At their most powerful, brands actually make culture. Creator brands, let’s call them.

Nike changed the way we thought about exercise, fitness, bodies and diet in the 1970s and 80s. Most of us look different and feel different for the work that came from this brand and those brilliant meaning-makers at Wieden + Kennedy.

A cluster of brands and industries after World War II helped create “mid century modernism” which in turn shaped how Americans lived and thought of themselves in a very fluid moment. Brands were minting fundamental ideas of who we were, what we cared about, and how we lived.

In the present day, Uber and AirBnb are changing the way we think about travel and tourism. Netflix is changing the way we think about TV and storytelling.

More often, of course, brands are fellow travelers. They identify what’s happening in the culture and put themselves “in tune” with it.

Subaru and the agency Carmichael Lynch are now brilliantly in tune with culture. They continue to speak to (and speak for) a new feeling for community and family. Now that competitive individualism is in retreat, this is the way Subaru made itself a “brand of the moment.” (This is exceptional work and I hope the brand and agency are being showered with awards. And enjoy them. Principal Financial Group and agency TBWA now threaten to do still better.)

Sometimes the brand resonates with culture in a painful, unconvincing way, as when a big processed food companies struggles unconvincingly to show us how “artisanal” they are. No one’s buying it, figuratively or literally. The brands of the consumer packaged goods world are really under challenge at the moment. It’s sad because they were so perfectly in tune in the first few decades after World War II.

Getting in touch with culture is hard. Creating culture is harder still. It’s not for the faint of heart or mind. It takes intelligence, imagination, a virtuoso control of the organization, the message, and the moment.
The rewards, on the other hand, are immense. The brand that creates culture becomes a kind of navigational satellite in our world. It becomes one of the places from which we draw our ideas of selfhood and in the Herman Miller case, the work place. Most brands are "meanings made." Creator brands are meaning makers. They help make the meanings that in turn make us.

With this in mind, I read with interest a wonderful essay in FastCo Design by Diana Budds about Herman Miller and its plan to change our culture. In the words of CEO Brian Walker, the firm has undertaken a

"shift from being just a contract company or just an industry brand to truly be a powerful lifestyle and consumer lifestyle brand."

This is the language corporations use when it setting about to change culture. They talk about becoming a lifestyle brand. They are now embarked on styling life.

The trouble with this approach is that many people want to style life but they have no clue about what culture is or how to change it. And you can’t style life unless you are prepared to reckon with culture.

Too often, "lifestyle brand" means slapping a new coat of paint on the brand. Too often lifestyle branding is all "style "and no "life." The brand remains an PET plastic soda bottle sitting on the surface of the Atlantic, incapable of any sort of real contact (thank goodness). It’s just another contribution to the detritus that flows from the land of bad marketing.

The good news is that Herman Miller hired a guy called Ben Watson (pictured here with his muse, a beautiful Burmese). Ben is a designer and, at their best, designers are good at helping connect the brand to culture. The best of them have an extraordinary combination of intelligence, imagination, strategy, craft, cunning. They grasp cultural foundations and the cultural moment. They can see culture in all it’s manifestations, intellectual, aesthetic, emotional, material and emergent, and they have a way make these manifest in the brand in a way that points us in new directions, in this case away from old concepts of work and work place to new concepts of work and work place. This makes them a precious, possibly irreplaceably precious, resource. This makes them seeers where the rest of us are blind.

But it doesn’t always go well. Sometimes designers just don’t get culture. Pepsi and Tropicana hired Peter Arnell to “rejuvenate, reengineer, rethink, reparticipate in popular culture,” and Arnell promptly engaged in what BusinessWeek called a “five week world tour of trend design houses.” (More details in Chief Culture Officer, pp. 161 and following).

This is a little like asking an astronomer to look for uncharted planets only to discover that he’s spend his time touring observatories chatting up other astronomers. Yes, of course, you can learn a lot this way, but at some point you have actually have to leave the design world bubble and talk to people who aren’t wearing really cool glasses. Anything else is threatens to deliver the provincial and parochial. Anything else is an echo chamber.

I don’t know Ben. Let me point out that there is no criticism implied or intended. For all I know, he is absolutely the most gifted “astronomer” in play and Herman Miller’s best chance to change culture. Fingers crossed! (I should say, in the interests of full disclosure, that I have done several projects for
Herman Miller. For all I know Ben is drawing on my work. In which case, god speed!

