To Brand or Not To Brand

From symbols and stories to systems

Ogilvy

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Brand:

A mark made by burning with a hot iron to attest manufacture or quality or to designate ownership.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

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TO BRAND OR
NOT TO BRAND?

The marketing industry is in the midst of a period of change that is both absolutely terrifying and very exciting.

Faster, more intuitive technology is creating increasingly high expectations. People demand more control and transactional power from their personal data, which changes their notion of being a consumer.

Today there are more channels, more choice, more speed, more confusion, more noise — and less signal. In this fractured, fast-as-the-speed-of-an-algorithm environment, it's fair to ask:

To Brand or Not To Brand?

(01)

The Paradox of Choice - Why More Is Less is a book by American psychologist Barry Schwartz. In the book, Schwartz argues that too many choices can be detrimental to our psychological and emotional well-being.

Here's a truth: many in our industry don't quite understand brands. Some think that "brand" and "product" are different. Or that brand is a layer of communications. But that is the stuff of blowhard manifestos or "anthem" films. Too high-minded to sell anything, too lofty to be useful. To make brands more valuable to people and people more valuable to brands, we need to know how the concept of branding evolved and what role in the modern marketplace it holds.

Marketers forget that their trade stems from the practice of livestock branding, the act of marking an animal to signify ownership. But how did we come to adopt this method in the commercial world?

Simply put, the need for branding is a matter of choice and consistency. As many objects of the same ilk emerge, the only way to distinguish between alternatives is by adding a distinct mark. When cattle look the same, we add burn-marks, tattoos, or tags. When wine glasses at a holiday party look the same, we (rather unfortunately) add tacky stem charms depicting Frosty the Snowman, or worse. Whatever the added 'brand' may be, it serves as a shortcut. It communicates a wealth of information in a single glance. So it goes with commercial products and services too; brands help consumers navigate the paradox of choice[01].

The evolution of branding is a by-product of the intersection of culture and commerce. As the marketplace evolves, so must brands evolve to satisfy ever-changing consumer needs and wants. As much as brands and companies may wish it to be otherwise, brand is a reaction to consumer culture – not the reverse. Not convinced? In this paper, we will explore the evolution of branding as it follows a socio-economic timeline. This will demonstrate how major historical events and technological advancements demanded that brands continuously alter, adapt, and modify the way they interact with consumers.
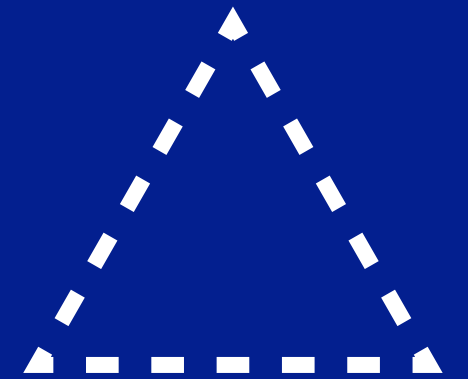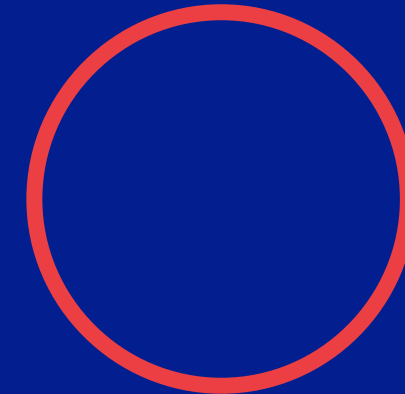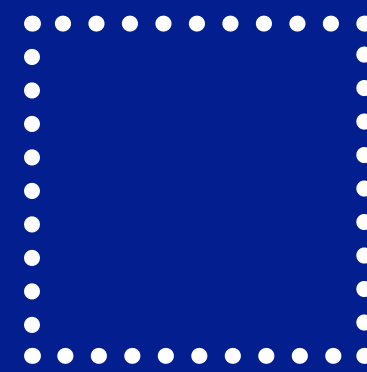
Brands as symbols

The rise of modern branding can be attributed to the surge of mass manufacturing in the US post World War II. For the first time ever, supply was greater than demand which created a proliferation of competing products, from automobiles to canned goods. The range of options created a need for companies to distinguish themselves and signify the consistent quality of their offerings.

