



Editorial

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It is often remarked how ubiquitous the concept of ‘brand’ seems to have become in recent years.

This is not surprising. ‘Brand’ is a word that captures the idea of reputation observed, reputation valued and reputation managed; and we live in a world in which reputation counts for a great deal. The importance of reputation, in fact, tends to increase as societies become larger, more diffuse and more complex: this is because most human transactions depend on a degree of trust in order to proceed. Trust can either be formed through direct experience of the ‘offering’ by the ‘purchaser’ — what might be called *earned trust* — or vicariously, following the example of other purchasers who have learned to trust the offering through their own direct experience. Trust earned by others is then used as a proxy for earned trust: this effect might be called *trust taken on trust*.

Trust formed by many satisfied purchasers creates a ‘cloud’ of trustworthiness which, either naturally or artificially, eventually surrounds an offering in the marketplace, and this cloud is a fundamental characteristic of strong brands. It performs the vital function of bridging the trust gap faced by first-time purchasers until they too have direct experience of the offering.

Of course, the appeal of the offering itself can also help to bridge this trust gap: when an offering is sufficiently desirable, purchasers will sometimes overlook their lack of direct experience of it, or even, on occasion, the absence of that cloud of trust which comes from the experiences

of others. They will, in short, choose to trust their feelings rather than their reason.

The appeal of an offering, especially if combined with a cloud of trust, can sometimes be so powerful that it will even survive a negative direct experience. Appeal is largely subjective, and can be judged at surface by the purchasers, but quality, dependability, reliability, competence and trustworthiness are hidden from the eye and can only be learned by direct or indirect experience. Appeal can have its own cloud effect too, which is important for those purchasers who are unable or unwilling to form or rely on their own judgments about the appeal of the offering.

The cloud of trust and the cloud of appeal are fundamental to the success of most offerings in most marketplaces. The art and science of branding, design, advertising, public relations, public affairs and many others besides are essentially processes by which this cloud of trust can be enhanced and its formation accelerated, even artificially induced or simulated. Companies and governments spend uncounted millions in attempting to create the impression that they are trusted by many people, or at least that they deserve this trust.

Globalisation has created a vast, planet-sized network of individuals working, communicating and trading together, and in such a colony only a small proportion of transactions are able to proceed on a rational basis of earned trust. Human society therefore utterly depends on a vast and complex system of brand value in

order to operate at this scale — a system entirely predicated on ‘trust taken on trust’.

This system of trust clouds has taken several centuries to achieve its current state of development. Arguably, it all started in Italy, when certain family names emerged early in the 14th century as symbols of wealth, trust and integrity: the Buonsignori of Siena — the first major international bank — then the Frescobaldi of Florence, the Ricciardi of Lucca, and later still, the Bardi, Peruzzi and Acciaiuoli families, some of whose business empires employed hundreds of staff in subsidiary offices across Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (Sapori, 1946).

In their correspondence and journals, the medieval Italian merchants stress over and over again the importance of creating a good and famous name: to be recognised far and wide as honourable citizens, to play a distinguished part in social and civic life, to support culture and donate to good causes. It is most interesting how this aspect of corporate reputation, never forgotten or overlooked by most clever and successful companies, has recaptured the attention of big business in recent decades, and the idea has been relaunched and rebranded as ‘corporate social responsibility’ or ‘corporate citizenship’, as if it were something that had just been invented.

Only an impeccable reputation for probity, substantial resources and success could automatically confer the kind of trust among new clients which ensured the continuation of their business. In every respect, the power of these family names was identical to that of modern brands: they acted as a shortcut to an informed buying or investing decision, and stood as a universally acknowledged proxy for trust.

Ever since the publication of what was probably the first ever international business best seller, the snappily titled *Book of Knowledge of the Beauties of Commerce and of Cognisance of Good and Bad Merchandise and of Falsifications*, written by Abu al-Fadl Ja’far Ibn Ali of Damascus some time between the 9th and 12th centuries, it has been understood that one’s good name is worth more than riches, for the simple reason that it is the necessary basis for

continued enrichment. People will only buy from people whom they know and trust, but as soon as trade extends beyond the limits of close acquaintances — which of course it must, if larger fortunes are to be made — then one’s good name must somehow be broadcast, and become a byword for trustworthiness. The cloud of trust, in other words, must be created.

In exactly the same way as non-locally produced products need brand names based on a reputation for quality in order to stand in for personal experience, so trading families — the service brands of their day — needed brand names based on a reputation for honour as soon as their circle of trade extended beyond the home town or a day’s ride on horseback. Brands are a necessary consequence of the growing distance between buyer and seller; and this distance is a necessary function of the desire to expand the business to benefit from a wider marketplace.

