



We Need a New Word for Brand

By Michel Hogan

“Read not to contradict and confute;
nor to believe and take for granted; nor
to find talk and discourse; but to weigh
and consider.”

—Sir Francis Bacon

WE NEED A NEW WORD FOR BRAND

The “Bob” Manifesto!

We need a new word for brand, and “Bob” will have to do.

Well, in reality, we don’t need a new word for brand—another clever name just to be different isn’t going to help anyone. Instead, what we DO need is a new understanding of what brand truly is.

Brand is having a crisis. Abused and misunderstood, it has become everyone’s favorite whipping boy. Now let me state upfront—I LOVE brand! But the brand I love bears little resemblance to the slick campaigns, shiny launch parties and hyperbole that most people associate with the word.

My brand is a genuine, living thing. It grows and becomes stronger with time and attention. It spreads like a virus, infecting everyone who encounters it. It can be powerful and help lift a company to great heights. But when ignored, it can just as easily help drive its demise.

My brand wants to spread its wings and show people exactly how important it is, how it is part of the whole system that comprises a company—not just a subset put in the corner for the next customer drive, not a veneer applied for promotional purposes, and not a shield for the true nature of the company.

So I invite you to join me in my exploration of the new world of what I call *authentic* brands. This manifesto is a conversation about what that means. Just between you and me, I don’t claim to have all the answers. Actually, I have more questions than answers. But with every question I have explored, certain things have become clearer.

ARE YOU READY TO EXPLORE WITH ME? ➔

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRAND

Let's begin with a quick recap of how we got here. Where did brands come from? (*Certain liberties have been taken in the name of space and time.*)

In the beginning, there were cows.

The four-legged property of ranchers—but how to tell one cow from another? How about we burn a unique mark into their hide—let's “brand” them. The more cows, the more marks, the better known the rancher was. The brand came to represent and embody how the townspeople felt about the rancher: did the sight of the brand on the cow and above the ranch's gate inspire awe or loathing?

What a great idea!

How about we do the same thing with companies? Let's create a brand—a logo—that will represent the company and put it on everything—our store, our literature, our products. Then people will easily know who we are. And the more they see it, the more successful we will be. From the time Paul Rand drew the ubiquitous IBM logo the deal was done. No company could be successful without a logo.

Then came the brand as message.

Thank you, Nike. Now it wasn't enough to simply have a recognizable logo, companies needed to tell people in three words or less everything they needed to know. Slotted under the logo, it was seen to be the magic elixir that would shape how people would think about the company, its products and services. Now let's put it on everything that moves and everyone will believe what it says. Just do it. Right! Except that often the company's actions didn't meet the promise those words made.

Which brings us to perception.

Specifically, customer perception—what they think you are is who you are.

The holy grail of brand today is to *create* the right customer perception—that perfect mix of emotion and smarts that will drive boat-loads of customers your way. And the best way to “create” that perception—a louder, bigger message that is put in more places! Slapped on t-shirts and caps for employees and splashed across the pages of magazines, websites and television screens, how could anyone resist? Thankfully that isn't the end of the story...

The Next Wave

There is another wave on the horizon. I call it the **authentic brand**. Authentic brands are deeply rooted inside the company. They are much more than the marketing veneer applied to the exterior face of the company. Authentic brands are honest. They are powerful mechanisms guiding decisions and direction across all functions of a company. They naturally filter out to the customer and everyone the company touches through those decisions and actions. This is the brand I love!

What does this mean for your company?

WHY DOES A COMPANY EVEN NEED A BRAND?

I was asked this question the other day. And I found myself struggling to find a good answer...why DO you need a brand?

*The conclusion I came to was this: perhaps you don't **need** a brand, but you most certainly **have** a brand, so why not use it!*

As I noted in “A Brief History of Brand”, my view of brand is not as a subset of marketing. I don't see it as merely a device for connecting with customers and shaping their perception. And it is not a logo or message. While these are all useful and important devices for communicating the brand, they are just that—small pieces of the whole. To paraphrase organizational expert and author Margaret Wheatley in her book *Finding our Way*, brand is “**both what we want to believe is true and what our actions show to be true....**”

So, by that measure, **every company has a brand**—even yours! You don't have to be a Fortune 500 or a sexy start up. You don't need someone else to tell you what it is. You hold beliefs that affect the decisions you make. You act every day in a myriad of ways—every one of which potentially impacts how someone feels about your company (both inside and out). Looking at those patterns across the company, you can see what they tell you.

What they say about you is your brand.

Both Inside AND Outside

Consider your own brand. How many things do you do or say every day which unintentionally undermine your brand? Or is what people think of as your brand so out of sync with your every day beliefs and actions that you have no hope of delivering on its promise? Do your employees snicker at the latest tagline or say “yeah sure” when they see the company values?

So consider this equation as a place to start:

What we believe + What our actions show = Our brand.

This is the next wave. Brand as an **authentic** representation of the inside of your company filtering out to the market through all the combined beliefs and actions of everyone who touches it. Employees, customers, partners, investors, vendors—everyone.