Take beverages, for example. In a market facing a sudden explosion of competitive offerings, companies like Coca-Cola were forced to communicate what made their product unique.

The answer? Differentiation through branding.

Companies used distinct visual symbols not just to identify their product, but also to signal its desired characteristics. People knew when they saw the red, curvy "Coca-Cola" logo and typography that they should expect a flavorful, refreshing soda. Distinctive and relevant design elements served as visual cues that, in sum, created a brand. The complex, intangible characteristics of a brand could simply be condensed into symbols. Over time, the Coca-Cola logo did not just mean "refreshing soda", it also meant camaraderie and effervescence.

And so it was.

"The Man in the Hathaway Shirt" print ad

(02)

The King of Madison Avenue: David Ogilvy and the Making of Modern Advertising Paperback – June 8, 2010 by Kenneth Roman

Across the aisle, a personal care shelf that was once filled with indistinguishable bars of soap now displayed a soap for mothers, a soap for bachelors, a soap for hard workers, and a soap for socialites.

Brands, augmented with abstract connotations like exclusivity or hominess, imbued their products with intangible values. Consumers began to buy products for reasons beyond just quality, price, and convenience; they were now buying what the brand meant, what the brand made them feel.
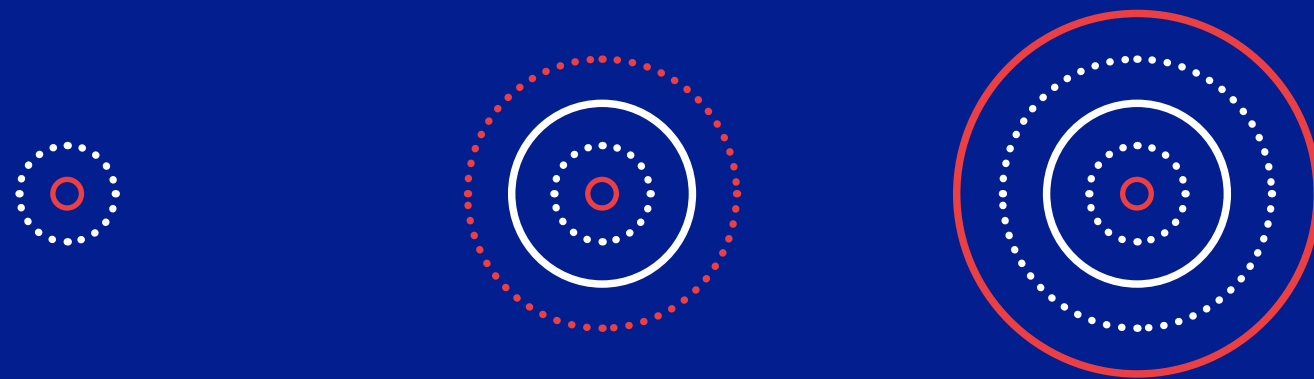
"The Man in the Hathaway Shirt" print ad is probably the first time, as Kenneth Roman says in his book[02], "that shirt advertising focused as much on the man wearing the shirt as on the shirt itself." Incidentally, this additional symbolic meaning in advertising allowed companies to account for a product's intangible value. Consumers were willing to pay more for products that symbolized a certain characteristic or lifestyle.

Brands, then, served not only as product differentiators, but also as symbols of conspicuous consumption. People ultimately used brands to display personal identity.

The next socioeconomic and technological advancements to propel the evolution of branding was the popularization of mainstream media channels. By the second half of the 20th century, nearly every American home had both a television and radio. These media channels allowed entertainment and advertising alike to adopt long-form narrative styles. The art of storytelling found a new home in aural and audiovisual airwaves, uniting the population in a state of collective narrative bliss.

With storytelling the new norm in entertainment and mass media, consumers became accustomed to a richer form of communication. As such, brands could no longer simply be multi-dimensional symbols; they had to become stories themselves. Brands began translating their symbols and intangible characteristics into rich narratives. Where a single print ad once sufficed, there arose the transforming need for need 30-second TV commercials.

In the iconic Volkswagen "Snow Plow" TV commercial, we see a man who drives the town snowplow using his Volkswagen Beetle as a snowplow. Using the story of an inconspicuous town hero, Volkswagen expresses the strength, reliability, and durability of its vehicles. The early narrative-style ads occupied the grey area between advertisement and entertainment. These brand stories pioneered the era of

emotional marketing, leaving purely functional marketing in the basement, collecting dust.

