



10 Rules for Branding in a Post- Branded World

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A new approach to brands is ahead of us.

We live in the twilight of a branded world born over 100 years ago.

Most marketing remains blinded by the fading glare of its old, outdated promises.

Yet, there is a new approach to brands ahead of us, based upon a definition that is less about static image and imagined identity, and more about real-time interaction and actual involvement between company and consumer.

This is your Manifesto for making branding work in a post-branded world.

Everywhere you look, brands are in decline. Sure, branding may be more common, apparent, colorful, loud, and wilder than ever before, but it accomplishes less, almost in inverse proportion to the invention behind it. Actual awareness is a fleeting commodity that is ever further distanced from actual sales or business impact. Even as the marketing industry media are filled with reports of the latest attempts to revive the promise of branding, there's no proof that anything works.

Not even the edgiest viral campaign or buzz strategy can overcome the fact that consumers are harder to reach, more difficult to convince, and less likely to stay loyal than ever before. Trust in corporations is at an all-time low, in spite of our latest innovations in communications, charitable works, and CRM.

Brands can't command the price surcharges that were once common, and have no easier time resisting any of the other negative pressures of a challenging economy. Product and market development cost the same for well-known brands as they do for unknowns; employees expect the same pay, irrespective of the popularity of employer image.

We talk about brands as if they're a fixture in our lives, or a fact of nature, but they're neither. Branding is a 100+ year-old conceit based on a specific context of community, culture, economics, and technology that has long since disappeared. Today's market and mediasphere have little resemblance to those of the Twentieth Century.

We live in a post-branded world.

Like any transitional moment in history, the real drivers of this change are only now becoming apparent. It is time to start asking different questions, starting with the acknowledgment that "branding as awareness" may no longer be a valid starting point for your marketing strategy.

AWARENESS IS SO LAST CENTURY

It's strange to even contemplate, isn't it? What if "awareness" is just "recognition," a moment in time, attached to context of place and circumstance, but with no residual or ongoing meaning? Stripped of the pretensions of branding, it's quite inert, really—almost purposeless.

The latest technical, cultural, and behavioral evidence suggests that what we've always called "awareness" is but a starting point for a long, convoluted, unreliable and often-times unpredictable process that has little resemblance to the models of brand strategy on which so many businesses rely. Awareness is a noun, and 21st Century branding has become a verb.

So forget declaring a brand, and then delivering it to consumers. Ads don't matter anymore, nor does anything else that somehow presents your brand. There is no continuum somewhere "out there" to which your brand speaks, associates, or otherwise communicates.

You communicate your brand through the actual behaviors of your business, and the involvement of people in that reality. Brand is the process itself. It is what takes consumers from awareness to repeat purchase. Brand is first and foremost a series of behaviors—not ideas or creative copy—that companies and their customers both share, and exhibit.

You can't afford to just talk about brands and branding in a post-branded world. You have to do them

WHY BRANDS DON'T MATTER ANYMORE

Everyone is aware of branding. We can't choose a product, use a service, or interact with one another without talking about or referencing brands. Brands are words, images, ideas, logos, colors, emotions, expectations, people, places, things, businesses, non-profits, government agencies and, well, you get the idea. Branding is everywhere because everything is a brand.

Of course, that's not true. It never was. Once we get past our immediate, almost unconscious assumptions about brands, we can see that we use the word 'brand' to mean nothing more than a 'name' or an identifier (that's the etymology of the word, anyway). There's no hidden brand substance that we carry around in our minds or souls...a word or icon might prompt a few reactions, but they're imprecise, impermanent, and further removed from our actual buying behavior than ever before.

There are lots of reasons why brands don't matter anymore. Much has changed, in terms of technology, society, economics, culture, and art, since the precepts of branding were established 100 years ago. You could read any number of books to learn about what's up. Here's my take on what's happened:

Reality has caught up with branding.

The advent of the Internet, with its real-time communications, has turned every consumer into a *de facto* reporter or watchdog. Brands used to claim things that couldn't be substantiated by reality (for instance, it's doubtful that an aftershave could literally drive women insane). They can't anymore.

People are more literal now.

