

# Brands don't work any more?

Howard Raynor explains why thinking about brands can make him feel queasy ...

Long ago when computers still ran Windows 95, ordinary office folk would tend their own desk to the quiet thrum of a dial-up modem, it was a more peaceful time, and folk had more time to consider their purchasing. Brands meant a little something extra and people appreciated that. Marketers had a feeling they called customer loyalty and they liked it.

However, while dreaming of brands some marketers can just hear the sound of distant thunder and feel a chill in the air: 70% of American consumers can't tell brands apart and only 4% of them stay loyal when a better product is offered at the same price. Malcolm Gladwell, a man who knows a trend when he sees one, observes, 'I'm a loyalty sceptic. I don't think that it is as high on the list of consumer concerns as it is on the list of producer concerns. I also think that a lot of the time people see loyalty where loyalty does not exist. Often what looks like loyalty is simply habit or unthinking allegiance. The effect is the same but the condition is different.'

When I think about brands I get queasy; the information clutter, the meaningless symbols, the disintegrated experiences, the temporary nature of the companies and the price twiddling all make me uneasy. Brands are put-on things that don't make my world a better place like millions of waxed paper cups every morning.

Worn out from over-use, a treadmill of novelty, adding more value, churn it, tactical promotion and events brands have become an unthinking

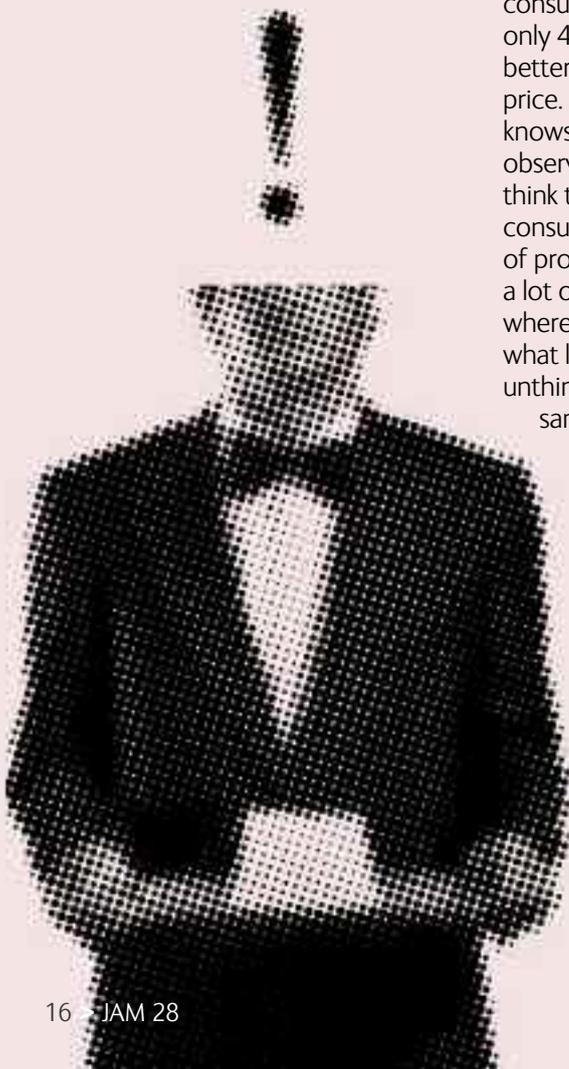
frenzy. There is a brand mountain, a brand lake. Everything is a brand. Customers are zoned out on brands.

The arts are not free of it and, let's be clear, by 2011 UK business is expected to be spending £4.5bn in online advertising alone, we are trying to compete with walls of money and what's worse is we are trying to compete by being the same. The mantra of brand; giving emotional life to inanimate objects could be justifiable if you deal with products but in the arts we risk making the error of taking emotional life and making it into an inanimate object!

We need to rethink the problem, rethink the assets and rethink the solution. We need to look harder at the facts of how we do business; what is our speed of response, how reliable is the experience of our organisation, do we always exceed expectations, how do we recruit, induct and develop our people to deliver that experience, what are our standards, do we integrate the experience from first encounter to recounting the experience to others, do we pay attention to detail, do we think of our customers as people in a relationship or as targets? Do we pay attention to all the senses and do we truly pay attention to good design?

If we do integrate these factors end to end we get an experience that is way beyond a marketing brief but it is something customers are going to love. I wondered who might have clues for such an experience and found myself looking at hotels: luxury hotels and hip hotels.

Luxury hotels have some interesting facets. The hotel group in question had a propensity to repurchase of 78%,





they interviewed people four or five times for cognitive skills and the like before they were hired, they engaged in a seven-part training programme taking new members of staff through every department before being put in front of customers, they had very thorough standards for how things were done and auditing of those standards was carried out independently to provide maximum opportunity for improvement. They focused on the human dimensions of the business because they knew key moments could not be made routine, they eschewed strictly programmed behaviours – inhuman treatment of staff won't create high quality service experiences, they recognised that high-end service interactions are social interactions and staff satisfaction ratings were measured as well as customer satisfaction ratings. Members of staff were given high levels of empowerment with high-value guests and members of staff were briefed daily on the events in the hotel. Imagine a theatre, art gallery or museum operating this standard.

The hip hotels had a different story: a tight focus on a small cadre of loyal and targeted patrons, they emphasised simplicity, building a relationship of trust rather than cold expertise – they emphasised the physical, cognitive and emotional attributes of the guests and staff and worked towards personalisation of the experience through skilled observation. For them anticipation and intuition were the defining factors along with outstanding service recovery. To quote Jan Carlzon; 'I am not worried about over-satisfied

customers.' They also put store by recognising returning guests at check-in and, in the case of Tablet Hotels, delivering 'subtle but polished hospitality'.

If any of this rings true (that operations is marketing; that what matters is what we do, not what we say; that we should use all the resources at our disposal to express ourselves), then there is one final dimension to think about. Online transparency is revolutionising the brand game; you can no longer bluff your way in hospitality – you will be found out by TripAdvisor.com, Laterooms Rating, Expedia, igougo.com and straightforward blogging. You can no longer bluff your way in cost advantage because MoneySupermarket.com, Kelkoo and Pricerunner can give you price comparison in seconds. Customers and bloggers are clearing the fog honestly in most cases and this will come to the arts.

So whether you see all the foregoing as just an extension of the brand dream or whether you see a real change in the marketplace, I would claim that brands are not the answer to art and arts audiences. We need to align culture, image and identity and we need to grasp the whole sensory engagement of the audience – we need to focus on actions and behaviours rather than images and words. We need organisations with a personality that our audience or visitors can taste, not 'me too' clones. Audiences and visitors want organisations that live up to their hype. The consequence, I believe, is to be impeccable with your words and rigorous with your actions. ■

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