work? It's possible that by making something 'real', you lose the intangible desirability that leads customers to buy in to a brand.

David Taylor is interested in this point. 'Dove will be interesting to follow. Will showing people a mirror actually make them buy? Or will it fail to strike the right balance of identification and aspiration?'

But as we've seen, Dove's wings are soaring at the moment. And where that brand flies high, surely other brands would be wise to follow. The key is to balance what seems to be real, with what is real. The Daz campaign where Shane Richie stopped housewives on their steps was real – but seemed fake. The Oxo campaign was fake, but seemed real.

Whether it is real or perceived to be real, if customers see the product or service they are being offered as having direct relevance to their lives, they will prick up their ears more enthusiastically to the message.

Escapism has its place. 'But selling dreams has become tired,' says Jim Davies, a writer for *Design Week*. He considers 'a clothing catalogue in which impossibly gorgeous young men and women cavort on sand dunes. So radiant, so carefree, so come and be one of us,' Davies writes. Is this the truth? No, it's a fantasy the marketers want us to buy into. People are rightly demanding more integrity and responsibility from their brands,' he declares; 'openness before image; a complete picture rather than just a distorting, tantalising glimpse.' [Source: Anon, 2004, p.11.]

A brand reflects society – you'll resonate more with your segment by giving them something they'll identify with. Align this somewhat glib statement to the concept of real branding and the strength of the idea shows through.

But real branding can only work if it builds on the first stage of branding – the seal of quality. Dove's real people branding can only work if the basic product is of a high quality and delivers on its brand promise.

SEVEN: GYM'LL FIX IT

The challenge for marketers is to make real branding bigger than advertising. How can the idea infuse the whole mix?

Tom Peters complains, 'I would rather not work out... in my bumbling, puffing fashion... in an atmosphere geared towards Lithe Human Machines. Health clubs are not designed for, or marketed to, people like me. Why not? Don't they like money?' [Source: Peters, 2004.]

Virgin Active Gyms aims itself towards real people, who want to get fit at their own pace rather than aspire to be supermodels. It seeks 'to break down barriers and so it champions a no-pressure, no-judgements environment where everyone can feel comfortable, whatever their shape, size or level of fitness.' [Source: About Virgin Active, 2004.]

And consider the new Volvo concept car – designed by an all-female team to take into account the needs of real women.

'Far too many branders see branding as a controlled process where they dictate the public perception,' says Johnnie Moore. 'The real world is not like that – the public are very much part of the conversation.' [Source: Correspondence with Insights, April 2004.]

Moore points to MovableType (www.movabletype.com) which makes a popular form of Weblog software. 'Their community of customers evangelise the brand and provide most if not all technical support via the user forum. The founders kicked this all off and clearly shape the community, but they don't control it.' [Source: Correspondence with Insights, April 2004]. The human beings have become part of the brand and the brand develops organically. No longer does the company tell the customer what the brand stands for.

Because of the nature of the medium, successful web brands can enable real people to help create the brand values.

- Friendsreunited.co.uk – excited users tell their friends = free marketing
- Confetti.com – real-life stories of brides-to-be that encourage people to return to the site
- Amazon – user profiles mean customers return and do not go elsewhere

The brands are managed by the company, but real people have input. That input leads to the brand's success. Amazon, for instance, has conquered the problem of being faceless by appearing to offer individual service – when you buy a particular product, lists of similar recommendations from real customers appear in a side-bar. Amazon is also justifiably proud of its rating system where customers enter reviews and say exactly what they like about the book, DVD or CD under discussion – good or bad – and award it a number of stars out of five.

This interaction between the company and the customer will become more and more important as the relationships are enabled by interactive technologies. The BBC brand, for instance, has been taken in a new direction by digital-enabled devices. No longer is the customer the passive viewer, told what to watch by the lofty, anonymous provider. Now it is a case of pressing the red button to view one football match instead of another.

Using real people and situations won't work for all brands. Alycia de Mesa, a brand identity consultant, points out 'I don't believe every company can be successful at applying real people concepts/campaigns to brand building or even brand identity. What's important is in remembering that target audiences ARE real people and need to be communicated to as such.' [Source: Correspondence with Insights, May 2004.] But brands that have lost their way could do with a good dose of reality.

EIGHT: BACK TO REALITY

Brands must be more real if they are to connect with customers. But we know that brands exist to add value to something that, without the branding, would not carry that value.

How do we reconcile this? It's acknowledged that companies need to change the way people think about brands, in order for them to grow in the future. Opinions differ only on the methods that should be used to develop that change. Tim Kitchin questions the 'tokenism' of Nike and Reebok moving away from celebrities as icons and recruiting child sportspeople in a drive to become more human.

The important thing is to increase customers' connection to brands – so that brands have more meaning to real people. Unlike the lovemarks approach, if brands are real, and use real people in the communication of the brand, real people will engage with them and they will be authentic.

David Lewis, author of *The Soul of the New Consumer*, argues that we are moving from a time of hype – which customers hate – to a time of buzz – which customers like. This is because buzz makes brands seem part of life, rather than a way of selling you something at a premium.

Lewis points out that buzz is likely to be seen as truthful, as opposed to hype which is perceived as devious. And buzz is democratic – the customer is involved – as opposed to the autocratic nature of hype – which only comes from the company. [Source: quoted by Johnnie Moore in *Ind*, 2003, pp.114]

Real branding takes brands back to where they began – because it emphasises the trust element of a brand. Long ago, all brands had real meaning for real people. It's since the glitz and glitter of sophisticated advertising that we've lost sight of

what brands are meant to be.

