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Theory of Brand Culture

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1. The Lowdown

The marketing world today is kind of like a blindfolded chef stumbling around in a kitchen trying to find a new model of branding. It's a rather painful situation, given all the sharp knives and such.

The theory of Brand Culture might provide an answer. It proposes that the old model of branding, based on creating an external, sometimes fictional, brand image, is dead—killed by the fact that people just don't buy a manufactured brand image anymore. People today want the truth.

Brand Culture offers a new model of branding. It suggests that a brand can operate much like a culture, in the anthropological sense of the word. It uses the Clifford Geertz definition of culture (there are many definitions), which is:

“A historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [humans] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.”

What does this mean? Well, it means that a culture—take the Hopi Indians for instance—has at its core a set of values, a way of seeing the world, and a way of acting in the world which never changes. The Hopi culture has survived hundreds of years of occupation, first by Spaniards and then by Americans, precisely because those values haven't changed. Yet the Hopi culture has also morphed around those values to adapt to an ever-changing world.

Brand Culture proposes that a brand can operate in a similar way. Based on what anthropologists today are saying about consumers, this is exactly how a brand should operate.

By putting a stake in the ground in the form of values which never change, a brand allows consumers to measure those values against their own values. When consumers find a close-enough match, that brand is permitted to invite those consumers to join its culture. It works the same way with employees.

2. Why do I need to know about it?

Mostly because consumers want you to, according to recent anthropological research. Consumers today are highly concerned with supporting brands that agree with their personal values. People are no longer simply trying to figure out which plow is a good one. They now want to know which plow is built by fairly-compensated workers using a sustainable process and by a corporation that isn't also deforesting the Amazon basin.

Anthropologists tell us that is partly because people are hungry for meaning. People are using different symbols and meaning systems to construct their ever-evolving sense of self. It just so happens that some of the meaning they're using is coming from brands.



This is why a brand doesn't just produce products and services anymore. One of the most-important things a brand produces today is meaning—meaning which shows up in a multitude of brand experiences which today are replacing the advertising campaign of old. This meaning must spring from a set of deeply held values which live at the core of the brand. Values that sincerely drive every action and communication, both inside and outside of the brand. Values that consumers can count on.

3. Business Case Studies

Johnson & Johnson has made all of its business decisions based on “Our Credo,” a document written by Robert Johnson back in 1943. It trumps everything, including profitability, and has cost the company money in the short term but has built highly sustainable success over the long term.

Patagonia stands out from its competitors who make similar products by their brand culture. Everyone who buys Patagonia seems to know that they give their employees surf and snowboarding break, that they have long championed sustainability causes, and that they only use photographs taken by their customers for their ads.

Zappos has captured the world's attention with a brand culture that boldly involves all employees in shaping and articulating the brand's meaning. Zappos' employees passionately dispense game-changing service; they feel a real ownership of the brand. With virtually no real advertising, Zappos has grown big enough that Amazon recently acquired them. It's now time for Zappos to develop their outreach and create new ways to enable consumers to participate in the fun.

These are some quick examples of brand cultures in action. The theory of Brand Culture is currently being used to start brands from scratch and to revitalize and unify organizations that are 200- years-old. The implications of this new model of branding are just beginning to be explored.

4. The thing to remember is...

A brand culture cannot be faked. The brand's values must be real. Consumers (and employees, for that matter) are sick and tired of ad campaigns and slogans that are completely incongruent with how a brand operates. Building a brand culture usually requires an internal process of articulating the brand's values in a form that can be wholly embraced by the leadership and the employees within the organization. None of this can be simply decreed by a CEO; however, the process certainly requires the full support and participation of the CEO. This is followed by an internal adoption campaign which is required to get the organization aligned around those values. This is followed, in turn, by creating a vast array of brand experiences which invite consumers to join the brand culture.

Brand Culture doesn't just involve the marketing department; it involves the entire organization. The result is a strong foundation that can drive all future internal and external actions and communications. This eliminates the common scenario of a brand saying one thing and doing another. Similarly, a brand culture can't be built through a traditional ad campaign. Advertising

might still be a powerful tool, but a brand culture demands inventing new ways of engaging consumers and expressing the brand's values.

About ID Branding

Founded in 1979, ID Branding is a full-service brand culture that helps companies build and sustain rich and enduring brand cultures. In an era where image is not enough, ID Branding reinvigorates a company from the inside out to develop an integrated brand culture that embodies in its vision, values, and beliefs in every action. The Portland, Oregon-based firm has ignited transformation for clients such as Kodak, Microsoft, Sisters of Mercy Health System, The Bonneville Power Administration, The Oregon Wine Board, Symantec, SAIF, and TriMet. Learn more at www.idbranding.com

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