Brand is not a veneer to be applied to the company with the goal of presenting a certain image. With no apologies to the agencies and design studios that lay claim to the creation of brands, brand is not something that can be created—EVER! The roots are inside the company, and can only be uncovered or identified. And only once it is uncovered can brand grow, flourish and become real to everyone and sustainable over time.

IS YOUR BRAND TRUE INSIDE AND OUT? ➔

GET YOUR HANDS OFF MY BRAND!

Dear Reader:

The agencies, consultants, marketing groups and departments who have long staked their claim to stewardship and “creative rights” over brand on behalf of companies are wrong.

They think they know what is best. No matter what. They tell you that you need a new logo, a new campaign, a new “brand” to reach your customers. And they know just what it needs to be. No matter that it bears no resemblance to what your company really is. No matter that it makes promises you have no hope of keeping. They know best and treat you like a passenger along for the ride.

It's time to take back our brands!

I mean it. They are not the provenance of the selected and enlightened few. Your brand is your soul, the face of your culture, your very valuable reputation and every day goodwill. You must take back your brand and put it where it belongs—inside—owned and lived by all. Side-to-side, top-to-bottom, operations-to-technology, CEO-to-shipping clerk. You must take back your brand and let your company be what it is meant to be, be who you are. Let that be the differentiator and the market value. Let that be what people see and why they love you. Don't agree to wear a disguise—it only makes people disappointed and confused when they find out who you really are. So I say to everyone: “Take back your brands.”

HAVE A POINT OF VIEW!

And defend it.

Your brand is like your most dearly held belief—it is not expendable, something to be mortgaged to the flavor of the month. It is not something to be changed on a whim. It is that thing you will shout about and fight for, defending against anyone who would try to change it. Imagine Volvo without Safety, Adidas without Sport, Apple without cool innovative products, Whole Foods without healthy food, Google without search (you get the idea)!

You have to have a **definitive point of view**—one that is authentic and not manufactured—to take advantage of a perceived marketplace opportunity. One that is born of your beliefs and actions. Imagine the change in your company if you had that point of view—how much easier it would be to decide a course of action. Authentic brands are a great way to help stay focused on who you really are. Now, I don't mean to make it sound that easy. And that may be why more people don't practice truth-based branding.

It takes courage.

It is hard to stand strong in the face of pressure to change your brand. “We need to be more trendy”; “We have to show people we are innovative”; “We must redo our brand so we will stand out from the competition”. The pressure to change comes from all around you—books, magazines, television, the internet. Everyone thinks they have a better idea for what your brand should be and how to get to it. But you know your company best. You live it every day. So don't give in. By all means change your ad campaign, update your website, create some new collateral, throw out the tagline. But DON'T think that you are changing your brand—it will still exist as it did before. Don't mistake giving your marketing a makeover with changing the truth of your brand. Have the courage to protect that—no matter what.

Patience is a virtue.

Perhaps one of the most important principles of authentic brands is patience. Strong brands cannot be bought. There are no shortcuts. It takes work. There is no wiggle of the nose. They take time to develop and grow. In today's 24/7 business culture who has the time? We need results today. Actually, yesterday would be even better. But time and time again, we see that approach fail. The massive success of Jim Collins' book *Good to Great* shows us people are realising that the theories de jour that produce short-term gain, often to the long-term detriment of the company, are fast becoming a thing of the past. And brand is no different.

Even when a brand is built on truth there likely will be some practices and policies within your organization that need to shift to better align your brand with your whole company. As with overall business goals, your brand requires commitment from top to bottom and across your organization. It takes time to become fully realized and the tragedy of many companies' brands is that long before they have had the chance to grow into their own and really take hold, they have been upended and reworked so many times that no one knows what they stand for any more.

DO YOU DEFEND YOUR BRAND? ➔

TIDE IS JUST A WASHING POWDER!

“Brands” are everywhere, lining our supermarket aisles and mall corridors. But are they? Or are we really looking at products? The inclination to confuse what you make or do with who you are is almost irresistible. And why not jump in—everyone else is doing it.

With apologies to Proctor & Gamble, a **product is just a product**—something to be consumed or used. It is most surely an output of the brand and rarely, but not often, a product will transcend to become synonymous with the company brand, think Coke/CocaCola, Barbie/Mattel, iPod/Apple,

While what your products and services *are*, can, should and will change over time, the brand underlying them—the *who*—will not. People buy things from companies, not from products. Seems obvious, but it is amazing how many people forget to look to the deeper reasons their company exists. And without that deeper reason, growth into new areas is difficult, painful and often out of alignment with the company.

Think of your brand as a stake in the ground and your products as being connected to it by a piece of string. The string can rotate around the stake to different positions, it can change length, moving closer to it or further away. But without that piece of string, without any connection, rather than supporting the brand and helping it grow, the product can become a competing factor, creating confusion. Your products are your products—they don't need to be brands.

ARE YOUR PRODUCTS CONNECTED TO YOUR BRAND OR VICE VERSA? ➔

OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE.

