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ARTICLE REPRINT

**Design  
Management  
Review**

# The Road to Authentic Brand is Littered with Design

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Reprint #08192LEM16

This article was first published in *Design Management Review* Vol. 19 No. 2

**Building Brands at the Intersection of Design and Business Strategy**

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# The Road to Authentic Brand Is Littered with Design

by David Lemley



*Sophisticated products, the latest technology, persuasive marketing, and graphics—it is all for naught without an abiding employee commitment to the brand. David Lemley stresses that this internal focus includes crusading leadership, staff engagement in making the brand real, and a culture that emphasizes values and ideology over compliance. It's an evangelical spirit that marks the intersection of brand building, business strategy, and design.*

Hands up if you are sick and tired of hearing about branding. Me too. Brands, branding, and branded everything are everywhere. The pinnacle of over-saturation had to be when Tom Peters wrote *The Brand You*. Now we live amid a marching mass of billions of branded bipeds. And how about the brand books and brand gurus? It seems you can't swing a dead cat at a Chamber of Commerce luncheon without clubbing a branding expert in the back of the head. When did it all become so ubiquitous and meaningless? As Georgie Best was once asked, "Where did it all go so wrong?"

Way back in The Beginning, branding used to refer to the searing of cattle with a permanent, prominent scar that claimed said cow for life and helped



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keep it out of the hands of thieves. Then, as a by-product of the Industrial Age, it became a cluster of 50-cent words co-opted by the American Marketing Association to say in 100 words what could be said in four: *trademarks for corporate property*.

Now the term branding sits in the crock-pot with all the other buzzwords. Creative agencies are largely responsible for the confusion, as they quickly trademark everything under the sun to develop proprietary branding processes. We have branded branding. Clearly, this must be a sign of The Apocalypse™.

Somewhere on our journey from burning live leather on the range to prettying up the logo, color palette, and form factor, we forgot something: We forgot to deliver. You can make promis-

es all day long—explicitly, through your product claims and advertized messaging, or implicitly, through tone and manner—but to be seen as real in an increasingly unreal world, you need to deliver on the experience you promise.

### **The death of the four P's**

In their book, *Building Great Customer Experiences*, Colin Shaw and John Ivens write that 85 percent of business leaders no longer feel that the traditional differentiators (product, price, placement, and promotion) make a sustainable business strategy. They go on to state that brand is the only sustainable business strategy in existence today.

### **Radical change**

Our society has become extremely fragmented. We do less as families, groups, and neighbors and more as individuals. And yet, the fundamental condition of humanity is our need to connect and belong.

It's easy to see that anything in which we participate must be intentional.

The two places in which this intention has manifested itself in terms of radical change (which require our attention, as professionals standing at the intersection of business strategy and design) are the virtual world—where tribes are formed based upon affinity and like-mindedness rather than on geography—and the physical world, where we have Starbucks, the tribal



Consumers have created, in effect, tribes around brands they love.

gathering place, where the brand handles are easy enough for everyone to grab hold of and, thus, belong. But I promise not to bring up Starbucks again in this piece.

*The Cluetrain Manifesto*, by Rick Levine and colleagues, begins with one of my favorite lines ever written, “People of Earth...” and goes on to declare, “Markets are conversations.” Since its publication in 2000, many of the authors’ predictions have become commonplace. For the first time in history, consumers, not the companies that own the brands, control them. The consumers have created nomadic tribes centered around brands they love.

### **How I first learned that design ≠ brand**

It was 1996. I was happy having achieved pretty much everything I ever wanted in the industry along my journey: to change the world, be recognized by my peers, and woo women. I had gotten as far as any 30-year-old self-obsessed hipster doofus imagines he can.

Then during one of those late-night, sleep-deprived bottle feedings, which only the parents of a colicky baby can fully appreciate, I was channel-surfing and found a news program that was lambasting one of our clients for alleged ethical violations and unfair labor practices in Asia. This woke me up from my “just do it, revolution” bliss as I was working on a new project with the man who had uttered those words into existence. And for the first time I began to see what is now front and center in our consumer-centric world: Great design does not a brand make.

Great design can create interest. I agree with approximately 68,000 design firm websites in proclaiming that design creates emotional connectivity and that it may just be the thing that makes the difference. However, design style and clever imagery can be copied with ease—in fact, I challenge you to name one inspired motif that hasn’t been ripped off at least a thousand times. (If you can think of one, send it to me so I can steal it.)

### **Products don’t matter**

Here is a simple truth most product designers and innovation engineers don’t like to hear: Technology is irrelevant because it’s a given.