It's for marketers to decide how real branding can be used to differentiate brands which are currently competing for the same emotional space. It's only another stage in the 'arms race' of fighting for attention. If everyone starts to compete on the same ground, we'll be back where we started.

But marketers who want to gain an edge can use this idea to leverage truly powerful brands – brands that deliver on their promise, have a true connection with customers, and deliver added value to shareholders.

Shape the agenda with your feedback – send your views to shapetheagenda@cim.co.uk.

Sources

- 1 About Virgin Active, www.virginactive.co.uk [Accessed 28th May 2004]
- 2 Anon (2003) The 100 top brands. *BusinessWeek*, 4th August, pp.48-51.
- 3 Anon (2004) So-called public relations. *Design Week*, 29th April, p.11.
- 4 BBC (2004) McDonald's enjoys its salad days. *BBC Online*, 28th April 2004. Available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3665509.stm> [Accessed 28th May 2004]
- 5 Brierley, Sean (2004) Shouting sweet nothings to sell them pipe dreams. *Marketing Week*, 22nd April, p.29.
- 6 Cann, Richard (2004) Champion family to front Sport England. *PR Week*, 23rd April 2004, p.16.
- 7 Gad, Thomas (2000) *4D branding: cracking the corporate code of the network economy*. FT/Prentice Hall.
- 8 Ind, Nicholas (2003) *Beyond branding*. London, Kogan Page.
- 9 Kitchen, Tom (no date) *On being human: delivering values in the relationship age*. The Medinge Group. Available from: <http://www.beyond-branding.com/blog/On%20being%20Human.%20Values%20Delivery%20in%20the%20Relationship%20Age.doc> [Accessed 28th May 2004]
- 10 Knobil, Marcel (2003) *Foreward to Consumer Superbrands*. Superbrands, p. 5
- 11 Lovemarks.com (2004) McDonalds. Available http://www.lovemarks.com/lm/read.php?LID=98#Scene_1 [Accessed 28th May 2004]
- 12 Peters, Tom (2004) 'Meat market' madness. Available from: http://www.worthwhilemag.com/entry/2004/04/14/meat_market_madness.php [Accessed 28th May 2004]
- 13 Rehtin, Mark (2004) All female Volvo gets mixed reviews. *Automotive News*, 78 (6083), p.8.
- 14 Shepard, Anna (2004) As well as chocolate... *The Times*, 3rd April 2004.
- 15 Taylor, David (2004) *Brandstretch*. Chichester, John Wiley.
- 16 Wernle, B (2004) Volvo women's concept car is mostly a show success. *Automotive News Europe*, 9 (5), p.24.

Appendices

Asset

Heavily branded goods average some 400 points ahead of the FTSE 350 index, which itself is ahead of weakly branded or non-branded goods. [Source: Interbrand.]

And research by Superbrand shows that 70% of people think that their favourite brands would be better at running the country than the government. [Source: Knobil, 2003, pp.5]

Sales of Dove products

The Dove brand has shot up the ranks in recent years. In less than a decade, sales have grown fivefold from under \$300 million in 1990 to well over a \$1 billion in 1999. The brand is growing at 20% per annum and is on course to reach turnover of \$2 billion within a couple of years. [Source: Taylor, 2004 pp.11]

Vonage

Vonage is a broadband phone company in the U.S. and has just launched in Europe. Currently it has an effective Internet ad campaign using black and white photography of 'real' people of all ages and ethnicities. The photos are generally close ups and communicate friendliness and approachability, while the design of the ad and use of black and white photography evoke 'edgy and cool'.

Alycia de Mesa, brand consultant and head of deMesa Brand Consulting, believes that the rest of the brand could benefit from the 'real people branding' found in the Internet campaign. 'What could be improved is for their actual web site to have more of this friendly, approachable, yet still hip look and feel rather than using the standard, colour photos of people in business/action situations that look like every other stock photo out on the Internet,' she says. 'They instantly lose the tangible, emotional connection evoked by the Internet ads.'

This, de Mesa feels, is an example of rather inconsistent brand image, which could be resolved by extending the real person idea. [Source: Correspondence with Insights, May 2004].

Marmite

In 1998, Marmite had a staggering 70% market share – its nearest rival, Bovril had just 20%. After the 'love it or hate it' campaign, in 2000 Marmite had increased this share to 72%, and Bovril had gone down to 15%. Other brands and own brands barely register [Source: Mintel]. Sales of Marmite increased 16% after the first four weeks of 'I hate Marmite' adverts [Source: ACNielsen].

McDonald's

Sales in Europe have picked up 'significantly' since the introduction of the new 'Salads Plus' range. Net income for the first three months of 2004 was \$511.5m, up from \$327m for the same period in 2003. [Source: BBC, 2004]

Volvo

"...If you meet women's expectations, you exceed those for men". So said Hans-Olov Olsson, President and CE of Volvo as he unveiled the sporty YCC (Your Concept Car) at the Geneva International Motor Show, March 2004. This is a car that was designed by women, with women in mind. With detachable machine-washable seat pads, lots more storage, paint that repels dirt and assisted parallel parking it has lots of features that might specifically appeal to the female market. However, with its good-looking exterior and good interior solutions, coupled with good performance, it is a car that may well also appeal to men. Volvo is not intending to develop the car into a product to sell. It is a concept car, the best elements of which will find their way into Volvos' of the future.

The issue of the car being designed for women is beside the point. This is a car that has been developed with real people in mind, never mind their sex. The thought that has been put into the design means that it comes up with solutions for problems that many people did not know existed. But now they have been addressed, other car manufacturers will have to take note in order to keep up. Whether the intended consumer is male or female is incidental. [Sources: Rehtin, 2004, pp.8. and Wernle, 2004, pp.24]