

Five Truths About Brands

Much modern marketing is afflicted by a failure to face up to plain truths. Doing so could salvage thousands of inappropriate design strategies every year writes Kevin Duncan, Turner Duckworth London Strategic Director.

Truth no.1: People are emotional, not rational

The consultants can draw as many flow diagrams as they like, but people do not follow logical steps on a decision tree. Sure, you can pump a stack of rational benefits at them, but as a mainstay of brand communication, this approach went out with the soap wars in the fifties. Most purchasers are now doing so with their emotions.

A modern example of this truth can be seen in relation to the apparent distinction between 'own label' brands and 'real' brands. There is, in fact, no difference. The myth was put about in the early nineties by petrified brand owners observing the relentless rise of the power of the large retailers. The derogatory term 'own label' was gradually replaced by 'retailer own brand', a phrase widely promoted by Terry Leahy of Tesco. These days, many so-called 'own brands' have more loyal and profitable customers than their 'branded' counterparts, much of which is driven by an emotional, rather than rational, bond.

Truth no.2: People are approximate, not precise

There or thereabouts will do for most people. Many marketers breathe the rarefied air in a world full of BMWs and Harvey Nichols, whilst their consumers are more concerned with getting the kids to school and putting food on the table. Where money is tight and time is at a premium, approximately will do.

The sad fact is that most brands simply aren't interesting enough to attract sufficient attention, or to generate a precise response. Your average consumer has a low interest in brands, until a highly enthusiastic researcher comes along and makes them concentrate on them. (At this point, Brand Managers lap up their every word in an effort to verify their theories.)

Truth no.3: People mostly do stuff without thinking

Most consumer behaviour is habitual and involves little or no thought. In this respect, humans are to thinking as cats are to swimming - they resist it whenever possible. This insight effectively neuters the wishful thinking that can be found in many marketing briefs, and throws huge quantities of market research into question.

Because brands aren't more important than real life, many consumers drift along interacting with brands without giving it much thought. It can therefore be misleading to find patterns in purchasing behaviour, for example, when, as far as the consumer is concerned, there isn't one. Brand owners would do well to keep this in perspective.

Truth no.4: People mostly copy other people

As the book *Herd* by Mark Earls shows, most people exercise no or very little personal choice even when offered it. When people do things, they rarely know why, and this has a massive bearing on the predictability of their purchasing behaviour. This means that how brands behave is much more important than what they say, because their true colours will be spotted immediately and broadcast by consumers, not the brand itself. Any dissonance between claim and reality will be ruthlessly exposed by customers, and doubtless posted on the Internet within minutes.

The good news is that if the fit is good, then popularity, and thus purchase, could well be copied at high speed, to the benefit of your brand.

Truth no.5: You can't persuade people any more - they persuade themselves

The old persuasion model, in which a company extolled the virtues of a brand until consumers were persuaded of the benefits, hit the dustbin decades ago. These days, in a complete reversal of the process, a customer is more likely to tell the brand what they think of *it*, a lot of which makes for uncomfortable reading.

To a large extent therefore, Brand Managers do not control their brands and how they work - their customers do. To paraphrase an analogy once made by Jeremy Bullmore, a brand is a bird's nest of thoughts, images and experiences bundled together in the mind of a consumer, *by* the consumer. Consumers own brands, not companies. The best anyone working on a brand can do is to make sure that the twigs they generate are a constructive addition to the overall nest.

So do these truths mean that all is lost for brands and successful marketing? Absolutely not. More than ever, it means that clarity of thought and execution is paramount, and that clever ideas are at a premium.

Exceptional design can play a powerful part here. When devising a design strategy, it pays to face these home truths head on. That will ensure that brilliant design solutions are based on solid ground.