

Brand building or bland building?

In our busy, overmarketed world, the pressure on any business communication to cut through is enormous.

Good branding is supposed to be the solution: using powerful emotional anchors to mark a company out from the crowd. But a quick look at our collective intrays will tell us, mostly, it's not working. We receive thousands of marketing messages each day, and most have no impact at all.

That's because most branding is done with caution and cowardice as the implicit watchwords.

As a result, most brands are actually **Blands**. These are brands that in various ways try to reassure us that they are like Mom and Apple Pie. They describe themselves effusively and pretend to be just what we wanted. To quote the catalogue of Howies, (a brand that definitely escapes this category):

“Big corporations are pretending to be small. Small companies are pretending to be big. Chains are pretending to be independents. Independents are pretending to be chains. Towns are pretending to be cities. Cities are pretending to be towns.

Just another day on planet earth.”

Frequently, **Blands** arise from the unimaginative use of research. A business assesses customer needs using research, finds out what customers want, and then styles itself as an organisation that provides that. The trouble is, most of their competitors have done the same research and are saying the same things. As Prof Michael Porter says,

“Competitive Convergence means the more you and your competitors pursue ‘best practice’ the more you all look alike and the customer ends up choosing on price.”

Worse, **Blands** present themselves as if they meet these imagined needs without really assessing whether there's much truth in the claim. As Alan Mitchell comments in his excellent book, Right Side Up:

“Despite everything marketers like to say about knowing, understanding, getting close to and focusing on the customer, building and managing brands as we know them is the ultimate exercise in egocentricity.”

That's because the people who work for **Blands** are very good at avoiding conflict and so rarely develop much self-awareness. That means they're also good at attracting sycophantic advisers.

Which clears the way for some truly **Bland** advertising. The company convinces itself (1) that it can find a unique and creative way of expressing the same old idea, and (2) that somehow that will be enough. So it makes the classic error of doing something superficially different from its rivals whilst in fact doing something profoundly the same: believing that a bit of marketing flummery can make up for a failure to be genuinely distinctive.

Beware the Punk Blands

There is a sub-category of **Blands** which I call the **Punk Blands**. These have spotted the possible dangers of blandness and decided the solution lies in presenting a much more provocative and challenging message to the audience. Reading the marketing press, it appears that brands like Tango and Ikea are the heroes of this category. Whether they are anything but superficially different I will leave you, dear reader, to determine. Seth Godin calls this “Interruption marketing” and says

“the marketer who interrupts us not only fails at selling his product, but wastes our most coveted commodity, time.”

The way out : authenticity

The way out for brands is to reflect on what works for us as human beings. The truth is most of us don't like sycophantic people who are too eager to please - we rightly sniff out a hidden agenda. And we can't abide vain people who constantly puff themselves up. Consider your friends and you will surely acknowledge that they are imperfect people. I find I get on best with people who are not perfect and are willing to say so.

In fact, I like people who define themselves. They sometimes say no. They're willing to disagree. They have beliefs and attitudes. They have, if you will, emotional authenticity.

It's interesting that easyjet succeeds as an airline by avoiding any possible perception of perfection. It seems to relish its imperfection. How many businesses do you know that would countenance being in a TV show like Airline? How would they cope with its constant presentation of disgruntled and distressed customers. Easyjet seems to take it in its stride because ultimately, what you see is what you get. And in the land of the bland, the brand that underpromises may be king.

Another remarkable example of this refreshing directness is Patagonia, the US clothing business. It doesn't leave other people to find fault, it does it itself as this article demonstrates.

...in a rare display of radical corporate honesty, Patagonia found itself wanting and posted "Louder than Words," a self-indictment, in each of its stores. The statement reads, in part: "In fact, we've come to understand that the [headquarters] building is a monument to superficial satisfaction over environmental priority. We used virgin materials everywhere -- new wood, new fixtures, new gypsum board, carpeting and paint. And the vertical grain fir [used in the ceiling beams]? It's made from the old growth forests that groups we now support are fighting to protect. Surrounded by these persistent reminders of our own naiveté, we are committed to a new approach."

(You can see the whole article in <http://www.fastcompany.com/online/37/benchmark.html>)

There is no substitute for the smack of authenticity in a world of wishful thinking. Jack Nicholson, in A Few Good Men famously told us all:

"You can't handle the truth."

I disagree. It's time for business to drop the bland presentation of perfection and show us the more interesting truth that lies behind every well-polished lie.

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