Brands used to be 'mini-stories,' as our shared ideas and beliefs served to fill in the blanks of a stolen print ad image or short TV commercial. A fragmented society shares no such common definitions, so marketing needs to be far more explicit in order to even register.

Subtlety is dead.

While every generation has likely bemoaned the coarsening of daily life, the digital revolution has captured even the smallest bits of experience, so people expect to see, hear, or otherwise experience detail, not suggestion.

Taste is no longer a trend.

The two founding tenets of a cultural trend—a topic and an audience—have been blown apart into millions of fragments, as people can aggregate for any subject, large or small, and often concurrently. There are no more trends, only moments.

Repetition risks becoming noise.

The logic of advertising used to be that repetition built brand retention. The opposite seems to be true today, as people have learned to tune out information that isn't directly relevant to them. Worse, if it's repeated, it risks becoming perceived as a negative.

Choice is real-time.

It's hard to even imagine a world wherein people couldn't shop, talk, or otherwise interact anywhere, anytime, but branding *used* to address set points in time/behavior (shopping trip, meal time). That's no longer the case.

Virtual experience is the new dreamscape.

One of the drivers of brands has always been associating a product, place, or service with a sense of 'escape' or relief from the daily routine. Now much of that escape is available virtually, which threatens to obviate one of the primary drivers of consumer purchase.

Recognition isn't the same as relevance.

The renaissance of viral communications—funny videos or ads that you share with friends—is based on the traditional branding premise that recognition matters about all else. But busy consumers care more about relevance to what they're doing; if an ad is relevant to 'being funny,' it's not necessarily remembered for much else.

No more secret codes.

A typical branding tool has always been to create some word or technical-sounding term—*X12 power*, or *ultra-surfactant* quotient, or something like that—and presume to then “own” it as an exclusive brand attribute. Consumers can look that stuff up now, and discover that it's usually about as real as the *Battlestar Galatica* spin-offs your marketing gurus are also imagining.

Conversations are just the beginning.

While most of the attention in the mediaspace has been about conversational, or social media, branding has been embodied as participation in said dialogs. Yet, as just more fodder for conversation, brands are reduced to what they once were, perhaps 100 years ago—names, and little more. The brand 'ing' occurs by the very conversations themselves.

THE MESSAGE IS THE MESSAGE

You're still thinking that brands aren't outdated, right? Awareness matters!

If so, you're not alone: there's a *Creative Media Industrial Complex* of very talented people working feverishly to make the old definitions and expectations of brands fit into our new world. Many millions are being spent to create the awareness and retention that just aren't a part of our modern experience, almost as if yesterday's answers should work, because they worked once before.

Marshall McLuhan, the communications and social critic, once said "the medium is the message," which was a reference to the *ways* people experience media as being more important than the content of the media itself. He presciently saw that various models of interaction and involvement shaped what people got *from* the content far more than the what was actually *in* it.

He was right—Internet search is a behavior that changes not just what we find, but how and how often we use it, for instance—but once that interaction becomes ubiquitous, as it has through broadband web access, mobile phones, etc., the content emerges again as a key driver of behavior. In other words, the latter must match to the former; the *media* of our experience dictates the *content* we put into it, not visa versa.

Ultimately, what matters is the message, and it has to emerge from the experience of media, not be inserted into it.

So the mechanism of, say, a game or promotion, an Internet site or sales visit ... these aren't tools to which concepts of brand need to be put, but rather drive the very attributes of that branding. And it is via these actions—the behaviors that companies undertake, and that consumers evidence—that branding in a post-branded world is being defined.

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How do you bring all of this conceptual stuff down to the realities of your business or operating entity? It's deceptively simple:

Ask different questions, instead of trying to make the same old answers fit. Throw out your previous definitions of brand, and *do branding differently*.

Here are 10 Rules, with illustrative examples, for you to use within your organization before you spend any more money on last Century's solutions.

I YOU CAN'T BRAND YOUR WAY OUT OF REALITY

When we see or hear two things that don't jibe with one another, like being told "everything I say isn't true, including what I'm saying right now," it's called *cognitive dissonance*. One of the key indicators of branding's failed application in a post-branded world is the emergence of *reality dissonance*.

