
Day I

**WHAT YOUR BRAND IS AND
WHAT YOUR BRAND ISN'T**

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There are lots of misconceptions about brand and branding and what these terms actually mean. For some people these terms are veiled in a kind of arcane mystery, as though ‘brand’ was exclusively the province of specially qualified executives in huge and complex companies. For others the words ‘brand’ and ‘branding’ are inseparable from other specific aspects of marketing, such as advertising, logos, and slogans. Yet others think of branding as a dark, mysterious and probably evil art, practised by the hidden persuaders of capitalism.

But brand isn’t really about any of these things. Brand isn’t a subset of advertising (it’s actually much more important than that). Brand isn’t your logo. And it shouldn’t be complex or mysterious.

Brand is serious and important to your business: but it’s also very simple in its essence. **Brand is about meaning.** In short, **your brand is the sum total of all the meanings that all your possible audiences carry around about you in their heads and in their hearts.**

In other words, your brand is everything that your customers and prospective customers think, feel, say, hear, read, watch, imagine, suspect and even hope about your product, service or organization.

Take the British store John Lewis. Ask any group of people in the southern half of the UK what John Lewis ‘means’ (and I know because I’ve asked numerous workshop audiences over several years) and you will discover that most people share a fairly small number of ‘meanings’ for John Lewis.

Regardless of background, level of affluence, and whether they shop in John Lewis or not, the following meanings are always mentioned within the first minute or two of starting this exercise: quality, service, value, partnership, middle class.

This is not to say that these are the only words used. Of course not, but no matter how often I repeat the exercise these five meanings are the dominant ones: in fact they are the 'headline' meanings under which almost every other idea about John Lewis can be put.

Some people will say "John Lewis staff are always polite", which of course falls under Service. Others will remember the store's long-standing slogan "Never knowingly undersold", which reflects the brand meaning of Value.

Interestingly, most people are familiar with the fact that John Lewis is a partnership organization: in other words that each of its staff 'own' a little bit of the business. Materially this doesn't matter to us, the shopper. But philosophically, somehow it does. I think it's because we feel somewhere deep inside that if this store is in partnership with its employees then that indicates a value system which will in one way or another translate into a better relationship with us. We become a kind of partner of John Lewis too, just by shopping there: which is not the feeling one gets in most stores.

Not all the meanings that groups throw up in this exercise are positive. 'Middle class' is descriptive and neutral in and of itself, but is actually loaded with value judgements, most — though not all — on the negative side.

The negatives for John Lewis under the Middle Class headline include descriptions like: boring, stuffy, old fashioned, a bit posh. Some people go on to say "it's not for me" and "it's not really a family store", and "it's expensive".

But alongside these interpretations, John Lewis is also seen as aspirational and appealing, even to those people who call it stuffy, boring and posh.

The point overall is that John Lewis as a brand has a definable meaning which is almost all positive (quality, service, value) and that even its few negative meanings actually have a positive aspect. After all, even 'boring' is a reassurance that things will be just as you expect, every time. John Lewis is therefore much more than a name or a logo, or a number of big stores with certain stock. John Lewis 'means' something.

One more example. Draw the Nike logo (which, curiously, everyone seems to know is called the 'swoosh') on a piece of paper and people instantly respond with a whole new set of meanings. Nike headline meanings usually amount to the following: achievement, sport, design/technology, fashion, quality, expense, high-profile sponsorship figures (exemplified by Tiger Woods), hip-hop culture, child labour/sweatshops.

Nike has somewhat more complex meanings than John Lewis for two reasons. First, it's an international brand with a massive advertising and sponsorship spend. Second, it works across cultures to many different audiences.

Once again, you'll see on the list one brand meaning which is obviously not a desirable one for Nike. The interesting thing about 'child labour' as a brand meaning is that it is historic rather than current; however, it is a very powerful meaning, and one that Nike will have to live with for decades to come regardless of their actual labour practices.

Nike is a fascinating case of brand meaning. One might say that Nike is a brand and nothing else. The fact that Nike can be simultaneously so successful and yet so insubstantial as an organization is the most powerful evidence in retailing of the power of brand as meaning. And the fact that it is so multi-faceted as a brand (even though it markets a fairly narrow range of goods) demonstrates that brand is not a static thing but an ever-changing and dynamic one.

Why does this matter? Why does brand meaning matter so very much to Nike, to John Lewis, to any other brand you can name? And why should it matter to you?

Well, the answer is that without 'brand' John Lewis would be just a department store, and Nike would be, well, not much really. It is brand that gives these two businesses a personality and presence in the world. It is brand that enables us to understand them, and allows them to communicate with and sell to us.