It is also critical to mention that the emergence of mainstream media coincided with a period of increased global tensions and political uncertainty. World events like the Cold War and the Vietnam War brought consumer emotions to intense highs. Implicitly, the public desperately wanted to believe their cries were heard and their fears understood. To achieve relevance, brands responded to heightened consumer emotions by crafting stories that were emotionally and culturally resonant.

Coca-Cola, a brand that once merely connoted camaraderie and effervescence, now told the story of a group of friends from all over the world coming together united by a shared cause - facilitated by Coca-Cola.

In the words of the advertising legend Bill Backer, creative director on the Coca-Cola account, the idea behind "Hilltop" was to see Coke not as originally designed – a liquid refresher – "but as a tiny bit of commonality between all peoples, a universally liked formula that would help to keep them company for a few minutes."

But it wasn't enough to just tell any story. Consumers wanted to hear their own stories. Brands began telling stories featuring characters the consumer either related with or aspired to be. The protagonist, however remained the brand—the brand, in all its glory, would drive the narrative. It was the Volkswagen Beetle that carried the snowplow driver to work, transforming an average Joe into a town hero. It was the Barney's suit that gave the average Joe a sense of confidence, a touch of the elegant Edwardian dandy. Buying a brand's products was a method of buying one's way into the narrative.

Make no mistake about it. As brands became stories, they remained symbols as well. The transition from symbol to story is not one of substitution, but augmentation. Brands evolve by adding in layers of meaning that correspond to the ever-evolving consumer and marketplace needs.
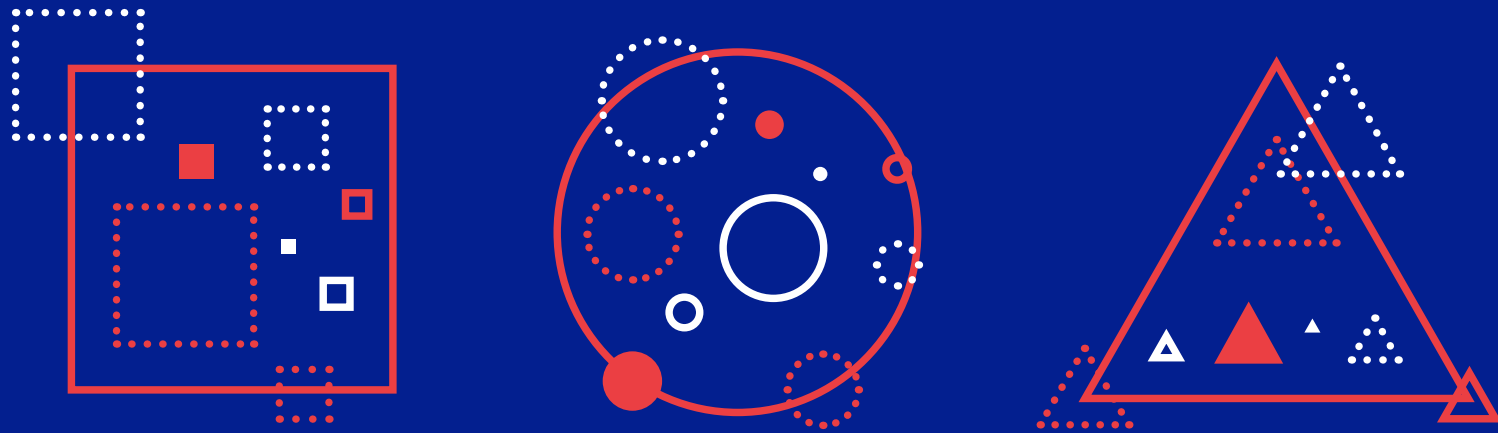
System:

A regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole.

