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## **BRANDING > Brands Not Products**

Branding started off being a, just a mark of quality on a mass produced good. Branding really took off around the Industrial Revolution when the market was flooded with identical products. And there needed to be some way to differentiate them, some way to know which was the better quality. Or at least to believe that. The role of branding has changed dramatically and there was a moment in the mid eighties when Kraft, when Phillip Morris bought Kraft for six times what it was worth on paper.

And this was a pivotal moment in branding history because it said to the markets that your brand image, the word Kraft is worth this incredible intangible amount of money. So the act of building up your brand is an enormously profitable investment because it can translate into such enormous profits. And ever since then more companies have been shifting away from building up, making their products the star of what it is that they do and making their brand image the star.

And there is, there's a phrase that management consultant Tom Peter uses which is: Brands not products! And it's this euphoric idea. That the companies that are going to be left behind are the ones that still produce their own goods. Still sort of tied, he called them earth bound corporations. While the transcended corporations will rise and those are the ones that have cut their ties to the manufacturing world. They let a web of subcontractors and contractors produce their goods. And they spend all of their time building up their brand image. And they do that of course by projecting their brand image onto the culture as well as drawing brand image inspiration from the culture itself.

## **BRANDING > Selling Us Our Values**

I think we should stop beating ourselves up for buying into what is essentially our most cherished ideas. Our most cherished values because there is so little competing with them. I mean these are, nobody else, nobody in the public sphere is competing with Nike's version of the town square. Our libraries are underfunded and degraded. Our universities are underfunded and degraded. And along come these glitzy commercial utopias and of course we're drawn to them because the inspiration behind them came from us in the first place. That's what the market, that's what underlies the brand image process. Coming to us and asking us what do you care about and then selling it back to us at a premium.

## **MARKETING > Cool Hunting**

The cool hunting industry didn't even exist before 1993. It sort of exploded just over the course of the decade. And the idea behind cool hunting is that, essentially the premises that corporations don't understand what young people want. And that there needs to be a kind of middle man, middle man industry that will be the liaison between youth culture and the brands. To explain and decode so that these companies are better able to create brand images that are direct reflections of youth culture. And of course the time span between when something is a genuine idea, genuinely sort of independent organic idea within youth culture, and when it is sold back as a brand has become so compressed that it's completely insignificant.

But cool hunters sort of comb the back alleys of our culture, interview kids, video tape them. It's basically corporate journalism. But what's interesting to me is that in reading the literature of the cool hunters, what they predict is that because young people are so cynical about marketing. This is of course the premise of all marketing, that we all hate marketing and that we need a new campaign that's going to break through that cynicism. So nobody is more aware of the backlash against marketing than the marketers themselves. It's the guiding principle behind all cutting edge marketing.

And so now that impulse is now just being applied to anti-corporate politics. Okay so you're cynical, your angry at corporations you feel they're taking over your lives. We'll just co-op that and sell that back to you. And I am really not convinced that it's going to be effective. I believe that what young people in particular are reacting against is this very process of co-optation. And that co-opting that feeling, that anger at being co-opted only makes it more militant.

## **BRANDING > Designer Activism**

We are so inundated by these brand images and we're so entwined with them, but it's such a one way relationship that it sort of builds up this resentment. And then when you come along and you give people the dirt on these corporations there's a real receptiveness to them that reaches beyond a sense of outrage over the issues themselves. Now that's a complicated issue.

I have a friend who's a labour organizer Hong Kong, he says this is designer activism. We're only interested in corporations, we're only interested in social justice if we're connected to it with a brand name logo. What about all those unbranded injustices out there that we can't connect to our Nike shoes, and our Starbucks lattes. And that is a real issue. But it's also true that for a lot of young people if you were to go into a high school and say kids we're going to talk about Guatemalan coffee pickers today.

Or we're going to talk about the fact that we need rules for labour in the World Trade Organization they would all fall asleep. But if you go to these schools and say I want to talk to you about your Mickey Mouse sweatshirt, or your Starbucks coffee, or your Nike running shoes. You have their attention. And it's not just because they have the products it's because they have, these products are so entwined with youth culture that these are pop culture icons

## **LABOUR > Joke Jobs**

When I was interviewing the managers of export processing zones in Asia. As well as managers of individual factories. When I would ask them why the wages were so low and what the conditions under which the workers lived were so difficult, they really sort of pooh-poohed the concern. And the way they explained it is that the people who work in these factories are overwhelmingly young, young women between the ages of 18 and 25. And I would hear over and over again that these young women didn't really need the kind of money that could support families.

That these were just temporary jobs. That they were only doing it for a few years so that they could send a little money back to their families who lived in the country side. And they lived like, it was a sort of dorm room set up, although twelve to a room and so on. Bunk beds, very cramped quarters. These were conditions where one could never raise a family.