Brand is a kind of shorthand. A way for a business or a product to introduce itself to people (customers and potential customers). But brand is also a kind of tool for those customers to use when making buying decisions.

When we choose a pair of trainers or decide which department store to shop in, we don't make the choice rationally, at least not completely rationally. That would be impossible, because the world is too complex. And even an apparently simple decision like which department store to visit when, say, looking for a new fridge, is fraught with difficulty.

Do we really have time to compare every single feature and benefit of every make and model of fridge in every different store? Let alone to cross reference that information with prices, guarantees, special offers, delivery charges and so on. And what is our ideal fridge decision anyway? How do we know when we've made the best rational choice?

The fact is that we don't have time or head-space, or even the information processing capacity to make these decisions rationally. So instead **we use a system of signs and meanings that have come to be known as 'brand'.**

If we've registered John Lewis in our internal system as a brand that we trust to give us quality, service and value, then we don't have to make anywhere near as many difficult decisions. Plus, of course, we remember the John Lewis promise of being 'never knowingly undersold', which overcomes our anxieties about them being expensive.

Funny thing about this slogan, too. When John Lewis say it, we believe it, because they are a trusted brand. It wouldn't be difficult to name a dozen retailers from whom we wouldn't trust that statement.

There's one more crucial element to remember from the beginning about brand: it's not about size. It is perfectly possible to be a brand with just a few dozen loyal customers. You can be a local chip shop and be a great brand. It's not the absolute numbers of people who know about you that make you a brand, but the relative coherence of what they think, feel and believe about you.

If you have 100 customers who share a set of meanings about your business then you've got a strong brand. If you've got 10,000 customers who don't have a shared set of meanings then you have a weak or non-existent brand.

"So what," you might say, "I've got 10,000 customers... so who needs a brand?"

Good question, but the answer is simple. Ten thousand people might buy from you this week or this month, but if you haven't engaged them as a brand (given them some meaning), then there's no particular reason for them to buy from you again. They might do. But they might just go somewhere else.

But if you have a strong brand, a strong set of meanings, then your 100 customers will come back, again and again. Because your brand

helps them to make their buying decisions easier. And not only will they come back, but they'll tell others about you too.

Brand gives you stability, growth potential, loyalty and longevity.

Consider the alternative. If you don't have a set of meanings that works for customers both rationally and emotionally, then where does that leave you? You might say it makes you a commodity. Just a set of functions rather than a set of meanings.

You can survive in business as a commodity. Lots of businesses do. But it's tough. Because if you're a commodity then you had better be cheaper, quicker or more convenient than your competitors, because that's what you will be judged on. As a brand, however, cheapness, speed and convenience are much less critical factors because, as a brand, you tap deeper into human psychology. As a brand, you go beyond a functional 'transaction' with your customers, and they start to buy from you because you somehow fit in their world and what it means to them.

It's a very powerful and enviable place to be. Big business understands it (although sometimes they get it terribly wrong). Many small businesses don't apply themselves to building brands anywhere nearly as much as they could or should. But you can, and I'm going to help you.

This book can't make your business into John Lewis or Nike. Because they are unique and so are you. But what it can do is guide you through the process (and the state of mind) of brand and branding, so that you can develop a set of brand meanings that are positive and attract people to come to you, to stay with you and (the ultimate brand benefit) recruit others to come to you, too.

Whether you're a flower shop or a financial adviser, a designer or a gardener, a charity or a voluntary organization, a local council or a wedding planner, a chip shop proprietor or a car mechanic, if you follow my steps you can become a powerful and sustainable brand.

Brand Builder Workout

Bearing in mind the concept of brand as sets of meanings (e.g. Nike and John Lewis), try to list the meanings of two of your favourite brands here.

Brand name:

Meaning 1:

Meaning 2:

Meaning 3:

Meaning 4:

Meaning 5:

Meaning 6:

Brand name:

Meaning 1:

Meaning 2:

Meaning 3:

Meaning 4:

Meaning 5:

Meaning 6:

Now, here's your first big brand challenge: repeat the exercise with your 'brand' as it stands now. And for this to be valuable, you need to be very honest. Don't write down a meaning that is just wishful thinking on your part. Try to put yourself in the shoes of your customers. If you can't (or

won't) do that, ask a friend whom you trust, and insist that they are brutally honest. Better still, ask a customer!

Your brand:

Meaning 1:

Meaning 2:

Meaning 3:

Meaning 4:

Meaning 5:

Meaning 6:



This is just the start. We will revisit this exercise later on, and if you follow the steps in this book you'll be amazed at the difference in results.

