

The New Gods

Brands are hugely influential – and they're worth millions. They don't just sell a product or a service anymore: they sell a set of values, a philosophy, a meaning for life.

By the time you sit down at your desk this morning, hundreds of brands will have hit your retina – toothpaste, underwear, cereal, tea, newspaper, billboards, even the back of your bus ticket, the railway sign and the paper bag for your croissant. We live in a brandscape where an increasing proportion of our lives is mediated by brands. It's not just our shopping: brands dominate our working lives, and corporate logos are now in every civic space, from the school playground and hospital to the art gallery, the sponsored political debate, and the marathon. And this brandscape is global: walk down a street in any city in the world and there will be enough brands to make you feel at home.

Is this a good thing, a bad thing, or neither? Views are passionately held. For the first time, marketing – its purpose and its method – has shifted into the centreground of intense political debate and activism. The anti-globalisation movement doesn't demonstrate outside multinational corporate headquarters¹, it attacks its brands on the high streets, the more familiar the better – McDonald's, Starbucks – because it makes for great media coverage and symbolizes the movement's critique of global capitalism. [...]

Brands have rightly become a political battleground – they represent huge power. Firstly, they are worth a lot of money. The physical assets², the bricks and mortar, now represent a small fraction of the company's value. Far more important is the perception millions of consumers have of the company. Reputation is worth millions because, in a highly competitive market, it brings you loyal customers and good staff. When Ford bought Jaguar, it was estimated that the physical assets were only 16% of the value; when Vodafone bought Orange they were only 10%.

Secondly, brands generate more trust than any institution – government, church, politicians all fall before the credibility of some brands. [...] People have great affection and loyalty to them and will pay over the odds³ for the logo. The argument runs that a successful brand – Swatch or Calvin Klein – offers consistency of quality, a point of certainty in an uncertain world. So we use brands and we decode other people's use of brands to establish their status. We no longer identify with churches, political parties or even our local community: we construct our sense of who we are through our association with brands – from football teams to TV channels, from designer jeans to the make of car, from coffee shop to cosmetics. [...]

Brands are no longer simply about the qualities of the product or service they sell, they are promoted as a set of values, a philosophy, even an ideology. For example, the Orange brand represents a bright optimistic future, while Nike is about individual achievement – just do it. Brands are being used to humanise corporations by appropriating characteristics such as courage, honesty, friendliness and fun.

As brands take on good causes such as Aids or the death penalty, they are implicitly bidding⁴ to legitimise the corporation as a morally and socially responsible institution. The aim is that the audience will forget the downsizing⁵, the sweatshop⁶ wages, the environmental waste, the huge pay inequalities and believe that the corporation is a good thing.

Madeleine Bunting,
The Guardian, July 9, 2001

1. headquarters (n.): siège, quartier général
2. assets (n.): actifs, valeurs, biens
3. pay over the odds for sth: payer quelque chose plus que sa valeur

4. bid (v.): say, ask
5. downsize (v.): reduce the number of employees
6. sweatshop /'swetʃɒp/ (n.): atelier où la main d'œuvre est exploitée