For years, I struggled with a kind of blindness

among businesspeople that defied my ability to address it: the belief that a good product was enough to make consumers loyal. A good product, even a great one, is not enough (Sony MP3 players and Zune.) Quality is a given in today's marketplace.

Why? Anyone can make a product that works and push it into the marketplace. Once there, if it is any good at all, it will be mimicked. And in the crowded, communication-saturated world we occupy, I expect my running shoes to help me correct the fact that I "pronate." I expect the moisture-transfer system in my polypropylene jogging suit to keep me dry when I sweat and my iTunes to sync up with my online workout journal. How or why all these things work is too much noise for me. In essence: Tell me the benefits, and I will choose based upon brand (the collection of opinions I have about you).

**Meaning is the new black**

To quote my long-time client Robert Raible from our presentation this winter at the National Retail Federation: "People want more of the same, only with better features, but that isn't why we buy. We buy as a form of self-actualization." Raible continues, "In our consumer culture, people are no longer purchasing merely on the basis of need or utility. Consumption has become meaningful, and brands are often used as building blocks for the construction and maintenance of our personal identity."

It works something like this: If I chew this whitening gum wearing these Prada pumps while standing in line to buy RED at Bloomingdale's before I head to Patagonia, then what does this say about me? It's no longer enough to have your own world beliefs and to purchase products—people see the corporate responsibility aspect of brands as part of the cultural cachet they receive from alignment with those values by simply purchasing, wearing, and so forth.

**Brand strategy is a new business model**

Compare the old model still used by many of today's organizations experiencing decline versus the new model that is the underpinning of all leading brands.

*The traditional model: Compliance*

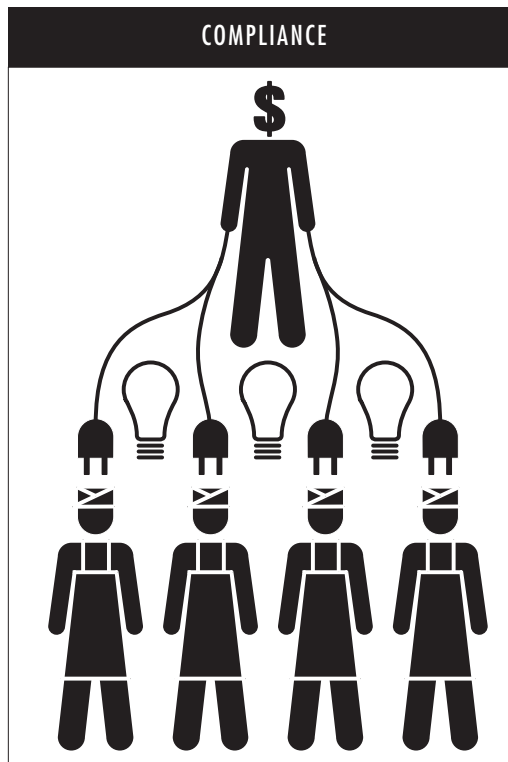
- Decisions by committee
- Sink-or-swim culture
- Disgruntled employees
- Company distress and pressure for short-term gain
- Typically top-down ideas, handed out by management and imposed upon employees; also known as command and control and resulting in a brand product nobody will hate

*The new model: Commitment*

- A fearless leader on a crusade
- Employee engagement
- Values-based culture

True vision can't be imposed on a company; it has to grow from the authentic, mutual purpose and passion of its people. True vision leads to commitment rather than compliance, confidence to create goods and services in a bigger picture—a brand people will love.

Think about it, The Home Depot isn't about

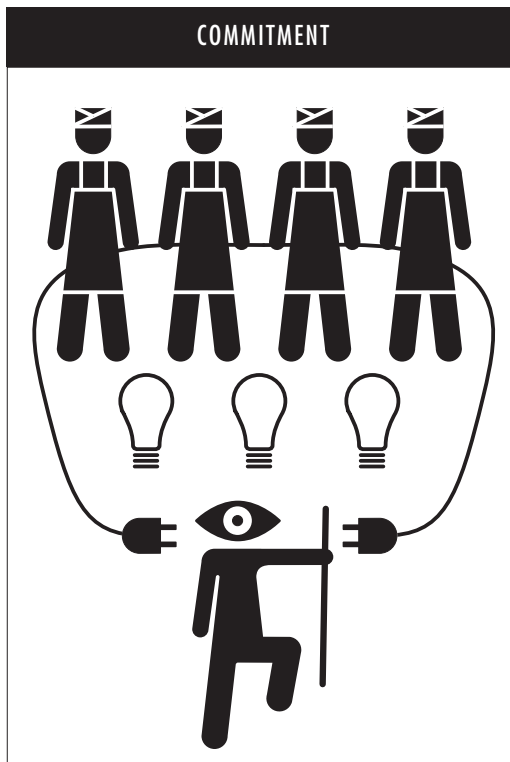


The traditional compliance business model features decisions by committee, ideas handed out by management and imposed upon employees, and results in a brand product nobody will hate, but nobody will love either.

