

I believe a role for brands will be...to change your world

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One brand can make a difference

Twenty-one year old Li Yuchun is the most popularly elected person in China, more people have shown their individual support for her than for President Hu Jintao. But Yuchun was not a politician, she was the 2005 winner of 'Supergirl', the Chinese version of Pop Idol. However unintentionally, the Pop Idol brand bought a version of democracy to over 400 million people in one of the world's most tightly controlled authoritarian regimes. The social and cultural impact of Supergirl did not go unnoticed:

"This is a development in our culture from social bondage to democracy".¹



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I believe not only that brands can shape the world we live in but that brands will also be increasingly used as tools or 'change agents' to consciously bring about such change. Consumers have always defined the meaning of a brand but now a brand's value is derived more from its meaning than its product. How can brands justify their existence to consumers? How will your brand help people to change their world?

¹ 'Mad about the girl: a pop idol for China', The Gaurdian, Friday 7 October 2005.
(www.gaurdian.co.uk/media/2005/oct/07/chinathemedia.broadcasting)

² Li Yuchun, winner of the 2005 China Supergirl contest

Consumers define brands

Brands are defined by people³, existing as 'simply a collection of perceptions in the mind of the consumer'.⁴ We can build on these ideas to determine that we use brands to inform the way we see the world.

People have always attached arbitrary social meaning to certain objects or behaviours (fig.1). Gary Duckworth sums it up well:

"We float in a sea of meanings, significations and signs, it is our arrangements of these which shapes the world as we see it, which structures and guides our behaviour."⁵



Figure 1. Social meanings given to arbitrary symbols, objects and actions.

We use brands as cultural short hand to represent complex arrangements of social meaning. Giving someone your last Rolo is an informal romantic gesture whilst a box of Quality Street says 'thank you'. When I was at school slapping someone around the head was unacceptable behaviour, unless they were drinking Tango...

Brands give things social meaning.

Service brands are "derived not from goods but from complete interaction between consumers and the service organisation"⁶, i.e. they are defined by the way consumers use them. Some product brands can also be thought of in this way, IKEA is defined by customer participation in the buying and construction process, as is Dell. Brand owners can sometimes have little impact on the social meaning their brands develop, e.g. Burberry:

³ 'Confessions of an advertising man', David Ogilvy, 1963

⁴ 'What is brand equity anyway?', Paul Feldwick, 2002

⁵ 'Understanding Brands', Chapter 3: 'Brands and the role of advertising', Gary Duckworth, 1996

⁶ 'Creating Powerful Brands', Chapter 6: Service Brands, Leslie De Chernatony, 1998



Rather than building a brand from the bottom up (product, positioning, brand, execution) the world's newest brands are determined by their consumers, either in content, the way that they are used or both. Google, Wikipedia and BBC (via iPlayer) set out a vision but ultimately let people decide how that should manifest it self.

Society now defines the economy

Over the last century, we have witnessed a new social economic epoch, the dawn of the information age and the knowledge economy.

The majority of the world's economic output is now generated from the service sector despite it representing a minority of the global workforce (fig. 2).

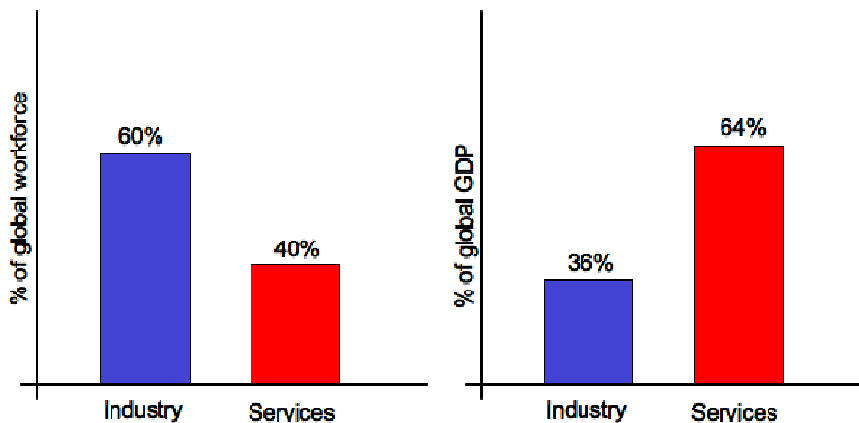


Figure 2: Global employment and GDP output by sector
Source: CIA World Fact Book

⁷ Daniella Westbrook, The Sun, 10th April 2008

In this new epoch it is information, knowledge and skills rather than factories, raw materials and fixed assets that create value⁸.

The key point here is that knowledge, information and skills belong to the individuals that have them. In a knowledge economy, it is society, the owners of knowledge, that have the power to control the economy.

“Society is no longer defined by its economy; the economy is now defined by society.”⁹

This has major implications for brands.