The trust broadcast system commonly called branding is most often associated with commercial transactions, simply because branding is a science which has developed within the commercial world, but the same basic principles apply in equal measure to almost every sphere of public and private life: political, social, and cultural, official or unofficial, private or public. The idea of place branding is usually associated with places simply because the nation, city or region is most often the administrative unit under whose authority the groups of people represented can behave in the organised manner necessary to achieve a ‘branding’ effect; but you can take the place away from place branding and the concept still stands.

Groups of people are subject to the branding effect just as places are: they are perceived both internally and externally, to some extent, as summarisable entities, and thus have ‘brand images’; their progress and prosperity are to a large extent conditioned and influenced by that image. So non-geographical groups of people are just as much ‘nation brands’ as places are: being a member of a particular faith, a caste, a social class or an income bracket, a political persuasion, an age group, a gang, a supporters’

club, a profession, a gender: all these allegiances consign their individual members to a group branding effect, a public identity which overlays, influences and to some extent distorts their individual identity. Just as with a corporation or a country, the brand image of the group to which one is perceived to belong will help one to 'trade at a premium' if it is a positive image, and oblige one to 'trade at a discount' if it is negative. Weak or small groups, just like weak or small nations, can punch above their weight if their image magnifies the reality; and vice versa.

Even (or perhaps especially) outlawed organisations depend on the cloud of trust as well as the cloud of appeal in order to attract new members and support for their causes; brand management is consequently just as important to an organisation like al-Qaeda as it is to a corporation like Apple. Broadcasting trust and appeal is the lifeblood of such organisations, which depend entirely on long-distance effects created through formal and informal networks of associates, since person-to-person 'selling' from the core of the organisation itself directly to its 'consumer base' is only available in very limited forms.

The fact that branding is a vital component of the strategies of al-Qaeda and its associated organisations is clearly shown by Daniel Kimmage in a forthcoming analysis of Jihadist media (Kimmage, 2008). As Kimmage says, 'Jihadist media are attempting to mimic a "traditional" structure in order to boost credibility and facilitate message control. While conventional wisdom holds that jihadist media have been quick to exploit technological innovations to advance their cause, they are moving toward a more structured approach based on consistent branding and quasi-official media entities. Their reasons for doing so appear to be a desire to boost the credibility of their products and ensure message control. In line with this strategy, the daily flow of jihadist media that appears on the internet is consistently and systematically branded'.

What al-Qaeda has been able to achieve over the last seven or eight years must surely rank as one of the most effective brand-building campaigns in history. The extraordinary global

branding effect achieved by a small, heavily constrained, initially unknown and relatively under-resourced body deserves examination. It seems as if al-Qaeda has deliberately sought to harness the branding power of nations and populations much larger and more influential than itself, and pit them against each other — the use of terrorist strikes in order to stir up enmity between 'Islam' and the 'West' being one of its core tactics: so it is not merely an organisation that depends on its own brand to magnify its importance, attract recruits and gain attention; it also deploys the brands of other players in order to achieve its aims. It is a brander as well as a brand, and this is the secret of its inordinate influence.

The collateral damage caused by the endless cycle of hostility between Islam and the West does not, of course, start or finish with the negative branding of Muslims against non-Muslims and vice versa: it has also inflicted enormous and probably lasting damage on the brand images of many nations, thus constraining their ability to engage productively in international trade and international relations for many years to come.

When Iran was included as a 'guest nation' in the 4th Quarter of the 2006 Nation Brands Index, for example, some of the extent of this collateral damage was revealed. Iran's scores were the lowest overall on every dimension, and indeed for every question in the survey except the two concerned with cultural and historical heritage. Even on these questions, Iran was ranked 35th and 36th out of 38. That one of the world's oldest and most important continuous civilisations, representing 6,000 years of culture and learning, can today be ranked virtually at the bottom of the world's leading nations for its cultural and historical heritage, lower even than countries whose civilisations are mere centuries old, must surely give pause for thought. The power of political and ideological discord to wipe millennia of achievement from the memory of humanity in a matter of decades is a terrifying power indeed.

Not surprisingly, people may rebel against the brand image imposed on them by external

opinion as a result of their membership of a certain group: it is to be hoped that the respectable and moderate citizens of countries like Iran and Pakistan might one day rebel against their being branded — through the efforts of their own leaders, the ignorance of the media, or the propaganda of Western governments — as militant fundamentalists. This is the tyranny of public opinion, the coarsening effect of the simple shorthands we all use in order to sum up complex groups of people. Trying to understand and, if possible, to have some influence over these shorthands is, just as in place branding, the real justification for the existence of the discipline: place branding is, as I have often said, legitimate self-defence against the tyranny of ignorance.

This impatience with the coarsening effect of the 'group brand' is also part of the reason why political parties find it harder and harder to create and sustain membership, at least in stable and prosperous democracies. When basic needs are answered, then the strong practical distinctions between political ideologies begin to fade, and the issues that motivate people tend to become more subtle, more variable, and less susceptible to the broad theologies of party politics: when everybody is middle-class, distinctions like 'left wing' and 'right wing' cease to have much meaning. In such circumstances, it is not surprising if voters dislike being branded as subscribers to an entire belief system when their actual views on different issues may range widely across the traditional political spectrum. Nobody wants to be branded as a 'conservative' or a 'liberal' if this means traducing their views on a large proportion of the issues that they care about, and until the arrival of a new generation of political brands that communicate in a more sophisticated and more nuanced way the concerns of modern voters, it seems likely that democratic participation will continue to decline.