(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Brands as systems

Mainstream media channels like radio and TV were nothing if not innovative. But they established a passive relationship with consumers. People viewed and listened to broadcast narratives, but they were far from active participants with them. The Medium was the Message[03].
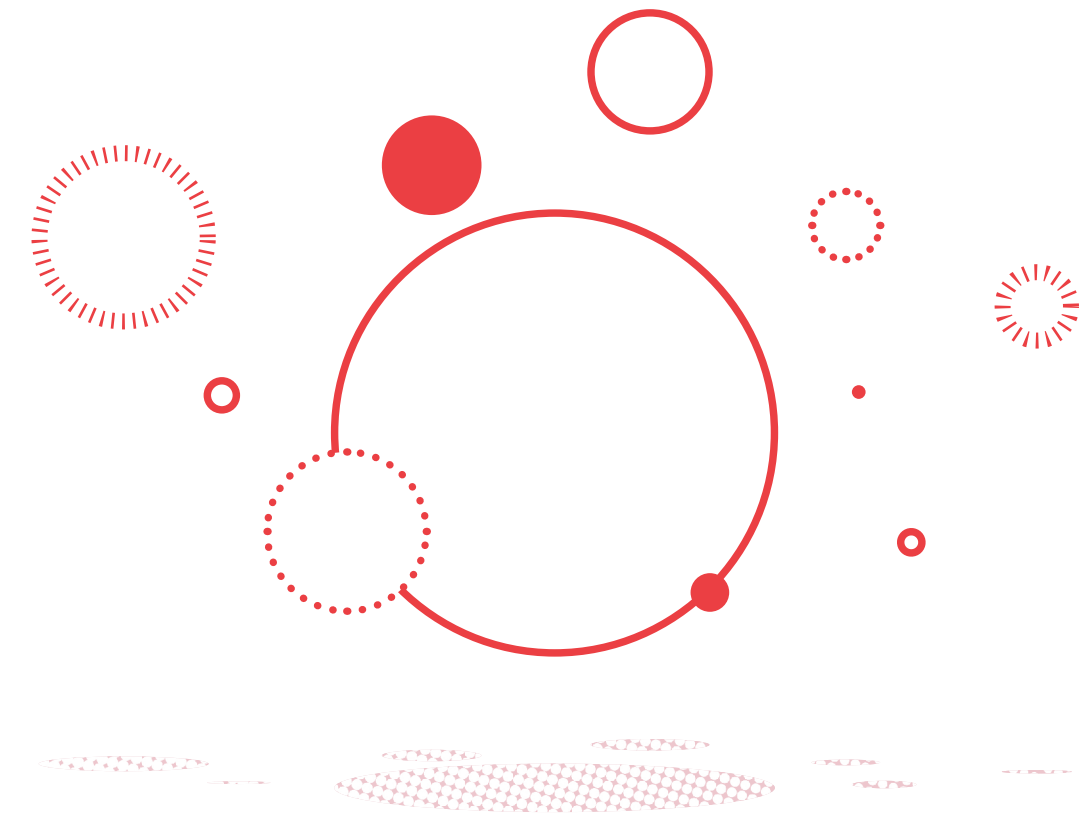
(03)

The phrase was introduced in McLuhan's book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, published in 1964.

Enter the digital disruption of the late 2000s. The emergence of the iPhone and smart technology completely altered the way consumers interacted with media and brands. 'Digital' became inseparable from everyday life. Stories via technology were not to be merely listened to and looked at. They were now part of a conversation.

People began both consuming media and content as well as curating and creating it. Consumers quickly became accustomed to the opportunity to interact and dictate media culture. The conversation now runs two ways. Get your content and platforms right – like brands such as Lego, GoPro, Marriott and KLM have done – and you can turn people into media, willing to spontaneously spread your brand's gospel far and wide. Provide them with a platform to participate in your products and services – like Coca-Cola managed with its personalized Share a Coke initiative[04] – and you have the chance to embed people directly into the narrative or fabric of your brand.

(04)

During the summers of 2013 and 2014, Coca-Cola made a splash when it swapped its famous logo with popular names, so everybody could Share a Coke with the people who matter to them most.

In other words, the Consumer is now the Medium[05] (which is the Message). Consumers are no longer the destination of communication; they are now the Medium that defines its shape and form.

(05)

The phrase was coined by Leo Premutico of Johannes Leonardo.

As a response to shifting consumer expectations, brands had no choice but to hand over a certain agency to consumers. Rather than the push of establishing symbolisms and telling stories to consumers, brands had to involve consumers to help craft their meaning. Brands began evolving from stories to systems.

