

MARKETING BEYOND THE MONKEY

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INTRODUCTION

Brands have become big business and are invited deeper and deeper into our lives. They have moved beyond the public sphere and are becoming more intimate with their users. More than ever, we are speaking about love markers, iconic markers, emotional branding, and archetypal brands (we could go on). But are these just fancy ways of talking about creating brand appeal, and making brands more important than they really are? Are these just concepts that further advocate the traditional mind space marketing models that are conventional in most marketing departments, and that focus on breaking through to the consumer departing from the product world of the manufacturers? We believe that much of the potential added value that brands can offer to both business and consumers has gone untapped because we have too narrow of a scope on the consumer, marketing, brands and marketing services like research, advertising, etc. This paper is an attempt to broaden the scope of how we look at consumption and consumers, unlock markets beyond the boundaries of tangibility and expand the utility value of brands. We believe that in today's world of over-abundance of stuff, media and messages, brands that learn to empathise and voice visions that resonate and have broad relevance to how people experience their lives, will be invited deeper into people's lives – and companies that succeed in doing so will be well rewarded. Although the traditional "mind space branding" model has been effective and efficient for a long time, a new time for branding, marketing and consumer

research is dawning. In order to uncover the hidden potential of brands, however, we will need to start a quiet revolution by questioning some deeply ingrained assumptions that are well embedded in the conventional marketing, advertising and research practices of today.

THE CONSUMER AS A PLAYER

Brands don't exist without people and only humans can give them emotionality and meaning. Thus, as a principle, before discussing brands or any of the practices around branding or marketing, we should start with 'the consumer'. Traditionally, business has mainly looked at the consumer 'as the end of the supply chain', 'a transaction base that we have to target and penetrate'. Consumer minds were to be owned and propositions and brands needed to claim a unique position in those minds, hence the obsession of marketing departments with receiving information for war. '*Positioning: The battle for your mind*' was the war cry advocated and popularized by Al Ries and Jack Trout in the seventies and it still is highly influential in most marketing departments across the world. Marketing was about choosing, focussing and breaking through to the consumer. Much like war, the consumer was identified, targeted and de-humanized. The consumer was seen as 'responding' to 'stimuli' proposed by companies. In a less complex world, which we might say lacked "stuff", the main function of brands was to serve companies by generating trust and expressing a brand- or company-identity. In such a context, this narrow view of consumers and consumption was more than sufficient.

However, as human frameworks are becoming more complex and people are expanding their boundaries of being, this narrow view of consumers and consumption seems no longer sufficient – indeed, it appears to hide the broader utility value of products and brands.

People consume with human purpose, and consumption has hidden utility value beyond surface level appearance. Like all animals, humans perform actions, but let us not assume we do little else. Our acts of consumption, like our acts in general, are acts of meaning that need to be placed within contexts and frameworks which can always change. Also our most intimate and emotional experiences take place within these human arenas, hence our ability to engage with products and brands, endowing them with meaning and significance which go way beyond their properties as objects. We differ from the rest of the animal kingdom in our ability to use tools and create tools that can dramatically improve our lives in the broadest sense. No wonder that these tools have become such a big business. Our ability to imagine and invent, create our own world and frameworks of existence, is the essence of our success story – but we marketing practitioners have been reluctant to recognize this ability in consumers. We have learned to view consumers as blank slates ready to be moulded by their environment. The doctrine that has dominated both the field of social and economic sciences, which lie at the root of the marketing and market research disciplines, have basically accepted the idea that the uniquely malleable human mind, together with the unique force of culture and communication, has severed our behaviour from its evolutionary roots; that there is no inherent human nature driving human events, but rather, our essential nature is to be driven. The mind, in this view, is basically passive – it is a basin into which, as a person matures, the local culture is gradually poured. Our mind and imagination seems to basically serve to assimilate and respond to the environment. The consumer is being played, he is not the player.