Take the world's largest oil companies, which have all been engaged in aggressive, sometimes very creative communications programs to brand themselves as being "environmentally responsible." There are petitions, web sites, even a video game to try and convince consumers that Big Oil is actively involved in finding solutions to the energy crisis and global warming.

This isn't true, of course.

Oil companies make their money by sucking stuff out of the ground, processing it, and then selling it to people who burn it so they can drive around, read at night, and do all the other things currently enabled by fossil fuels. In doing so, lots of gunk is released into the environment.

Instead of simply stating this fact, the oil companies are trying to use branding to obfuscate it. There's no real conversation going on with them concerning getting out of the pollution business and into the renewable gig, and that's OK. Unfortunately, the communications experts in their employ have convinced them that they should embark on a fantasy campaign, that *saying* something will convince people of something that isn't true (and that is countered by the everyday actions of the businesses).

One of the driving principles of branding in a post-branded world is that brands can't expect to ignore or deny reality. Telling the truth is harder, but far more compelling and sustainable.

2 SAY WHAT YOU MEANT TO SAY

Here's a game for you to try, which I call *The Fashion Game*: pick any style magazine (one full of fashion ads) and, starting with the first ad, propose the basics of a story. *Dad is a CIA agent saying goodbye to his kids before a mission*, or something like that. Now flip the page to the next ad, and add to the story. *He joins up with his partners as they walk to meet their adversaries*. Next ad, and more plot. *The evil robots await the CIA team, led by the dominatrix blonde from another planet*. Etc.

This little bit of culture-jamming reveals a major shortcoming of traditional branding: you can't rely on the viewer (or listener, or watcher) to *get* the story or meaning you've embedded in your creative.

Story-telling in our post-branded world requires more literal, specific expression. Think videogames instead of abstract paintings. If you have a benefit or value to present to your would-be customers, tell them about it. You can be wildly creative, but you have to do so with an eye to being understood. There simply isn't a common language for imagery anymore; one person's sexy skinny model is another's anorexic victim.

You might want to apply the *Fashion Game* methodology to your current marketing materials. Are there pictures that require some level of deconstruction, or some joke or *sleight-of-brand* that seems so obvious to you and nobody else? Now put your marketing materials together and see whether there's a compelling narrative that emerges from the pieces. Do they support and feed into one another or, like the fashion ads, provide fodder for an imaginary adventure story?

3 EVERYBODY IS SELLING A SERVICE

There's a quality that all wristwatch ads share. Out of all the possible bits of information that could be presented to the reader, there's one point that is more important than all others: 10:09. Each watchface tells that time. These companies, and most all of their competitors, decided that picturing their products and displaying the time "10:09" was crucial to presenting their brands.

How silly, don't you think?

There's no possible way that anybody could differentiate these ads based on the visual information presented therein, let alone make a purchase decision. These branding ads feature products, nothing more, and they look identical. Interestingly, so do most other products, from hamburgers to hotel rooms. Spending marketing dollars to present those images to consumers is common. It's also a mistake in the post-branded world. Now that consumers can search, review, share, and retain information on what they buy, it means that *everything they buy is a service*; even the most one-timer purchase has a lifetime of commentary that trails it. That means that they expect brands to address this ongoing relationship, whether frequent and real, or occasional and indirect. What matters in your marketing is less what the thing you sell looks like, and more how you and others support it.

We're all in the services business in the post-branded world.

What matters in your marketing is less what the thing you sell looks like, and more how you and others support it.

4 SHOOT FOR THE MOON, NOT THE STARS

The “trend” business is very alluring to brand marketers, as it has embodied the concept of viral communications since long before the term came into common use. A *trend* is when people do things (buy stuff) because other people are doing (buying) them, so a lot of branding—especially some of the new media activities that happen in online social networks—hopes to incite such activities, for obvious reasons.

What’s less obvious is whether truly large or meaningful trends are possible, or worth your brand marketing effort—in social media or anywhere else.

Consumers are at once linking across oceans and cultures, and organizing into ever-smaller communities based on specific, shared interests. For instance, there’s a community of people who love a strain of sci-fi imagining called Steampunk who share everything from media outlets and fiction, to favorite holidays and fashion items. These consumers are distinct from, say, Tokyo Pop consumers, or the legions of groups that descend on Mall of America every holiday season.