So authentic brands are not about marketing. They are not products. They live inside the company. And they are held and enacted of the people, by the people and for the people!

Just like the Declaration of Independence created the foundation of a nation, so does your brand act as the foundation of your company. Its principles are the framework for thought and action by everyone in the company. Without it there is no consistency, no alignment between what you say and what you do, no synchronicity between who you are inside and the way you present yourself outside.

You may ask—“well isn’t that the same as culture?” The answer is yes and no. Authentic brands are in many ways the identity of the company culture. They help that culture become visible. They also embody the values and purpose of the company, giving all these things a face and a voice that can be seen and heard by everyone the company touches. But especially your employees. As the people who most keenly impact the day-to-day beliefs and actions of the company it is constantly amazing how little they are considered when brand is discussed. It is employees who show the brand to be true or not.

Authentic brands live or die with the people in the organization. If they don’t believe the brand, if they don’t feel it is their cause, no campaign or change program on earth will help it succeed. Authentic brands feel natural. There is no need to “educate” the employees—they feel it immediately. There is no need to launch the “new” brand on your unsuspecting customers—they have known it for years. When you are doing it day in and day out, saying it becomes almost superfluous.

And that is just what makes authentic brands so powerful. Because they are drawn from the beliefs and actions of the company they are unique. That also means that there is no formula for finding them. There is no “10 laws” or “5 reasons” or “20 ways”, an authentic brand is yours and yours alone. There is no copying it, no fitting it into a gap in the marketplace, no add water and stir program that will get you there.

This is exactly why you should want to find your authentic brand. Just imagine a brand that is enduring, that lasts beyond the next ad cycle, that is sustaining and sustainable, that feeds the soul of your company and makes the whole stronger. Imagine a brand that doesn't cause disharmony inside your company, that doesn't cause friction with the way you already do things.

This is an authentic brand!

Sound good? Want to find yours? Need a place to start?

It starts with a conversation inside your company. What do we believe? Why do we believe it? How do we act in different circumstances? Why do we act that way? What is true? Our humanity is deeply connected through our conversations and our conversations are driven by questions. It is through the answers to these questions that you will find not only your authentic brand, but also a stronger foundation for your company.

So, my challenge to you is— find your authentic brand!

This manifesto is the opinion of the few—
but if you think we have stumbled on a
truth (with a small “t”) please ...

pass it on and let's take back our brands.

info

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alignment is Michel's passion! She has spent her career helping organizations, people and projects build greater alignment between who they are, what they say and what they do. A consultant, writer and designer, Michel first discovered the importance and value of integrated thinking while working in museum design 18 years ago in her native Australia.

Today, that thinking continues to evolve and drive her work as principal of Brand Alignment Group—a branding practice located in Denver, Colorado. Working with an eclectic client-base, ranging from individuals and start-ups to Fortune 500 companies, Brand Alignment Group helps their clients find and implement authentic brands, brands that serve to deeply impact organizations inside and out and don't just act as a veneer for the marketplace.

Michel divides her time between Denver, Colorado in the USA and Melbourne, Victoria in Australia.

Email address: michel@brandalignment.com

homepage URL: www.brandalignment.com

DOWNLOAD THIS

This manifesto is available from <http://changethis.com/26.05.NewWorldBrand>

SEND THIS

Click here to pass along a copy of this manifesto to others.

<http://changethis.com/26.05.NewWorldBrand/email>

SUBSCRIBE

Learn about our latest manifestos as soon as they are available. Sign up for our free newsletter and be notified by email. <http://changethis.com/subscribe>


← LAST PAGE READ | MORE →




WHAT YOU CAN DO

You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.

NAVIGATION & USER TIPS

Move around this manifesto by using your keyboard arrow keys or click on the right arrow (→) for the next page and the left arrow (←). To send this by email, just click on. 

HAVING PROBLEMS SAVING TO DISK?

First, make sure you have the latest version of Acrobat Reader 6 which you can download from <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>. If problems persist, it may be due to your Acrobat Reader settings. To correct the problem (for Windows), a reader, J. Hansen, suggests going to your Acrobat Reader Preferences > Options > Web browser Options. Check the "Display PDF in Browser" option. Then click on Save to Disk. 

KEYBOARD SHORTCUTS

	PC	MAC
Zoom in (Larger view)	[ctl] [+]	[#] [+]
Zoom out	[ctl] [-]	[#] [-]
Full screen/Normal screen view	[ctl] [L]	[#] [L]



BORN ON DATE

This document was created on September 6, 2006 and is based on the best information available at that time. To check for updates, please click here to visit <http://changethis.com/26.05.NewWorldBrand>.

COPYRIGHT INFO

The copyright in this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

Cover image from <http://www.istockphoto.com>

ABOUT CHANGETHIS

ChangeThis is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.

ChangeThis is supported by the love and tender care of 800–CEO–READ. Visit us at our main site www.800ceoread.com or at our daily blog <http://800ceoread.com/blog/>.