Psychologists have contributed significantly to enforcing this narrow scope which marketing practitioners have adopted concerning the consumer. The psychology school of Behaviourism, which dominated psychology for a good part of the previous century, consists largely of the idea that people tend habitually to do what they are rewarded for doing and not do what they are punished for doing; thus is the formless mind given form. This view of consumers as being one-dimensional and being driven, rather than driving – considering human nature as something that barely exists and doesn't matter – has led brand managers, advertising agencies, media planners and market research companies to view consumers as essentially passive respondents in the game of consumption.

Some puritans keep claiming that consumption is about improving our physical reality, about getting jobs done, about solving problems efficiently, and at best trivial and something we only allow ourselves to recover in moments of permissible excess. But if we change our view of the consumer from a passive receiver to an active player in the game of consumption, describe consumption as an act which is boundary-challenging, reality-defying, insanely optimistic and another way to engage with oneself and the world around us, then we must conclude that this blank-slate view of consumption is hiding a lot of possibilities to add value, and ignoring the broader repertoire of human potential. Consumption is, in our view, a game in which the players engage, create and actively expand the frameworks of being, and brands are the toys and tools by which they do so. Our “stuff” helps us redefine who we are, what we believe to be possible, and how we feel about ourselves and the world around us. By “stuff”, we mean artefacts and symbols of meaning, which serve as solutions and tools for dealing with our modern-day existence. We tend to give them credit only for their utility value in allowing us to master the physical world, and ignore the fact that people have

invited products and brands into their lives since they allow them to be somebody beyond the limitations of their current reality. We also ignore that people can recognize that the ambiguities of human existence are at once inevitable, pleasurable and disturbing. This creates strong tensions that move humankind in all kinds of directions. These forces fuelled both by our common inborn human strivings and the beliefs we have about what is possible, what is bearable and how we define our existence give companies and brands a much bigger space in which to add value. If we can accept that our 'stuff' not only improves our physical lives, but also touches our psychological and philosophical existence, then the limitations to brand growth are currently unimaginable.

MORE THAN MONKEY BUSINESS

The successful mass market logic of corporations which emerged in the previous century was focussed on production and distribution. When it emerged, the world was short of 'stuff'. *Knowing about the consumer and their lives* was seen as being, at best, of secondary importance. Letting consumers know about the company and the proposition that the company had on offer – now that *was* important. Consumers were targets that the company needed to reach and break through to with repetitive, relentless messages about 'unique selling propositions' which were clear and strong enough to penetrate the minds of consumers. When 'brut' was not enough, an appeal was made upon the more feminine powers of seduction and attraction. Where initially brands were called upon to communicate trust or origin, now brands became tools for attraction and seduction and every human strategy of desire was called upon to seduce the consumer. Marketers, like businessmen, thought in one direction: our company, our product, our brand and our consumer. Consumers were targets at the end of the supply chain and what was important is letting them know about our 'unique selling proposition'. Market and consumer research was called upon to find the easy routes to market.

Product and brands came first, consumer later. To help find the route to market, market researchers were asked to check opinions about company propositions, about their awareness of company propositions and about their understanding and liking of company propositions. Little was known about consumers and how they experienced their lives, about their complexities of living and how they viewed their lives. What drove these people to consume and why did they consume? Business was in control and the consumer was the passive, grateful receiver.

But as the world gets filled with 'stuff', people seem to expect more from brands, and the propositions on offer are starting to have difficulty finding their target. The rise of the individual and the freedom to self-compose multiple identities make modern lives more interesting and complex both for producer and consumer. The way people are using brands is changing, and more and more individuals are using brands similarly to how physicists use mathematics, that is, as a way to express themselves. What we see is that brands are getting invited deeper and deeper into people's lives and brands that succeed in 'getting more intimate' with the consumer are being rewarded well. Brand players like Apple, Coca-Cola, Virgin, Evian, Harley Davidson, Nike, Starbucks – all companies and brands that have generated exceptional share holder value – do not see their propositions as end-goals or the final benefits for people who use and consume their propositions. These players in the game of consumption place their offerings within the broader context of living and build their propositions upon deep human truths that have fuelled their propositions forward into market place. Nike voices a vision and has created tools believing everyone can be a better athlete and that humans have no limits, Apple could have viewed themselves as makers of stylish computers but instead considered themselves as creating tools for creative people who do not want to accept the uniformity or institutionalisation of society.