While traditional branding might hold onto the hope of prompting next year’s Cabbage Patch Dolls phenomenon, branding in the post-branded world suggests that you target these smaller, more discreet communities. Trend has less to do with *impermanence*, *immediacy*, and more to do with *involvement* and *affirmation*. Endorsement, not mimicry.

Go for a dedicated smaller group you can learn about, instead of hoping to exploit a larger population of people you’ll never know. Today’s trends are about buy-in, not selling out.

5 INTEGRATE OVER TIME, NOT ON CONTENT

One of the catchphrases of traditional marketing has been “integrated marketing,” which is a broad allusion to the idea that various marketing tactics—like ads, web sites, etc.—should all fit together somehow, and support the same brand messaging.

What this usually amounts to is the same imagery, colors, and content in a variety of media, so it’s not so much *integration* as it is *repetition*. Combined with some of the other outdated notions of old-fashioned branding, you get things like car ads that all show the same things, over and over again. Visit an automotive web site, and you’ll get...more cars. Throw in a creative slogan, or run crazy viral videos on the Internet. Still, integrated marketing is all about saying the same thing, over and over again.

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The latest behavioral and cognitive research suggests that people don’t really pay attention to things unless they’re already somewhat interested; if not, they actually tune it out the more they hear it.

So the opportunity in the post-branded world isn’t to keep doing the same thing in hope of getting a different outcome, but to change the approach. Integrate over time, for instance, whether that means coordinating your marketing with the context in which people experience it (who needs a web site listed on a radio ad when most drivers have no capacity to write it down, for instance), or within the chronology of your target consumers’ purchase intent (i.e. don’t run the same car ad 3 times in a given hour).

6 THERE'S NO TIME LIKE NOW

Think of food or travel branding; the hope is that you'll remember a particular product or service when next you're hungry, or in search of a vacation destination. Somehow, the branding will hide in your psyche and bide its time until you're ready to unconsciously call it up. So how, exactly, does this branding relate to that eventual purchase decision? Indirectly, at best, and more than likely not at all.

Most branding still operates on a theory best summarized as “we'll put the brand out there—wherever there is—and our targets will absorb, store, recollect, and apply it when they need it.” Traditional brands hope for some future benefit that is outside the purview (and the accountability) of branding strategies.

The post-branded world is built upon discreet moments of *now*.

Instead of relying on a someday/someday strategy, the opportunity is to look at each of your marketing events—from the smallest to the most major—as opportunities to address consumer needs *at that time*. The best way to contribute to the future state of things is to take responsibility for helping create it, not just hope to be included when it's created. So take prompt actions, behaviors that matter—vote, register, get, respond, whatever. There's no time like now in the post-branded world.

7 REALITY HAS TO TRUMP VIRTUAL

Ours is the Age of Virtual Reality, among many other experiences. The content available digitally rivals much of the experience accessible by the rich and aristocratic class of past generations. Even the mundane appears somewhat magical when rendered digitally; I don't think I've ever felt as good about, say, taco chips or razors, as I have after seeing them on my computer.

The travel business has had to contend with this fact, and find ways to brand *reality* vs. the virtual corollaries. The post-branded world requires that every product or service address this fact. No matter how well your creative people can render online—or on any other medium—whatever it is you sell, you need to figure out how to make the *reality* of your consumer experience that much better.

It used to be that brands risked letting visitors down when a beach wasn't as pristine as it appeared in an ad. Now, you run the risk of over-selling—*over-branding*—your toothpaste, floor polish or industrial widget.

Reality matters more than brands in the post-branded world. You've already read this a few times in the Manifesto. I hope it sticks, because it's one of the overriding facts of our times.

You need to figure out how to make the reality of your consumer experience that much better.

8 KILL YOUR MASCOT

Mascots are animated logos, artifacts leftover from an era when consumers needed shorthand to memorize the commands given unto them through branding. There's nothing wrong with funny or cuddly characters in marketing, and there's a benefit to putting recognizable cues on your packaging.