Consumers own brand value like never before

As product difference becomes harder to achieve, brands have been forced into delivering other differentiators.¹⁰

Pine and Gilmore recognise that increasingly, the majority of a brand's value is not created during the production of it but by the creation of the experience that surrounds it.¹¹ Consumers now own brand value like never before as the sources of value now sit firmly in consumer land, not manufacturing land. Brands are no longer economic tools to manage the material demands of society, brands must democratise and serve the people that consume them.

Brands that change your world

By owning knowledge, society now defines the economy, and by owning brand experience and meaning, consumers now define the value of brands. I believe that brands must prove their worth to consumers beyond what would be expected from a product. I believe that brands must be useful to consumers by becoming ‘change agents’.

I believe that a role for brands will be to change your world.

This doesn't have to mean using brands to change *the* world, just *your* world, i.e. on a personal, social or cultural level.

⁸ In industrial sectors, raw materials and labour account for 60% of production costs, in the information sectors, raw materials and labour account for only 2% of production costs. Source: ‘Education in the information age’, Dr R. P. Reigle, Illinois State University

⁹ ‘The age of social transformation’, Peter F. Drucker, The Atlantic Monthly, November 1994

¹⁰ ‘Branding essentials in the new environment’, Judie Lannon, Admap, June 1993

¹¹ ‘The Experience Economy’, B. J. Pine and J. H., Gilmore, 1999

Brands that change your personal world

Brands that aim to help people change their personal world will become teachers. In this new social economic era, knowledge is everything. The old world of the blue-collar worker has all but disappeared, knowledge workers now represent the biggest single economic group in many developed economies.¹² In this new world, education becomes a continuous development process as we try to ensure we are equipped to play our role in the economy.

Many developed economies have a knowledge deficit, with the number of skilled jobs outstripping the number of tertiary level educated adults.¹³ Governments have reacted by significantly increasing education spend.¹⁴

"Getting more young people skilled and into higher education has never been so important for our country's future and the health of the economy as a whole."¹⁵

Whether through Open University styled further education programmes, 'teach yourself' materials, or through 'Brain Training' games, more people than ever are also educating themselves as part of an ongoing process. This even extends to our leisure time:

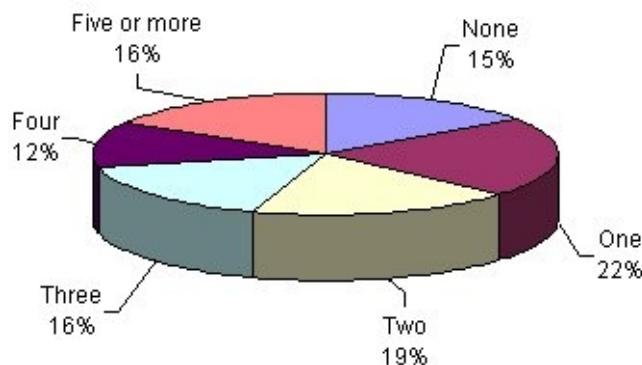


Figure 3. Number of types of leisure activities with an educational bias undertaken in the last 12 months, January 2009. Base: 1,537 adults aged 15+
Source: Mintel Reports: Edutainment in the UK, March, 2009

¹² Those in managerial, professional and technical occupations represent 35.5% of the US workforce and a further 24.8% work in sales and office roles.
CIA World Fact Book, 2008 data (www.cia.gov)

¹³ Education at a Glance 2008: OECD Indicators, www.OECD.org

¹⁴ Education spending rose in all OECD countries, on average by 19% between 2000 and 2005 alone, representing a 1% average increase in government budget. Source: Education at a Glance 2008: OECD Indicators, www.OECD.org

¹⁵ David Lammy, UK Higher Education Minister, The Guardian, 31st March 2009
(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/mar/31/university-applications-record-high>)

A role for brands in this new epoch will be to impart useful knowledge to their consumers. Some brands are already active in this area. Apple holds technology lectures at its stores, when you buy an Apple laptop you get a cool product but also access to knowledge resources that could aid your personal and professional life. In 1998, the Shell Oil Company ran a campaign that provided drivers with life saving knowledge of what to do in dangerous driving situations, such as a high-speed tyre blow out. The jewellers, Tiffany's, provides knowledge of how to buy gold, pearl and diamond but also provide guidance on sophisticated cultural etiquette such as formal dinner parties.¹⁶

Strong brands like Apple and Tiffany's can extend that expertise beyond their intrinsic product knowledge to leverage the social meaning of their brands to provide life developing knowledge to their consumers. What knowledge could your brand provide to consumers?

