



Consumers and Cattle

Branding can be more than a mark of ownership

By Matthew Clark / *Applied Arts Magazine "By Design"*

The cattle brand: classic symbol of the Wild West. Each rancher asserts ownership over a herd with a mark uniquely associated with his ranch, burned deep into the hide of every cow.

Quite an auspicious origin story for the field of "branding," and still how many branding specialists operate today. By wrangling, taming, owning and ultimately branding their consumers with a symbol that makes them their own, they assert their dominion, power and wealth.

But ownership is one-sided, one-dimensional and far too possessive to be routinely practiced on the modern consumer. And it's just not working like it used to. Sure, consumers still seem willing to brand themselves with logoed T-shirts and smartphone affinity, but brands need to look far beyond trite marks of ownership to deeper and more meaningful promises.

Consumers don't obey the rules of the herd

This may seem like a contradiction in the face of Boxing Day sales stampedes, but consumers are increasingly defying the strict rules of herd mentality. (This is good by the way — we are all consumers and I would like to maintain a degree of free will myself, but I digress.)

A herd follows a largely homogeneous set of behaviours across a spectrum of activity: from eating to sleeping to mating. The herd is nearly a single organism, with each animal a mere appendage of a larger beast.

The consumer is simply not this consistent. Consumers — who are real human beings by the way — are messy. They follow one set of values in one part of their lives and a second in another. They claim a deeply held belief one moment, and then act against it in the next. Consumers are contradictions wrapped in an enigma wrapped in a mystery.

Quite simply, viewing the consumer "herd" as a "target" is lazy. It relies on stereotype and prejudice. It misappropriates the rigour of true demographics, psychographics and ethnography in favour of dumbed-down, pop-culture "consumer research findings."

It misses actual engagement and relationship and, I propose, views the relationship backwards.

Consumers are more suspicious than cattle

I eat beef. I do. But even I cringe at the sight of a slaughterhouse. And I do wonder why thousands of years of cattle domestication has not instilled some level of suspicion on the part of the dead cows walking. No whispered code seems to have been passed down from generation to generation, warning about what lies behind the shed door.

The same is not true of consumers. They are now suspicious to a (de)fault. Marketing and advertising is like an antibiotic that we have administered against skepticism so many times it has simply lost its effectiveness.

They don't believe you, even when you are telling the truth.

Is the solution bigger manipulation? The illusion of "personalization" in your marketing mix? "Consumer engagement," where they become co-creators of your marketing content, lured with contests and social media fame?

What can't be denied is that sneaking up behind them with a concealed branding iron is probably the wrong approach.



Consumers are looking for promises, not ownership

So let's go back a few hundred years (or more). You have a product that you really think benefits a specific group of people. Maybe you even just created it for yourself, but friends and neighbours came calling, so you made some more.

Pretty soon you are distributing far and wide and have packaged the product with a mark — a promise — that this product is what you say it is. That you, your product, your company and your "brand" will never lie, never shortchange, never lose sight of where you came from and the values you bring to this unique creation.

And you remain grateful to the people who have supported you and you would never, ever let them down.

Naive and too turn-of-the-last-century? Not fierce and targeted and strategic enough? I disagree.

Consumers' distaste for and suspicion of marketing's tricks are well deserved. We have collectively created these conditions by viewing the very people who support our products and services like cattle. Like targets. Like (leather) wallets.

Consumers don't owe us; we owe them.

And it's our job as marketing and branding specialists to help turn this around. Help our clients make deep and meaningful promises. Encourage them to make valuable products and services. Things that people actually want and need, not that we have to trick them into desiring. Fire clients who are inept, gratuitous, manipulative, self-ish and/or outright liars. Create campaigns and brands that are honest and real and unique and meaningful and relevant.

In short, we need to use our powers for good. Intelligently, strategically, creatively and powerfully for good.

Why? To better line our and our clients' pockets? Sure, okay. But maybe, just maybe, because human beings are not cattle. And because it's the right thing to do.

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