But mascots are otherwise no better than a distraction. Your brand can no more "own" a character than it owns a logotype or color.

In fact, the more time and money you spend trying to do so, the less you're focused on the things that matter to consumers in a post-branded world: functions, associations, attributions, forwards, affirmations. If you're successful producing recognition of your mascot, you risk that attention failing to transfer to your business or, more likely, having no connection to eventual sales. You can probably associate the Burger King with hamburgers, or the lizard with Geico, but does it do anything more than command a small sliver of your awareness? That's old branding at its very best.

Instead of putting resources into a mascot, how about creatively finding ways to communicate the qualities of your business? Think fewer objects, and more conversations. Not so much image, and lots more reality.

9 NO MORE SECRET CODES

As we move out of the founding, early years of the Internet, most consumers are facing an interesting dichotomy: while we can access an unheralded amount of detailed information, our capacity for *understanding* and *integrating* it is lower than ever before.

So how is it that a lot of the most glossy, obviously expensive branding contains data, terms and, at times, images that make absolutely no sense to the uninitiated?

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The tenets of branding suggest that companies should endeavor to “own” terms and slogans, much like they can own mascots or other gimmicks. Yet the consumers in the post-branded world are searching for common sense and clarity, and that experience requires simplicity and honesty from brands.

Consider the flat-screen television category as an example of what not to do: can you explain to a non-techie person the difference between HDMI and coaxial? How about 1080 as a resolution size? LCD vs. plasma? If you can, you’re an exception. Millions have been spent by experts at branding, with the effect of utterly confusing the marketplace.

The post-branded world makes sense, oddly enough. No secret codes required.

10 TALK IS CHEAPER THAN EVER BEFORE

You've read about social media, and the definitive revolution in communications driven by conversational tools, from IM and chat, to networking services. Much has been written about companies getting involved in forums, blogs, and whatever will come next. Complex math has been developed to link these activities back to some relevance to the brand. It makes the utility of putting a billboard up on a baseball outfield wall seem downright obvious by comparison.

Conversation in the post-branded world isn't an end unto itself, but a means to operationalize intent; social media are tools, or places where things get done. So, while traditional ideas about branding suggest that the frequency of brand mention in these conversations has merit, the reality of the post-branded world is that conversation is irrelevant unless it's linked somehow, in some way, to subsequent behavior. Talk was always cheap. It's just cheaper now.

Before you get your CEO to commit to writing a blog, consider the actions you're trying to prompt among the consumers (or would-be consumers) who are participating in whatever social media you've targeted. There's no doubt that you can find ways to further waste their time... even contribute interesting stuff to the conversation. But without a clear idea of the outcomes you want to prompt, you risk wading into the media without a purpose. Remember, being social is a means, not a destination.

THE EMPEROR'S BRAND NEW CLOTHES

The Twentieth Century is over, and with it we have lost our working model for branding. Your favorite business journalist or agency exec might not know how to talk about it yet, but you're likely encountering it in the real world. Customers are harder to find, more difficult to sell to, and less likely to stay loyal to your brand.

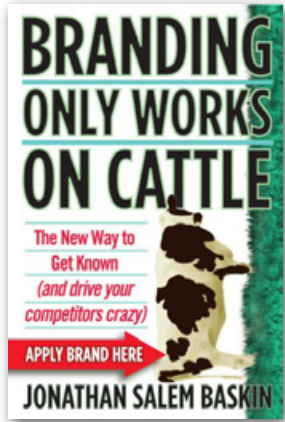
No amount of creative answers can change the fact that the very premises upon which the questions of branding are based have changed. We are living in a post-branded world, and *it's time to start asking new questions so that we can come up with better solutions.*

The 10 Rules for Branding in a Post-Branded World are intended to start that exploration for your business. The list is not complete. Parts of it could be improved, or perhaps new ideas swapped for original ones.

The opportunity is for you to make this Manifesto *your manifesto.*

The answers for how to brand in the 21st Century will not come from people or organizations that have a vested interest in doing so based on the old rules. It's up to you, in your business, to invent the future. You're already doing it every day anyway.

Take control of your branding, and start asking more of it. 📖



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