Now, the word "system" may sound unemotional. It isn't. It signifies the rise of the consumer to the role of interlocutor. Its definition encompasses the interdependent, reciprocal nature of the modern relationship between brands and people. A

brand's transition from a story to a system is market by a shift in power. In a system, the brand and the consumer play equal roles in influencing the brand. A more collaborative, consultative dynamic was created, where the interaction between brands and their users generates compound interest. The question asked was: if someone consistently invests time, money and energy into the content, services and experiences a brand offers, what is the brand giving in return? Brands in today's marketplace are required to be relevant, useful and entertaining.

It sounds obvious, but such an approach requires a fundamental reboot of the traditional marketing monologue, which was dominant during the "story" era defined by TV commercials and characterized by military terms like "target," "bombard," "campaign," "collateral" and "guerrilla." In today's system era a brand's meaning stems not just from how a company positions the brand, but also from how consumers experience it. The brand actually becomes the customer experience, and the customer experience actually becomes the brand.

To further illustrate the structure of a brand system, let's look at Nike. Once an athletic apparel brand telling stories of athletic solo willpower, Nike has now taken on a systemic nature by introducing consumer-oriented brand experiences

(06)

Nike's much-publicized attempt to break the two-hour marathon mark.

like Nike Plus, Nike Plus Training Club, Nike Plus Running Club etc. Nike, through partnerships like the Nike Apple watch and eventful initiatives like Breaking2[06], has managed to cast a wider net of interactions with people.

These integrated narratives and experience ensure that Nike is not just a brand that consumers use to appear athletic, but to be athletic. Nike Plus offers consumers the opportunity to interact with the brand, even when they are not purchasing a product (via workout instruction, health tracking, etc.). As such, people are not just carrying out transactions with Nike, but forming relationships with Nike.

These relationships are mutually beneficial; Consumers use Nike Plus to enhance their healthy lifestyle while Nike uses consumer interactions and their subsequent generation of data to better understand the needs and lifestyles of its consumers. This reciprocity means that the Nike brand is not only what Nike tells or sells you. Nike is what you do with Nike.

As companies and consumers enter these reciprocal relationships, the line between culture and commerce begins to blur. Brands have evolved from tokens of culture and lifestyle to tools of culture and lifestyle. Today, consumers use brands to become someone.
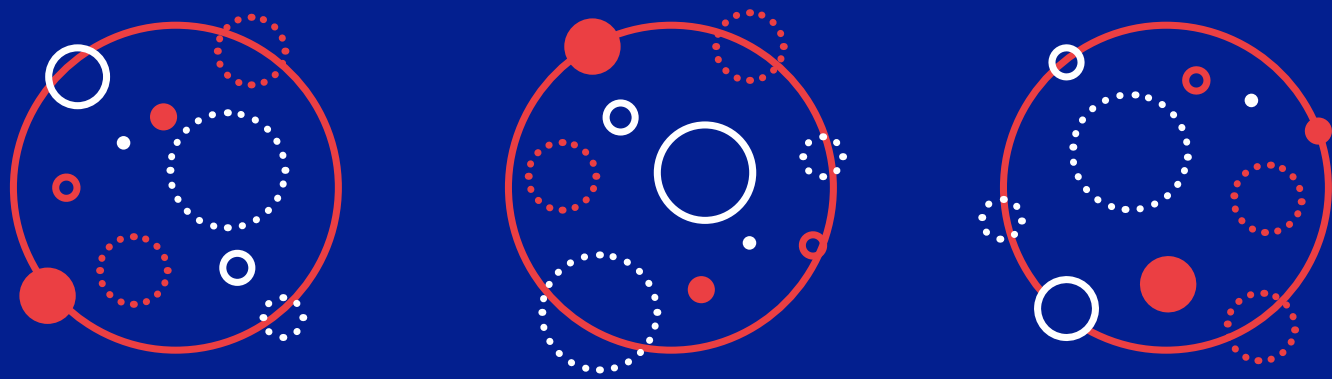
(08)

Physical availability is a term popularized by Pr. Byron Sharp, author of *How brands Grow* used to describe how brands can get their products physically in front of their consumers wherever they are, right when they want them.

This reciprocal nature is the core tenet of a brand system. However, the successful functioning of a brand system also depends on the careful management of space and time. At the risk of sounding Kantian or borderline Sci-Fi, a modern brand must monitor its spatial and temporal relationship to a consumer.