However, the simplifying effect of a group brand may be, for certain people at certain times in their lives, precisely what they want, and the ability to hide one's complex personal

identity behind the coarse narrative of a branded group can be very appealing. This is why rebellious adolescents are so often attracted to the simple, potent brand images of gangs, supporters' clubs, street fashions and fundamentalist sects: the desire to sublimate the difficulty and complexity of an emerging personality into something clear, shared and straightforward, doubtless lies behind much behaviour of this sort. The syndrome tends to be more widespread and less age-specific in those cultures characterised by anthropologists as 'communitarian' or 'collectivist', but is found to some degree in all societies.

It is never pleasant to have one's national identity defined or caricatured by others, especially when they have loud voices. There is a good example of this in the United Kingdom: because the British 'identity' favoured in popular American culture appears to be a nostalgic fantasy based largely on James Bond films, there is a tendency not just for Hollywood portrayals of Britain to follow this stereotype (eg *Austin Powers*), but for British productions to follow suit (eg *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Johnny English*). The problem is that these 'alien' portrayals are never very far removed from reality: they are reality seen through a slightly different cultural lens than the nation's own self-view, and are thus very hard to combat, or even distinguish from the 'real thing'. Consequently, there is a danger that after repeated exposure to such interpretations of identity, the population of the country itself may start to play along with the portrayal, especially if it is a beguiling and popular one.

There is no question that groups whose identity is fragile (an emerging nation, an émigré community), are likely to be tempted to fall in with an interpretation of their identity that is favoured by more powerful groups, especially if it appears to give them a clearer, more robust and more likeable status in the world and in their host countries.

This can be considered a good rather than a bad thing, and a useful step-up on the way to forging a richer and truer identity in the longer term. If the 'manufactured identity' provides

clarity and acceptance, even for trivial or false reasons, that is an important preliminary to achieving real acceptance in the long run. The important thing is that the temporary identity does not become 'rustled into place' and that it serves purely as the first stage in a longer and more rewarding conversation between peoples. One can see the Australians currently grappling with a grossly simplified Hollywood interpretation of their national identity (such as that portrayed in *Crocodile Dundee*) as they try to move it towards something more complex, more nuanced, more true and more useful to their aims.

But the phenomenon has a mirror image that is less positive. Today in many Western European countries, one can witness many discontented or alienated young Muslims 'playing along' with the identity provided for them by the media (the narrative being 'willing recruits for extremism'). This is an age-old problem: in seeking to understand a phenomenon such as religious fundamentalism, commentators discuss it in public and in the media, and in this way a consensus is reached and the phenomenon becomes named, and branded; branding makes it more real, more powerful and more accessible. This brand, once created, is then perceived to offer an identity to certain groups within the population who feel the lack of a strong identity of their own. Unable or unwilling to identify with their parents' or grandparents' national identity, and unwilling or unwelcome participants in the identity of the country where they are born and raised, they feel naked and unbranded. 'Willing recruits for extremism' may be a negative brand, but any brand is better than none: young Muslims are offered this suit of clothing by public opinion, and not surprisingly, they put it on.

This unwitting process of branding population groups also serves to widen the gulf between the 'our brand' of mainstream society and the 'their brand' of the disaffected. This is precisely the function of brands in the commercial marketplace: to put clear water between one product and another and build an incontrovertible separateness of identity which

is the prerequisite of strong loyalty. In a competitive commercial marketplace, it is entirely desirable; in a society seeking to become healthily diverse and tolerant, it is horribly dangerous.

Reputation in one form or another is the underlying currency of our modern world, and in consequence is just as much a part of the solution to these problems as their cause.

There is no question that the ideas and techniques which are explored and discussed in the pages of this journal are, in the main, competitive techniques: place branding is attractive to many countries because it appears to offer them a way to improve their prospects for trade, aid, economic development, political influence and general respect from the international community. Ultimately, however, place branding is not an entirely selfish pursuit, even if it is usually driven by national self-interest: so many of the today's problems are caused by people knowing too little about other places and other groups of people, by the eternal human habit of reducing those places and groups to the level of a convenient, superficial, and often negative brand, that any approach which helps to promote a fuller and richer understanding of humanity and its populations and cultures must surely produce societal benefits in the longer term.

The deliberate use of branding effects to turn people and nations against each other is, indeed, a powerful tool in the wrong hands, but it is equally capable of producing the opposite effect. Let us hope that this journal can play some part in developing and disseminating the skills which will enable countries and coalitions of countries to do the latter.

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Editor

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