

Branding desperately **needs to rebrand itself**

Once in a while a consultant gets lucky and encounters a trend before it takes hold across their marketplace. Over the past few months I think I have been running up against just such a trend and it worries me.

I am increasingly convinced that the biggest challenge brand managers will face over the next decade will be protecting the brand of brand. Let me share three recent experiences with you and then I will explain exactly what I mean.

In a session with the board of one of Britain's biggest service companies, the chief operating officer commented: 'I think the problem for our team is that we see branding as a strong contender for buzz word of the month. It's management-speak and we just don't buy it.' Her statement drew strong support from her colleagues.

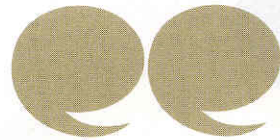
An MBA student approached me about the possibility of pursuing a PhD. We discussed potential research topics and I suggested brand architecture. 'Great area. But I wouldn't want to get tarred with the whole brand thing,' he demurred.

Over a pint one evening, the head of branding for one of the world's biggest banks said to me: 'These days, if I want to get our brand strategy implemented across the group, the last word I am going to utter to my chief executive or to the head of investment banking is "brand". I will talk share price or sales targets. But if I even whisper the B word, I know all will be lost.'

In 1988 a fledgling brand identity firm called Interbrand helped fend off an aggressive bid for one of its clients by providing a highly speculative valuation of their client's portfolio of brands. Two years later David

Aaker published *Managing Brand Equity* and the modern era of brand management had begun.

Now that era is coming to a close. Most organisations have 'rebranded' themselves with excessive budgets and questionable impact. Brand consulting companies have fought internecine struggles to



The biggest challenge for brand managers over the next decade will be protecting the brand of brand

come up with different proprietary definitions for that most simple of concepts: brand equity. The result of this confusing cornucopia of conceptualisation has been the alienation of the clients these concepts were designed to attract in the first place.

Saatchi & Saatchi even went as far as to modestly announce a 'future beyond brands' in the shape of its concept of the, ahem, Lovemark. The concept of brand is now freely applied to pop bands, pets, movie stars and countries.

The brand era offered marketers that which they had always craved: power.



Brand was the magical ladder that would finally elevate the marketer from the lowly world of direct mail and logo design into the boardroom.

Ten years on and it seems marketers have dragged the branding concept down to their level instead. Marketers' inability to focus on substance over superficiality and to speak the language of business, rather than bullshit, means the brand of brand is in crisis.

The people who make the decisions with respect to brand are not marketers, and they grow increasingly circumspect about the veracity of branding. In front of shareholders or marketing teams everyone may still be talking a good branding game, but the next time you hear a non-marketer speak about branding, listen for the irony in their tone. It's an inflection growing louder in Europe's boardrooms and it bodes ill.

I may occasionally question the ability of branders, but I have always believed in brands. Who can save our profession? Who can rebrand the brand before it's too late? Physicians, time to heal thyselfes.



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30 seconds on... brand watersheds

- The **Lovemark** concept was invented by Saatchi & Saatchi chief executive Kevin Roberts. Claiming that **'brands have stalled'**, Roberts believes that Lovemarks are the future for Saatchis.
- *Managing Brand Equity* was published by Berkeley's professor of marketing, David Aaker, in 1991. The book, which has sold more than **100,000 copies**

and has been translated into **eight languages**, was the first to systematically describe the challenges of modern brand management. Aaker went on to co-found brand consultancy Prophet.

- Interbrand's path to becoming brand valuation experts was more by accident than

design. In 1988, Australian asset-stripper Goodman Fielder Wattie attempted to buy RHM. **As a defensive tactic**, RHM asked Interbrand to value its brands. Interbrand came up with a figure of **£678m**, the acquisition was averted and Interbrand discovered a lucrative new business.