Coca-Cola, a legend in its own league, has consistently voiced a stubborn optimism, even in the worst of times. These companies have consciously or intuitively humanized their marketing capability by blending empathy skills, creative skills, technical skills and market implementation skills together in a beautiful mix, and expanding their proposition as possible means for consumers to engage and deal with the broader complexities of human existence. The tools and visions that these brands have made available and voiced have not only been recognizable (an obsession for most marketers), they have at times also been broadly relevant and have deeply resonated with people using these propositions actively in their lives. No wonder these brands are invited so deep into people's lives. Douglas B. Holt speaks of these brands as iconic, and advocates that these brands win competitive battles, not because they deliver distinctive benefits, trustworthy service, or innovative technologies (though they may provide all of these). Rather, they succeed because they forge a deep connection with the culture or with people within a certain cultural condition. He goes on to say that the strategic focus is on what the brand stands for, not 'how the brand performs', and this is what helps people make better sense of the world. Maybe he is just defining 'how the brand performs' too narrowly. Culture can fundamentally be described as a chosen and institutionalised way of dealing with our broader existence that is constantly changing, and brands are part of our cultural toolkit to adapt to a ever more complex environment. However, the vast amount of advertising which obviously is meant to convince the buyer of the superior quality of a product suggests that marketers have not yet recognized to broader utility value of brands and the market scope in which they could place their propositions.

NOTHING IS MORE POWERFUL THAN AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME

The following example could illustrate this broader scope of markets and brands. A good friend and

client, Benoit Beaufls, then marketing director for Coca-Cola in Thailand, told of the following situation that he experienced a few years ago. Upon arriving in Thailand, he was reviewing, with two young marketing colleagues, key pieces of advertising for Coca-Cola which had had an impact in Thailand. Whereas he was expecting them to quote some of the work done in the last years, featuring local singers endorsing the brand, both of them started to describe an ad which dated 10 years earlier. The ad featured young people travelling by train through the Thai countryside. As green, lush landscapes slipped by, the flock of young people sang a soft ballad. As they described the ad, the two young marketers started to sing the song in chorus, going through every single word of the 10-year-old text. Though they were in a very serious meeting, this turned into a very emotional moment; as their impromptu duet came to a close, Benoit noticed tears in the eyes of one of the brand managers.

He was extremely surprised, as a 26 year old woman crying at the recall of a Coca-Cola commercial is not a common encounter. In talking with her, he realized that the ad had been screened in a very particular context. It dated from 1992, the year of the last military coup attempt. In the wake of riots which left 80 people dead, and with tanks still on the streets of Bangkok, the king had appeared on the television. Despite lacking political power, the king delivered an eloquent, moving speech, reminding the Thai of their responsibility as a people. Thailand was their country, and it was their responsibility to maintain unity in order to grow peacefully. The king's appeal was unexpected, and came at a moment when the country was struggling to find its balance. Its effect was electric. The country united in support, the soldiers involved in the coup negotiated a peaceful end to events, and peace was restored to Thailand in a matter of days. Shortly after, the commercial by Coca-Cola was screened. Against a backdrop of tranquil rice paddies, optimistic youths were drinking

Coke and singing: “do you want to do something, something for your country ...”

Had Coca-Cola attempted to rally the youth with a patriotic message of social and national responsibility in, say, France or India, it would have been laughed off the screen. But in Thailand it appeared as a mark of respect from a foreign brand, paying respect to dramatic events that were changing the lives of people. The ad fundamentally marked the relationship between the Thai and the brand, creating a bond that never existed, and creating for Coke a clear superiority versus its rival Pepsi. What obviously happened is that, in a context where people reclaimed their sense of belonging to a community, Coca-Cola managed to become an icon for belonging. Just as it did in the middle of the Vietnam War, when peace became a hope for a generation of Americans who did not feel that Vietnam was their war. At that time, Coke produced an ad that featured hundreds of youths, with the typical long dresses, bell-bottoms and long hair of the period, who held hands while singing “I’d like to buy the world a Coke, for peace and harmony” ... That ad, just like the “train” ad in Thailand, played back a deep emotion of hope and belonging living with people, offering the brand as a uniting symbol. One of the key values embodied by Coca-Cola since its creation is this sense of belonging, the ability that the brand has to make you feel home where you belong. Why? Certainly the product itself contributes – the sweetness, the caramel, the cinnamon and vanilla aromas contribute to a reassuring feeling. But a large amount of communication has loaded the brand with that value, so that when people are in need of belonging – whatever the specific local context obviously Coca-Cola comes first.