Ben has an extraordinary Nike-esque opportunity. We are in a moment of real cultural confusion. There are several big questions in play. What is “work?” What’s a “workplace?” These things used to be defined by several pretty clear distinctions: work and home, work and play, work and life, public and private, instrumental and expressive, pragmatic and recreational, men and women, hierarchical distinctions of rank, exquisitely clear divisions of labor. nice, neat boundaries of inside and outside, them and us. These cultural meridians once so helpful in defining social life are now well blurred. Blurred? They are thoroughly tangled.

Ben could bring clarity here. He could create a space that accommodates these confusions, that enables what we hope for, and helps to “edit out” what we wish to escape. Ben can made a contribution to Herman Miller and through Herman Miller to us. He can actually clarify our culture. He can humpty-dumpty us back together again. He can help make us ready for a postmodern existence.

What’s especially interesting about Budds’ essay is the attention it gives to the way Herman Miller intends to use retail and display spaces to define the brand and through the brand the rest of us. Designers control the manifestations of culture in the world. And when we give them Herman Miller spaces (and furniture) we give them something with which to work.

Will Ben transform us? Will Herman Miller become a creator brand? It depends to some extent on how well Ben and Herman Miller understand culture. And if manifestations are designers’ strength, culture is, by and large, their weakness.

Post script.

I think we are seeing public space and public events used more and more to stage the brand. Even as we avail ourselves of social media and digital content, we like to make the brand live in the “real world.” (Note to self…and anyone else who’s interested: we need a model that distinguishes all the media and messages at our disposal and shows how we can divide branding work across them.)

I was interested to see the work being done by a Canadian bank called Mojo. Here’s a photo of their interior. As a Canadian I can say with confidence that this is the first time any message even remotely like “IS U REALLY BOUT UR MONEY OR NAH” has even been by a Canadian bank.

![Image of Mojo bank interior]

Normally, Canadian banks prefer to look like this:
Which to be fair is it’s own very particular symbolic statement, and in its moment superbly in tune with Canadian culture.

Thanks to Gerald Forster for the photo of Ben Watson. Gerald is the founder of Here We Go Now.

For more on culture, try this.
Ethnography has grown in the last couple of decades from a moody, friendless method in the social sciences to the belle of the business ball.

But clearly it has suffered in this rise to stardom. In the wrong hands, ethnography is now a license for the methodologically slap dash. To use the immortal words of Errol Morris, ethnography is now sometimes “cheap, fast and out of control.”

Part of the problem, I think, is that ethnography has been shorn away from anthropology. It was created by anthropologists (and to a lesser extent sociologists) and used in conjunction with anthropology (or sociology).

The advantage of adding “anthro” to “ethno” is that it allows us to put things captured in the life of consumer, user, or viewer in a larger, illuminating context. We can see, more surely, what it means. Without this larger context, ethnography devolves into simple observation, as in “this is what I saw when I was in a consumer’s home.”

Adding “anthro” to “ethno” also give us access to theoretical resources and intellectual traditions that contemporary ethnographers rarely seem to bring to bear on the problem at hand. (And I’m sure that I don’t need to say that the “problem at hand” for any ethnographer studying the ferocious dynamism of contemporary culture is usually formidable. We need any and all the powers of pattern recognition available to us. Airily dismissing the patterns made available by intellectual discipline and years of theoretical development is just dumb.)

How can we tell that someone is adding “anthro” to “ethno”? We are entitled to ask “where did you study anthropology?” (We could also use “sociology,” “film studies,” or “American culture.”) We are asking, “what do you bring to the table beside a claim to method?”

But this is only part of the problem. Too often, the researcher has no “depth of field.” He or she is incapable of seeing that this family, this home, the user, this community is a creature in motion changing in real change. Good observers have an acute sense of the historical factors at work here. They know what has happened in a very detailed way since World War II and they have a general sense of what has been happening in Western and especially American culture over the last 300 years.
This gives us a glimpse of “slow culture” as well as “fast culture.” (For more on the distinction, see my Chief Culture Officer.) And now we are really testing the abilities of the self appointed ethnographer. Do they have depth of field? Now we are entitled to ask, “tell me about any big, enduring trend in American culture. How did it take shape over time?” (Don’t be surprised if they are astonished by the question.)

Here’s the problem. Most of the work being done by ethnographers is being done here.

But this ethnography is stripped of the things that gives it real explanatory power.

What we need is something that heads in this direction.