Space, as it relates to a brand system, denotes the proximity of a brand manifestation to a consumer. This goes beyond the traditional idea of physical availability [08]. A successful brand must be intimately integrated into the consumer's life. It's not enough for a brand to be physically available, it must be relied upon.

Continuing with the example of Nike Plus, the Nike brand is granted access to personal health information so that it may help a consumer pursue their active lifestyle. As such, the Nike brand becomes spatially intimate with the consumer. Consumers trust and depend on Nike to help them carry out a certain aspect of their lifestyle. In this context, Nike acts as a lifestyle companion more so than a corporate entity. Thus, the consumer's relationship with Nike becomes deeply emotional, not just transactional.

(09)

Saleability: A term coined by Jeremy Bullmore in his essay "Just because you can, doesn't mean you should" describing the impact of communication efforts that are set out to remind the brand's existence and purpose; to maintain, nourish and enhance its general desirability; to increase its brand equity; to add intangible qualities to its functional core. In other words, communication that doesn't even attempt to make an immediate sale; its sole purpose to make a brand more saleable – and to keep it so.

Time, in a brand system, helps both the brand and consumers to share long-term relationships, medium-term objectives and short-term actions. The long-term relationship is cultivated by sharing with consumers a purpose, an overarching intent above and beyond the moment of purchase. Nike invites consumers to embrace their inner athlete and "Just do it" by talking and acting as coach and personal trainer first, and apparel vendor second. People interact with branded experiences like Nike Plus in their everyday lives even when they are not buying a product. This long-term relationship establishes an emotional bond between the consumer and the brand thereby improving the overall saleability[09] of Nike products. It lays the foundation for sales, which serve as the medium-term interactions between the brand and the consumer.

It is not enough to simply foster an emotional relationship with a consumer; a brand must also provide a certain utility. So, when it comes time for a consumer to buy a piece of athletic equipment, they are likely to call upon Nike, who has already established the role of trusted health companion. In order to propel sales when a consumer need arises, brands must have first established a non-transactional interaction.

The Medium-term objectives are satisfied for both the consumer and the brand by communicating specific offerings aimed to satisfy more immediate consumer needs and wants. By communicating these offerings in a way that either solves a problem or fulfills an aspiration, the brand materializes its long-term purpose and promise in tangible ways.

Finally, in today's social media enabled world, brands have to be responsive and ask for consumer participation in short-term actions that utilize opportunities in the everyday fluctuations of culture and commerce.

Mastering the systemic forces of time and space allows brands to rightly answer the fundamental questions of why they have a role in people's lives, how they are different from the competition, of what use they are, and when and where they are available. The mechanics of the brand system rely on both utility and purpose. An emotionally rich brand with no utilitarian benefit will not satisfy consumer needs. A functionally effective brand with no soul will not foster affection or loyalty and will be easily replaced.

SO, WHAT?

A systems view of the brand is like having an architectural blueprint: "Architecture is systematic and everything influences the other parts, like a geometric dome. It won't stand if its parts are weak."[10] This cohesive, unified, kinetic, and ultimately holistic view of the brand allows us to focus on a long-term vision, while simultaneously allowing for the introduction of beneficial short-term ideas or rapid adaptation of existing plans.

As customers demand more from brands, brands must strive to be strategic and clear about what they stand for and why – their organizing principle. But at the same time, as platforms and consumer behaviors shift like sand in a windstorm, companies must be adaptive in how they achieve such aspirations.

Think of yourself as the driver of a car. Head out with a destination in mind but be ready to slow down in treacherous conditions, stop to fuel up, or swerve to avoid an accident. As marketers, we play a daily tug of war between long-term brand building and short-term sales goals. A systemic view of the brand means getting them to work in harmony by keeping our eyes on the prize, but being flexible in the short term.

Now that change has become the new normal, brands have to move from the power of symbolism and the power of narration to the power of reciprocity. As brands morph from symbols and stories to systems, they need to find ways to be relevant, useful, and entertaining. They need to create hospitable ecosystems and build upon ideas that welcome and nurture consumer relationships now and in the future.

As a system, Brand Building always shared a lot with Democracy. Brands are constantly asking the dollar "vote" of many in order to grow and change in use, as a reflection of the ever-changing world. Therefore, please oblige a paraphrasing of Winston Churchill, in the attempt to finally answer the question To Brand or Not To Brand:

"Brand Building is the worst form of growth hacking, except for all the others."

Questions?
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