So people would buy Coca-Cola because it is providing them with a reassuring feeling of belonging, not just for quenching their thirst? So loading brands with similar emotions is the route to success? That sounds too easy!

Not so much – loading your brand with emotions means that you position it against some of the emotional triggers that can drive consumers to you. But consumers evolve and make choices, and their aspirations, anxieties and needs fluctuate over time. Ideas very often act as bridges which are able to connect humankind to the context in which they live, and nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come. The historian Theodore Zeldin writes that whenever life becomes unbearable, man has found a new way to look upon it. To explain the unfounded optimism human beings display, wrote Joan Didion, we tell ourselves stories in order to live. Good stories make the world more bearable. Inevitably, therefore, we want to tell – and be told – stories that make us feel better, even if that means that we don’t get as complete a picture as we need. Stories, mythology and sagas have served people by providing a direction for their lives, as beacons which help us define who we are and where we want to go to. Good stories can have mythical powers, mystique and promise, yet they always have reality value, and the need for certain stories grows as one’s current reality demands.

We have always needed narrative to find our bearings. What have changed are the storytellers and the story medium. Where previously these stories were voiced around the campfire, our window upon the world has become mass media and the storytellers have been replaced by film creators, musicians and brands. They have become the voice of the world, and they have the power and possibility to compose stories which offer a view of life that offers us bridges to deal with paradoxes of life and contradictions in society. In return we buy their products at premium prices because what we get in return is not just a product of utility, but a signifier of significance. Brands symbolise shorthand material representing certain ideas or ideals that seem important to us at the time. As marketing practitioners and consumer psychologists

we are learning to broaden our views on the utility of brands and how we look at marketing. A new brand era is dawning and as early as 1983 Paul Hawken identified a profound change in the relative importance of product “mass” versus product “meaning” announcing a paradigm shift in marketing, a shift which very few marketers have yet managed to make. Our imagination, a unique human quality, allows us to play with the frameworks of our existence and brands and products are the modern tools by which we do so.

An example? Let us continue our Thai story. Ten years after events of 1992, Thailand has changed. The country has become an Asian dragon, and created massive economic growth. The 1997/98 economic crisis broke the trend for a while but the economy is soaring again, so the spirit has changed. Thailand is driven by a massive desire for success. Every Thai, from the taxi driver to the current prime minister (an ex-policeman who made himself the richest man in the country) wants success. It is all about making it, and letting others know. Getting rich, access to cars, mobile phones, clothes, the country – and notably Bangkok – is driven by an economic frenzy similar to the one that now rolls over Shanghai.

In this context, Thai have not lost their sense of belonging – but it has become a much less major aspiration. Every Thai still dreams of his village, and would never miss paying respect to his elders or the monks. But this has taken new forms – it is no longer about returning to where I belong, it is about how big a house I can build to impress those in the village.

So what happens to Coca-Cola? Not surprisingly, the brand has been struggling for a few years.

Not so long ago, the same brand manager that told about the “train” ad went through Klong Toey, one of the slum areas of Bangkok, with a Coke can in her hands. She was stopped by a teenager who brutally asked whether she was an idiot. “Coke drinkers”, he

said, “are idiots!” When you spend 12 hours a day doing marketing for Coca-Cola, you do not let this go, so the young lady invited the boy to have a drink and a chat. He told her of his life – six children in one room, an uncle that stopped talking years ago out of despair, mom and dad away for work, drug pills everywhere, and afternoons spent at the Emporium department store just for the free air conditioning, with half a dollar a day to eat and drink. “So what do you eat and drink”, she asked. A quarter dollar for a bowl of rice at midday, and a quarter dollar for a soft drink in the afternoon.

