

# It's not cool to compare non-competing brands



Last Wednesday Superbrands, the 'independent authority and arbiter on branding', announced Britain's five coolest brands. Selfridges took the top honours followed by the magazine *Dazed and Confused*, then lingerie brand Agent Provocateur, the restaurant Hakkasan and finally Goldsmith's art college.

These five brands are featured, along with 58 other 'cool brandleaders', in a book modestly described by Superbrands as the 'cool branding bible'.

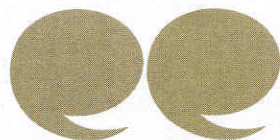
How did Superbrands manage to come up with such a list? The short answer is in the same way that it came up with its recent list of Superbrands, or its other list of Business Superbrands.

A shortlist of about 700 brands was drawn up. Then, a judging panel of 19 'eminent individuals', deemed 'well qualified' by Superbrands to recognise brand coolness, was convened, provided with a definition of what makes a brand cool (as defined by Superbrands), and asked to review each brand, 'instantaneously' awarding it a score from one to 20.

The judges were explicitly asked to ignore categories and compare non-competing brands against each other. Results were tallied, and the Cool Brandleaders of 2004 were announced.

By now, you should know where this column is going. The Superbrands approach to measuring brand equity has the methodological efficacy of bingo. Obviously comparing brands across non-competing categories is pointless and strategically impossible (Diet Coke versus the Design Museum anyone?). There is also the troubling presence of an average score. Ultimately, the

Cool Brandleaders were the brands that captured the highest average score across the judging panel – in direct opposition to how brands really succeed. They do not attempt to attain generally positive reactions from everyone. Rather, the great brands polarise the general market –



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inspire passion in the few, and often antipathy from the rest. A strong brand is rarely all things to all people.

But perhaps the most pernicious elements of the Superbrands approach are the judges themselves. I have nothing personal against the designer Cozmo Jenks or Mark Rodol, former chief executive of Ministry of Sound, or any of the 17 other judges on the panel. I just don't think their opinion is worth a toss.

The greatest lesson of brand is that brand equity is not something that can be deigned by managers or chief executives or fashion gurus. Brand equity resides in only two locations: the head and the hearts of the target

market. For every brand manager who understands this true location of brand equity, there are a dozen who labour under the assumption that they can somehow intuit their brand's current health through introspection and intellect. This explains why most brands fail to continually track their brand equity over time. The subjectivity of Superbrands renders it anything but.

Superbrands acknowledges this weakness. It claims 'the subjective nature of the judging process is necessary to be able to compare different brands of different sizes purely on brand strength'.

Here, at least, Superbrands offers a valuable insight for marketers. Whether it's the flawed subjectivity of Superbrands or the standardised futility of WPP's Brandz data, the search for an Archimedean point from which all brands can be compared to all others is pointless.

Searching for a generic measure for brands, that are by definition anti-generic in every sense, is a chimera. You can only compare your brand using your brand equity, as expressed by your customers. If more brand managers did that, now that would be superbranding.



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## 30 seconds on... Selfridges

- American **Henry Gordon Selfridge** emigrated to the UK in 1909 after a career in department retail in the US. In 1909, at the age of 48, he opened the first Selfridges store on London's Oxford Street.
- The store had a soda fountain and a Silence Room bearing the sign '**Ladies will refrain from conversation**'.

- The **90s** were a period of great change for the Selfridges brand. Two stores were opened in Manchester, followed by a Birmingham branch in 2003. The London store was **comprehensively overhauled** under the direction of chief executive **Vittorio Radice**, who was later poached by Marks & Spencer.

- The current plans for refurbishment of the Oxford Street store include expanding the **food hall** and **sports area** and adding 100,000sqft more retail space.
- Selfridges also plans to construct a **contemporary hotel** on the site.