

BRANDS ... SHOWCASING UNIQUENESS OR PROMOTING SNOB VALUE??

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As a professional communication practitioner, I've both closely watched and been involved with this phenomenon for over three and a half decades. As a media commentator, though I continue to be intrigued and fascinated with the ways it's been leveraged [manipulated? approximated?] in the promotion & selling of goods & services in an increasingly confusing & competitive market scape.

To the common man, away from the universe of fancy jargon, let's hit the basics: what is a Brand? It is essentially an identity and the process of branding is the process of creating & managing this identity with imagination, skill & confidence to reap the desired result/reward. To simplify matters, once upon a time we went to the market to buy **commodities**, right? Cars, clothes, snacks, cold drinks ... not any more. We don't drive/demand cars; we **drive brands**: BMW, Porches, Mercs, Toyota, Rolls Royce. We don't wear shirts, shorts, jeans. We style-out with brands: Allen Solly, Arrows, Levis, Wrangler, Nike, Rebok, Benneton. We don't consume **arrey anything, yaar**. It has to be branded: Cokes, Pepsi, Thums up, Mcburger, Dominoes, Kit Kat, Cadbury's. Even the old Super market, stores & bazars have taken a hit. Its Malls with Gaps, Shoppers Stop, Benneton ... got the drift? Brands rule and they shape & form the way we think, behave, react, respond, choose, buy, shop & consume any & everything, impacting the way we live!

Cool-so extending that logic in today's modern, technologically-advanced age, **all these branded goods** must square off with a [given?] tried & tested mark of excellence and reliability in terms of excellence & reliability in terms of product value, right? In this scenario, how does the poor, unguarded customer **choose** accurately from the plethora of **parity** brands, his **preferred** choice? What prompts him to choose a **specific** brand and later become totally loyal, even possessive about it? The answer must come with the brand which we can establish a relationship with, can relate to and have a compatibility-connect in terms of the way we think, feel & identify with it. Also, we invariably gravitate towards brands that promise greater value to lifestyle-behaviour; brands that promise us a unique offer of benefits, values, personality traits, images and associations that satisfy our functions & emotional needs, consciously or subconsciously. Most critically successful, iconic brands transcend their physical existence and take on a life of their own, building seamless bonds with their customers. The experience, values and take-out perceived leads to a fulfilment of customer expectations. This then becomes the cornerstone of Brand success.

However, neither life, the consuming universe nor the market place, is as orderly and chaos-free as before. In these maniacally consumerist times, where product and **wannabees** flood the market promising to convert **needs to wants** with newer, sexier ad-slogans & pitches to an aspirational, upwardly-mobile new-age constituency forever hungering to be counted, the very concept of brands take on a new dimension. Along with required and expected product attributes – matchless quality & reliability – comes what the Gurus proclaim **subjective value to objective worth**. These letters writ in stone, basically means giving the brand a [real or imaginary] distinct aura and personality, humanising it



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in a powerful manner designed to trigger the purchase intent. Hence a car is not just a 4-wheeler that transports you from one place to another, but a **heritage/class** statement. Similarly, clothes are not just attire meant to cover the body but flash a sexy style statement. A Mo-bike is not any va-va-va-vroom mean machine, but a cool, super-macho brand ... and so on & so forth.

Fine, but what happens when hawk-eyed, local, home-made brands want to mosey in on this lucrative space by cleverly **faking** big-ticket, classy signature brands and hawking them at affordable – even lip-smacking prices? Remember, today we live in times when-thanks to globalisation, consumerism and media exposure-the once-ignored smaller metro creatures are very much in the loop. They may not always have the **resources** but certainly have the more important ingredient, **desire** to grab and acquire branded products. They are soft-targets in the **aspirational** universe where brands [stupidly and inaccurately but emotionally] are equated with class, style, fashion & social status! A young friend of mine categorically proved this to me recently. At a party hosted by a Bangalore-based hi-profile fashion designer, he [deliberately] turned up in a frayed and colourless jacket. Predictably many of the brand & fashion-conscious glitterati were shocked and hard looks, whispers & sniggers made the rounds. When this buzz got sufficiently hot, this guy loudly stated that this jacket was the latest craze in New York & London and his cousin had very thoughtfully got six of these for him, knowing his love for off-beat & edgy wear. Within a scarily short time, the pronounced negative buzz turned to admiring glances and hushed wows! The mischievous guy later – with much glee – confessed that he had actually purchased the jacket “impulsively from a pavement stall!” So suddenly does all this hoo-haa about **Brand architecture** and allied jabberwocky fly out of the window ...?

Of course not! Brands indeed are today’s most valued aspect of business – certainly the FMCG category and some other areas too – because they make a product look distinct in a booming parity market. Perception & positioning evokes images and feelings that connect you irrevocably with that particular product. This is the exact reason why the world’s greatest brands continue to seduce popular imagination ... which is why Nescafe is the **Instant** brand; Gillette, the **shaving** brand; MTV, the **youth** brand; Hush Puppies, the **casual** brand; BMW, the **defining** brand; Apple, the cult brand; Domino’s, the **home-delivery** brand; Bacardi, the **Caribbean** brand; Coca Cola, the **ultimate** brand ...