Which one? The brand that sponsors David Beckham and Robbie Williams, the one that offers a bit of dream to make the day ... the one that tells me “ask for more” ... Pepsi.

So what about Coke? It has posted larger posters in Klong Toey with a Thai translation of its global selling line: “Life tastes good”. But you have guessed it, in the countryside of Thailand, where life remains simple and traditional values are key, life does taste good despite poverty – and Coca-Cola beats Pepsi 2 to 1. But in Bangkok where the emotional tide is about working for more, it does not. In the poor areas of Bangkok, Pepsi wins by 3 to 1 ...

So is marketing just luck? Waiting for the population in your country to be ready for you? Or can you proactively win them?

The answer is obviously: proactivity pays. Even if your brand has lost appeal, it is up to you to create it by understanding the broader human frameworks of users’ lives and adapting your offer. Coke Thailand has understood it, and a recent re-injection of “energy” in their marketing mix is driving the brand high again.

But let us take a more dramatic example.

In June 1999, several school children in a town close to Antwerp in Belgium complained about nausea and dizziness after drinking Coke – time would tell

that some traces of fungicide improperly used on some transport pallets had left an unpleasant smell to a few cans. A not so uncommon event, however. Coca-Cola receives a few quality complaints a year – sometimes justified. In 1997, the company even had to get a production batch of Coca-Cola Light off the market, as some broken glass had been spotted in a few bottles. This actually happens to all major companies – zero defects is hard to attain when 10 million bottles are sold every day – so the event only generated a few lines in some newspapers.

But 1999 was different. As Coca-Cola hesitated to communicate to the press before having found the origin of the defect, the government became worried and the press violent. Very soon the government asked the company to retrieve all its products from the shelves. No Coca-Cola, Fanta or Sprite product would be sold for eight whole weeks – a nightmare.

A marketing earthquake of that magnitude has the ability to kill a brand. In the minds of the marketing people at Coke was the disaster of Perrier in the United States, which had occurred a few years earlier. After traces of benzene were found in a few bottles, Perrier had to retrieve its entire production from the market. When it was able to re-introduce the brand after a few weeks, sales were 30% lower, and never completely picked up.

A natural reaction would have been to rush into a PR marathon to justify the quality of the product, to clarify that despite the bad smell no one had been really sick, and to insist that the kids in Antwerp were OK after a few hours of feeling nauseous. But in marketing, just like in PR, a golden rule is “perception is reality”. Coca-Cola had to have poisoned children, since that was in the news! So the people at Coca-Cola tried to understand how a minor quality incident could become so blown out of proportion. What they learned – with our help – provides an amazing perspective on the role of culture and emotions in marketing.

Belgium is a small country, marked by a sadly dull history: its territory had been under constant (but changing) domination of the French, the German, and the Dutch, until the international community that had defeated Napoleon gave them their autonomy in 1830 as means of creating a barrier between France and northern Europe. The newly formed country brought together a French- and a Flemish-speaking community, which have developed a solid emotional enmity ever since. Until early in the 20th century, the French-speaking community in the south dominated Flanders, thanks to their mines and the steel factories. Since WWII the Flemish have gradually become dominant, as the heavy industries collapsed and they developed textile and lighter industries. However the experience of domination has left both sides with a solid underdog culture, a constant need to be reassured, and a culture of non-confrontation and compromise. The constant arguments between communities have led to years of political instability and indecisiveness, and politics has become a tepid mush of compromise. Through that uncertainty, the population seems to constantly look for reassuring icons. They buy the leader in every product category: Belgium is the only country in Europe where the leader in coffee has a 65% share, just like the leader in nappies, in household detergents, or in soft drinks. Statistics show they buy more household appliances for the comfort of their home than any country in Europe, and have one of the highest rates of house ownership in Europe – their home is their retreat. They have a strong sense of their closed community, and the highest number of cafés per inhabitant in Europe, which allow citizens to share the warmth. And above all, they have an unbeaten level of pessimism. In 1999, when asked if they felt if things would get better for their family over the coming year, Belgians were 24% more likely to say no than to say yes. This figure was comparable to countries such as Russia and Indonesia.