And in fact there are horror stories coming out of the zones of workers being routinely fired when their bosses find out that they're pregnant. In the Maquiladoras in Mexico of doing pregnancy, routinely doing pregnancy testing before workers are hired. Doing sanitary pad checks to make sure that nobody is pregnant. And it's an infantilization of the work force that is going on overwhelmingly in the export processing zones. They're sort of engineering a kind of ageless work force where no one has to be responsible for families.

And there is a real parallel with what's going on at the mall even though it's some how obscene to compare the conditions under which teenagers and people in their twenties working at Starbucks and McDonalds and the Gap - those conditions. It's obscene to compare them with the conditions in the export processing zone. But from the perspective of the companies there is an undeniable symmetry at work. Because of course what we hear about the reasons why McDonalds' workers are only making just above the minimum wage. Or Gap workers are only making \$7.00 an hour it's because these aren't real jobs either.

And once again the work force is mostly, mostly women. Mostly ages 18-24. The companies say the exact same thing, that it doesn't, you don't have to support families on these salaries because they're somehow training wheel jobs. Joke jobs and so on. So an amazing thing is happening for a company like the Gap because neither at the retail end nor at the production end does it ever have to

take responsibility for the fact that adults with children are having to support themselves on the wages that they pay.

## **LABOUR > Codes Of Conduct**

When I was in the Philippines I talked to a lot of workers about these codes of conduct that are drafted by companies like Nike and the Gap. And might be regulated by some northern NGO's. This is the trendy new idea. And not only didn't they think it was going to help them but they were furious at the idea that these rules would be imposed on them rather than be rules that they had organized for amongst themselves. Because of course this is about self determination. This is about our right to govern ourselves and to govern our corporations.

And it's the same thing in the developing world. It's about workers' rights to organize themselves and make demands of their employers. These are founding principles of unionism. And it might seem like a short cut to say like, okay well we've got a whole bunch of rules and you just have to sign on to them. But what I'm hearing is that in fact this is the last thing that workers want. What workers want are for rights that they supposedly already have such as the right of to freedom of association to be enforced. Not to have an entirely privatized legal system imposed upon them.

## **STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE > Circumvent Party Politics**

I think that there's activism going on on several different fronts. Activists whether they are targeting Nike or whether they're school boards deciding that they're not going to do business with corporations who are invested in Burma. Or who use sweat shop labour. Or unions who decide that they're going to organize themselves as investors and apply pressure through their pension funds. This activism is taking place on many different fronts.

But it is doing an end run around traditional political parties. And I think the way previous generations perhaps understood how to affect political change. But I don't think it's about privatization. I think it's a fallow period where those structures have been thoroughly discredited that they need to be ignored for a little while so that new structures can emerge out of this movement. And so I'm not, I don't believe that this is about privatization. I think it's about decentralization and it's about building new structures. But we're just at the early stages and we don't even, in a sense, know what they're going to be.

But I'm encouraged that we're not sort of running into the brick wall trying to solve these problems through national electoral politics anymore. And part of the reason why this activism is happening, why so many, so many campaigners have

decided that they have more luck going after corporate targets as opposed to governmental targets is because they've tried that. They've tried to affect change by electing a social democratic party for instance. And seen that that was essentially a waste of energy. And worse than that, a recipe for despair, for activists' despair. And so what we need I think, are a few solid victories and a sense of empowerment to build upon.

## **STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE > The Consumption Dilemma**

I actually think that any movement that's about scolding people, making them feel guilty for needing to feed their families quickly. And for liking nice clothes is doomed to failure.

Not just here but particularly in the developing world where you've got a lot of people who are fighting for basic rights to consume and who can only dream of being able to produce, to buy the goods that they're in fact producing. And I think that's a really elitist argument.

And what this is really about is the fact that we see corporations as the most powerful political entities of our time. And we are responding to them as citizens, citizens to political organizations. And we can do it with a latte in one hand and with Nike shoes on. I believe that we can. I'm not saying we should but I think that there is a distinction between having a problem with a product and having a problem with the way a corporation is behaving in the global economy as a political entity.

## **MARKETING > Mainstream Dissidence**

Of course there are individuals in all of these corporations who care about this, care about these issues. I mean, my book for instance is published by a large corporation that went through a major merger while I was working on the book. And it was the fact that there were individuals within that corporation who were concerned about these issues who made sure that the book came out. And made sure that the book wasn't censored.

So I think it's really important that we don't talk ourselves into a corner where we're convinced that things are so bad that it isn't even worth trying to get our message out there into the mainstream. And we sort of recede into just publishing on our own web site and that's it.