

## What is a Brand?

»Products are manufactured on assembly lines,  
but brands are created in our minds.«

The American Marketing Association defines the term 'branding' as »a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. The legal term for brand is trademark. A brand may identify one item, a family of items, or all items of that seller. If used for the firm as a whole, the preferred term is trade name«.

Does this define what a brand is? Technically it does, but it doesn't quite explain why people like, engage or gravitate towards brands. Maybe we grew up with certain brands or products. It might be convenient and useful in the way we run our lives. Maybe we like the design of certain products and the innovative and sustainable approach to manufacturing. Some brands make people feel comfortable, safe, and right at home. Some brands give people a chance to connect and spend quality time with friends and family anywhere and at any time, whether in a store, a restaurant or simply by using a service exchanging messages on a phone while being thousands of miles apart.

Wally Olins states, "Branding is a profound manifestation of the human condition. It is about belonging, belonging to a tribe, to a religion, to a family". Whether for comfort, efficiency or even nostalgia, brands reside in our minds after being shaped through our experiences. They appeal because they create meaning in our lives. In a way, brands let us live life with purpose. This purpose comes from a set of values or ideas that a company or a product stands for. It is shaped through the company's or product's actions, and is recognized through a visual and verbal style.

But branding is much more than just an external skin you clad onto a product or service offering. Often we mistake brands to result from pure marketing efforts, advertising or visual communication. A symbol, a set of defined colors and a dedicated font alone do not create a brand experience which people con-

nect or interact with. And because branding is the social creation of meaning, it is not just what you express, but more so how you express it. As Yasmin Merican concludes in her book “The Right to Brand”, “Branding is what consumers, see, feel and experience”.

### Designing Brands

Vision and mission statements are often companies and services claims and aspirations to be ‘world-class’ or ‘industry leaders’. But what is the definition of world-class? Doesn’t it sounds like the beginning of the end, as brands are built and defined by their actions and not purely on promises, aspirations or self-prescribed attitude to ‘just get the job done’. As cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken states, “branding is a process of meaning and manufacture that begins with the biggest, boldest gestures of the corporation and works its way down to the tiniest gestures”. Therefore, the aspiration to be world-class doesn't make any sense. The focus instead should be to create the most amazing product or service which people use and enjoy around the world — and that ultimately enhances their life’s and enables them to do and experience things they couldn’t do so without.

Having an “insanely great” product or service offering fosters the core of a brand. Besides the product — design language, company culture, tone of voice, service and business ethics, speed of delivery and reliability and much more are essential drivers in building exciting and sustainable “brand experiences” which will converge in long-term value, customer retention and, ultimately, profit.

Companies and products especially in emerging markets tend to struggle to fulfill their promises to the consumer. One main reason for this is that brand ‘thinking’ behind those companies and products is diluted in the process of trans-

lation using manufacturing, design and communication. Design and communication only plays a minor role. In fact, it is often seen as an evil necessity rather than a valuable and strategic business assets deeply incorporated into companies DNAs. Solely competing on price is a quick fix for any brand as it lacks diligence to invest into a long-term strategy and brand growth and customer loyalty.

Paul Rand wrote in an article for the New York Times in 1993: “In the world of commerce, with the exception of the lucky, talented, passionate, or aggressive few, designers are neither appreciated nor understood. For the most part, they are consigned to a low rung on the corporate ladder. Similarly, it is the tendency of most businesses to appeal to the consumers’ lower instincts rather than to their higher ideals.”

As it becomes incredibly difficult in today's markets to differentiate between similar products or service offerings, creating a distinct brand experience based on shared values with consumers is more important than ever to ensure customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention. Within a decade we've come from a 140 characters per message, to “a 1000 songs in your pocket” and today have the world literally at your fingertips — and the noise that comes with it. It is easy to get lost, as a consumer and as a brand.

Design is a very important driver and guide in the creation and telling of these compelling stories and to navigate through the noise. The role of the designer today has evolved from simply illustrating a message to literally driving an entire channel of delivery. Melchior Imboden describes in his essay for the publication “Plakate der Schule” published by Simon Roth, that the convergence of modern media demands a critical understanding and evaluation of communication channels and their endless possibilities in creating and driving value. Today, designers are tasked with translating those values and inspiring the stories which

brands around the world are telling. It is design bringing content and meaning to life that enables the story and the storytelling. Without stories, brands have no meaning, and without meaning, brands have no connection.

Cheryl Swanson brings it to the point: “A brand is a product with a compelling story. A brand offers quintessential qualities for which the consumer believes there's absolutely no substitute. Brands are totems. They tell us stories about our place and culture, about where we are, and where we've been. They also help us figure out where we're going.”

### Leading Brands

Developing, leading and continuously enhancing a brand experience is a top down approach which is reflected in everything a brand does, from products to service to customer service and investor relationships. Without a strong leadership brands and companies put themselves in jeopardy and are easy prey in today's highly competitive and often ruthless market environments as educated consumers have an array of choice and therefore turn their heads quickly.

CEOs in conjunction with their boards set the road for the future and constantly have to evaluate whether the ship is still on track. Leading purely based on spread sheets, shareholder value and short-term profits for investors will only be a quick fix merely prolonging the course to hit the rocks. Kodak Inc. is one example of what missing vision and weak leadership focusing on the past and resting on their laurels can do instead of being brave and bold to take a look towards the future. A brand that's more than 100 years old and a former innovator and market leader, within a decade has come close to extinction. The task of a leader is to constantly evaluate the present to plant the seeds for the future. Even if it sounds simple it presents a huge obstacle for many companies and brands today

to challenge the status quo. After all, branding efforts are made to be prepared for the bad and not just for the good times. When founders or successful CEOs leave due to age or the company being sold, their brand vision and leadership values leave as well. Therefore leaders have to develop long-term strategies and vision which will be part of a companies DNA beyond their legacy.

In his book “A Fine Line” German product designer and founder of frog design Hartmut Esslinger explains the importance of leadership and brand vision: “[...] Success is not only a product of inspiration, big dreams, and a charismatic personality — although those must certainly play a role. The best leaders and the most successful companies also have the will and the desire to explore the unknown. And they have a deep ongoing respect for design and its power to drive strategy of creativity and innovation. [...] That kind of success requires strong leadership, defined by its strategic vision, its ethical commitment to serve people and society, its courage to pioneer new pathways, and its ability to turn dreams into reality.”

Creating and maintaining brands is a never ending process of refinement, evaluation, innovation and the creation of meaning and trust in the world. Continuously enhancing and developing products or service offerings, satisfying people beyond expectations and being a trusted and valued part in their daily lives creates brands. Being passionate and precise in every part of the process, whether it be engineering, development, design, packaging, communication, investment or business strategy to name a few, creates authenticity people will love and enjoy all along. After all, products are manufactured on assembly lines, but brands are created in our minds.