Recent history was actually proving their worries right. In 1998, whilst the economy was low and unemployment high, a number of paedophile crimes had turned into a major scandal, with recurring rumours of politicians being involved. Then in early 1999 a dioxin scandal further traumatized the population. A farmer mixed dioxin, a highly toxic product, into his production of poultry food, and sent it to clients all around the country. When news of this broke, the government dithered instead of acting immediately, which reignited rumours about a countrywide conspiracy of darkness, in which the corrupt political classes had allowed themselves to become dominated by private interests. When action was finally taken it was too late to track the dioxin, so every single product containing eggs or chicken had to be taken off the shelves and destroyed until their producers could justify that no dioxin-contaminated product was included in their production process. The result was three weeks of total chaos, with no chicken meat, no biscuits, no chicken soup, hardly any frozen dinners, no eggs, no cakes in the bakeries, and above all, no waffles nor mayonnaise to be found.

In that context, Coca-Cola in Belgium is an institution. One teenager in two drinks it every day, a European record. Per capita, Belgians drink as much Coke as Americans. Coca-Cola is for sale in schools, and moms buy it by packs of 12 litres for their children. The brand Coca-Cola alone represents ten percent of all beverages. Pepsi is 30 times smaller. With this in mind, the disaster of Coca-Cola is much easier to explain. Coca-Cola was one of the last standing icons, and then it stumbled – another institution part of the general conspiracy. This can only explain the massive overreaction of the press and consumers to the fact that a dozen teenagers felt sick for a few hours. A university professor would call this overreaction “mass sociological illness”. But more important is the reaction of Coca-Cola.

When this analysis was done, the conclusion was quickly drawn: no rational element could ever bring back the trust that had been lost. It was all about emotional reactions, so only emotions would help.

So Coca-Cola put in place an emotional plan. Doug Ivester, CEO, flew in from Atlanta and spoke on television. He shared apologies, and renewed the promise of Coca-Cola, a promise of “constant quality and enjoyment”. The Belgians did not particularly like or trust Doug Ivester, but he achieved one thing: by showing concern, he empathised with the Belgians and looked at the situation from where they stood. That one of the most powerful CEOs in America was ready to take the trip to apologize and reassure was important. Then a major communication campaign in the stores was titled “your Coca-Cola is back”, again showing concern and a focus on people. Ten million free bottles were handed to the population to overcome the initial fear of drinking it. The population, which was bewildered but only hoped for a quick return of Coke, appreciated and forgave. Then Coke ran a large advertising campaign. No new ads were created. Instead, old ads were shown again, and more ads were re-edited in vignettes that showed generations smiling, talking and sharing a Coke – all set to soft music. Coke went to the extreme in offering reassurance. Though a brand for teens, Coke communicated for three months with a lead ad showing a teenager helping a grandfather with a broken leg reaching for the last bottle of Coke on a tray. Sharing and cross generation exchanges, the world was safe again. With that campaign, Coke nearly closed the case, with sales six months after the crisis only 2% below the prior year.

A few months later the mood changed: the ruling party of 30 years was kicked out in general elections, and there was a royal marriage. This prompted Coke to abandon “safety feeling” ads for more upbeat communication. But the lesson had been learnt. For better or for worse, marketing is all about emotions.

MINING FOR MEANING CANNOT BE DONE AT SURFACE LEVEL

A far deeper and better understanding of consumers is a much harder task than describing the virtues of a product, and here market and consumer research has not always stepped up to the mark. Many current research practices are struggling to come to grips with changing dynamics of the marketplace and consumers who are consuming for reasons other than just to survive. Most research thinking follows the same route as marketing thinking. It involves taking a product “to market”. Much of the time we spend talking with our respondents is taken up with discussion about the product and the brand. Then, if there’s any time left at the end, we might think about doing some projective techniques, maybe, and discussing emotional end benefits. We spend little time worrying about what is going on inside people’s minds, and, more importantly their lives. As researchers this way of thinking seriously limits us. It leads us to carry out research that does not put people at the centre, but rather brands and products. We have adapted our research to suit the demands of our marketing masters. Along with the rest of the business world, we have reduced people down to consuming units. That is, people are only of interest to us in terms of what they consume. When researching we often do not see the whole person, but the consumer. That is what we are paid to do.