Brands that change your social world

Defining a brand as something that gives social meaning to an object or behaviour raises an important implication, that brands are defined by groups of people, not individuals. This concept is central to Mark Earls' Herd theory, which puts social utility at the heart of building meaningful brands:

"It is now clear that what really matters is the degree to which brands help consumers create social meaning in their interaction with other consumers."¹⁷

Perhaps like brands, our identities are in part, defined by how others perceive us. At a base level brands have always played an identity management role; badge brands lend kudos to those who sport them or provide the opportunity consumers to personalise their products, e.g. NikeID.

As more of our lives move online, a role social identity brands will be to build associations beyond badge value around their consumers. Facebook users subscribe to brand fan clubs, details of which appear next to their personal information. Radiohead released their single in a form that allowed fans to remix and share it, allowing fans to demonstrate allegiance to the band and their creative abilities. A brand could even help influence who Google says you are.

Some newer brands play an identity nurturing role. The School of Life¹⁸ offers 'ideas to live by', their 'product' consists of educational courses, philosophy sermons and psychotherapy. Now that's identity branding.

¹⁶ 'Knowledge branding: the role of expertise in the information age', Ed Chambliss, The Advertiser, October 1999

¹⁷ 'Marketing Theory: Tap into the herd instinct', Mark Earls, Marketing, February 2007.

¹⁸ www.theschooloflife.com

Being a social identity brand means helping your consumers let others know what they stand for rather than telling them what your brand stands for. How could your brand develop personalised products, social tools or applications, content, games etc. that aim to allow people to communicate their identity to others in new ways?

Brands that change your cultural world

The most ambitious brands change your world on a cultural level by providing a vision of how culture could change for the better, they provide 'thought leadership'.¹⁹

Holt defines iconic brands as 'cultural activists', brands that introduce elements of sub-culture into the mainstream to drive change. As society endorses more elements of the sub-culture, the 'cultural soup' changes to a flavour closer to that presented by the brand. In this way brands can bring about changes in culture.²⁰

Culture is a broad concept, brands can act to change various elements of it. Brands can be a force for good by adopting social causes²¹, Dove's 'campaign for real beauty' would be a good example, as would The Body Shop. Brands can also create new cultural identities; Levi's is often credited with the creation of the teenager as a recognisable social group.

Brands also have the ability to drive economic change. The Co-op bank has a very successful vision of what banking should look like. Micro-lending trends and the idea of 'Wikinomics'²² demonstrate that very different ways of conducting finance are possible. Alan Mitchell presents a plausible vision of the future where 'agent brands' mass aggregate demand in order to secure products at the cheapest price. Price comparison websites may be early versions of agent brands, if these brands are endorsed, Mitchell's vision maybe realised. Society can use brands to change the way that the economy functions.

Brands can also achieve political change, Supergirl and the practice of nation branding²³ are good examples. Barack Obama is clearly a master brand builder who knows more about change than anyone else.

Changing culture is an ambitious task and one must be sure that the brand in question has the licence to tackle such issues. Not all brands have to set lofty visions, they can effect change on a small, micro culture level, e.g. Mountain

¹⁹ 'Eating the big fish', Adam Morgan, 1999

²⁰ 'How brands become icons', Douglas Holt, 2004

²¹ 'Brand Spirit', Hamish Pringle, 1999

²² 'Wikinomics – How mass collaboration changes everything', Don Tapscott and Anthonie D. Williams, 2008

²³ 'Branding the nation – The historical context', Wally Olins, Brand Management, April 2002

Dew's efforts to define the American 'slacker' mentality²⁴. It is worth noting that many brands that bring about such change are aligned both internally and externally in all facets of their business. What changes will your business need to make in order to have a credible voice on a broad cultural issue? What part of culture will your brand change and how?

Final conclusions and implications

As society now controls the world's economic 'resources' (knowledge) and determines the value of brands, brands must remain useful to society. I believe that a role for brands will be to act as change agents, entities that consumers use to change their lives on a personal, social or cultural level.

From brand essence to brand mission:

Brand essences are very often static statements or single adjectives that are objectively meaningless. Build a brand with a mission, a brand with change at its centre.

Defining how your brand can change your consumer's world will be critical. Where does your brand's sphere of influence lie, what is your brand's social meaning? If the experience of using your brand is essentially personal, then your brand maybe best placed to aid change at a personal level. If your brand is used to facilitate social interaction then you could have a role in helping your consumers manage their identity. It is harder to assess if your brand could drive cultural change, one must take into account your consumer's cultural landscape and examine ways in which your brand could have a credible point of view.

Realising your brand mission:

Communications can help set out your brand mission, but a brand dedicated to change will have to provide the tools that allow consumers to reach their goals. Allow people to join up to your brand mission in more ways than just buying the product, can they collaborate, join in, spread the word, donate time to your cause?

In conclusion:

Brands are now more than ever at the mercy of society and must be of use to earn their right to exist. I believe that a role for brands will be to change your world by providing ideas and tools to help you make that change.

²⁴ 'How brands become icons', Douglas Holt, 2004