building materials but about empowerment: You can do it, we can help. REI isn't about hiking gear, it's about inclusion in a club that loves the outdoors, co-op values, and environmental stewardship. Starbucks isn't coffee; it's freedom to be you in the third place.... Dang, I did it again—but only because Howard Schultz stepped back into his leading role to “fix the brand so it keeps its promises.”

### **David Maister makes me look smart (and handsome)**

Harvard Business School professor, author, and recognized thought leader on the service business (and let's face it, except for all but the most commoditized of necessities, the Experience Economy has made everything a service business) David Maister recently completed a study he calls “The Profit Formula.” Maister worked with 139 companies in 15 countries trying to answer this question: What makes the most successful companies in the world? His conclusions show that we are in a new era. Here is what Maister found:



The new model, commitment, draws from a values-based culture and engaged employees, as well as from a fearless leader. Result: a brand people can love.

- The most money comes from consistently superior client satisfaction—which is entirely subordinate to internal culture.
- Businesses need employees who are engaged—not simply happy with their benefits package.
- It's about the wow factor. If your people are coming to work every morning saying, “Wow, this is exciting and fun, I get to be a barista again!” then they're feeling meaning and purpose.
- It comes down to the character, not the skills, of the individual manager.
- The person in charge must credibly be seen as having an ideology.

Or, as I like to say, ideology trumps systems.

### **Internal branding: An essential component**

The brand must have buy-in from employees, and employee training must be implemented to instill a clear-cut understanding of new directives and goals if it is to be successfully implemented. Aligning the employees and getting them on board with the corporate brand is the first order of business. Didn't your mother teach you to clean up your mess before inviting company?

It's no coincidence that Nordstrom and REI made the top of the list in the National Retail Federation's survey of Top Retailers for Customer Service, as well as in *Fortune* magazine's Best Companies to Work For. Successful companies understand that a crucial element of connecting the customer to the brand is accomplished through motivated employees who themselves understand and buy into the brand. Every employee, front-line or not, should be viewed as a “brand evangelist.”

Nordstrom encourages its employees to act “as if it's your name on the door.” In turn, employees are empowered to make decisions that might improve customer service. REI calls its brand “a way of life.” It encourages outdoor activity for its employees by providing big discounts on gear, free gear rental, and gear grants for personal outdoor challenges.

If employees fully experience an authentic brand, see it, and believe in it, they will effectively convey it to the customer. Clearly, retailers like

Nordstrom and REI have given their employees and customers real reason to believe.

Collaboratively, businesses and their brand consultancies can define the unique brand attributes that have meaning for both employee and customer. These attributes, or pillars, of the brand, are the elements that describe its unique qualities. Communicated across every channel within the organization, they have the ability to connect with employees and customers on a personal, emotional level.

Once defined, these attributes need to be embodied and embedded throughout the company. From the CEO down through the retail ranks, from product design to advertising, in-store communications, signage, and POP displays, one overall identity and message must resonate. (Caveat: If the CEO of the company doesn't embrace the brand, live it, and make it a focus of the entire organization, all the revitalization efforts in the world will fall flat.) Employees who become brand evangelists are one of the most powerful tools in a company's arsenal. Furthermore, employees, in turn, can make evangelists of the customers by embodying the brand well and by making their customer service second to none.

### **The future begins now**

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The big challenge for brand strategists, design managers, and brand owners alike is to accept that organizations creating and running brands are made of people. Contradictory by nature, people and their modern consumer culture struggle to find meaning in our post-modern, democratized design world. The leaders of today already know what the rest of us need to learn: People will encourage transparent, authentic interactions with the brands they allow into their lives. Our job is to figure out how to create a framework that allows them to participate.

Companies need to find out and articulate why they exist (beyond profits), and that is where brand building, business strategy, and design intersect.

So what about the brand manager or the design manager who is tasked with changing the sales figures without touching the business? It may be time to work on your resume. ■

*Reprint #08192LEM16*