The term “consumer” and “respondent” itself is a symptom of this type of limiting thinking. We have adopted it in order to fit in with the rest of business, as have marketers. Approaching people in this way is a serious handicap. It prevents us from really understanding what moves the people we talk to. We have reduced people down to the level of economic units of consumption. We devote so much time to analysing our brands and our products, and so little to people’s minds and motivations that important “insights” can go unnoticed. Our questionnaires and discussion guides are packed with questions about

brands and products. There are plenty of reasons for doing research in this way. We are making good money out of doing what is asked of us, so have little incentive to change.

We need to approach things from the other end, and start by looking at what motivates people. We need to understand this emotional territory, and how it relates to the market in question. What psychological needs, wants, and desires is the market serving? How can companies become “respondents” to the “stimuli” that can be found in the space of the lives of the people who use their products and brands? If we want to be invited into people’s lives, it is imperative that we first start by looking at what moves them, and then move our focus outwards towards the brand, the product. Brands and companies live in the same cultural waters as the people they serve. They are subject to the same powerful currents, and need to use the force of these currents to make stronger connections with people.

Nothing ‘moves’ man more than our common inborn human strivings and the beliefs we have about what is possible, what is bearable and how we define our existence. For those who are busy with the art and science of branding, the forces of motivation and persuasion should be of primary concern. It is surprising how little effort goes into trying to understand and uncover the possible broader virtues and vices of a brand or product offering. To move people you need to understand them, empathise with them, and offer solutions which they can invite into their lives. Yet the marketing of today still mainly focuses on the virtues of product, the forces of media spend, brand awareness and categorizing consumers into passive buckets of reach.

More and more voices are crying out that the current market(ing) paradigm is no longer working, or is no longer sufficient, believing that the greatest opportunities for growth in today’s world of post-modern consumers lies not in making more ‘stuff’, but in making ‘stuff’ more meaningful.

We researchers have the task of unlocking the broader utility value of brands by siding with the people that invite them into their lives and understanding their broader contexts. We can be of great service to marketing if we offer insights that can make brands part of a human story that matters to people – insights which offer brands entry points of relevance and resonance into people's life, enabling brands to connect better. We will need to dive deeper and accept that both human strivings and our assumed beliefs are hidden beyond surface level and elude our conscious reflections on a daily basis. Research will have to focus on uncovering meaning, on people and their paradoxes and exploring human frameworks, not just evaluating consumer responses.

A final example: Case of Coca-Cola in Turkey

The brand team and the advertising planners in Coca-Cola Turkey were considering how to activate their brand within the context of the football World Cup. Football was a property they owned and connecting platform which they had spent a lot of money on in the past to give their brand the rightful place within this arena. Football touched many people's lives in Turkey, so for such a big brand it made absolute sense to be there. Previous research had already indicated that the Coca-Cola brand was strongly associated with football, and based on the fact that Coca-Cola sponsored the event, it was a must-do event activation. Based on the mind share marketing model, Coca-Cola owned this space, and all that the advertising agency had to do was come up with a creative idea which gave Coca-Cola a role. As an ideas company, the advertising agency was quick to offer witty and clever scenes connecting Coke to football. However, these ideas were not really grounded in people's lives. Coca-Cola and the agency felt it was necessary to partner with research to uncover some insights what would give them a stronger foundation on which to activate. We were called upon to dive deep into people's lives to see how Coca-Cola could be of service to the people of Turkey at the time of the World Cup.

What we uncovered and the result of this case we will share in New York where the case will be presented at the ESOMAR Brand Matters Conference. See you there.

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