If ethnography is to evolve, we want to migrate in the direction of “anthro” + “slow culture.” We could think of this as a “Northwest passage” strategy. Until we find a way to connect these worlds, the Southeast sector must remain poorer and less cosmopolitan.

It’s not clear to me what the practical solution is. I did a couple of posts about the C-school idea a few years ago and discovered some of the following programs, any one (or several) of which might take up this challenge. (Notice that I am not saying these places have a solution, merely that they are the kind of places that might come up with one.)

The D school at Stanford (David Kelley)
W+K 12 (Wieden + Kennedy school, Victor a German Shepherd pointer)
The Miami Ad School (Ron & Pippa Seichrist)
The VCU BrandCenter (Helayne Spivak)
The Berlin School of Creative Leadership (Michael Conrad)
As I was noting here, the Annenberg School at USC is coming up fast.

Finally, I recently had lunch with John Curran and he tells me that things are afoot in London. I will leave it to him to reveal the details. (John, please send me a link so that I can include it here.)

I am hoping readers will let me know the programs I have missed.

Ralph Lauren, the 80s called, they want their ad back

Here’s a recent ad for Ralph Lauren’s fragrance Polo.
It's a cultural antique. This is what advertising used to look like when designed to flatter male egos and sell goods that were designed to flatter male egos in a cultural moment designed to flatter male egos. These days, its “Really? Get over yourself.”

Ralph Lauren has not been superbly in touch with the cultural moment. (Not since the 1980s when he helped define the cultural movement.) But this is really egregiously out of touch. I guess he doesn’t have a Chief Culture Officer.

What looks and feels more contemporary? Have a look at this Fitbit ad.

The difference?

It’s not about one person. It’s about lots and lots of people.

It’s not about young males. It’s about a variety of people. Because some years ago, advertising and branding learned it had to let in everyone, not just the Young and Beautiful…and Male. Who gets the credit here? Sylvia Lagnado and Dove? Who else?

And it’s not about someone with that terrible look of self congratulation, that overweening red speedboat of an ego.

It’s not about speedboats but the diversity of ways people have found to entertain and exert themselves. This is plenitude in action.

Yes, this ad is an exercise in diversity because the Fitbit is designed to capture data generate by any activity. But notice the tone, the reckless, frenetic charm of this spot. It’s not about anyone’s ego. There are no beautiful people here. No celebrities. It’s a “Here Comes Everybody” exercise, to use Shirky’s phrase. There are a variety of deep cultural reasons why diversity is so important when crafting cultural meanings.

We are on the verge of a season that shows a relentless stream of James Bond movies, and with each season, Bond looks a little stranger, a man so
besotted with himself that it’s hard to imagine rooting for him. How do we identify with a monster of vanity? Those days have passed. This is where you are, Mr. Lauren, on the wrong side of history.

Meanings, Models and Men in Black

Driving to JFK airport today, I looked at the remainders of the 1964 World Fair and thought, as I almost always do, how successfully they were used in Men in Black, the comic book and the movies.

In the World’s Fair, they are observation towers. In the film and books, they become alien spacecraft.

To use my parochial language, this makes them “culturematics” and that’s because they repurpose culture and change the meanings of one thing (towers) into another (spacecraft).

Men in Black is filled with repurposing of this kind. My other favorite: turning bad, incredible newspapers into a one of the few sources of information the MiB take seriously.

Ok, a third. A creature arrives from outer space and demands a weapon from an earthling farmer. This scene turns the warning “you may have my weapon when you pry it out of my cold, dead hand” into a negotiating position that the alien takes literally and accepts. “That arrangement is satisfactory.”

You get the little jolt when something in your head changes meaning in this way. Good metaphors always have that effect. I get a little vertigo. “Wait, those meanings that belong there don’t really belong there?!! Oh, ok, they do. Very well. Carry on.” (I am not saying all metaphors are culturematics. Because most metaphors are not experimental.)

The answer to the mystery of this meaning relocation may lie in the book I took to read on the plane: The Power of Impossible Thinking. I am not crazy about the title (a little too Norman Vincent Peale for me) but I love the contents. It’s by Jerry Wind and Colin Crook, both at the Wharton School. I know Jerry a little and like him a lot which makes especially irksome the fact that I missed this book when it came out in 2006 and found it only literally a couple of weeks ago.

Power of Impossible Thinking argues that there is no real world, an assertion sure to warm an anthropologist’s heart. What there are the models in our heads that help form what we see in the world. So there is no economic action, no managerial initiative, no strategy, no insight, no decision, that is unshaped by the models, or as I would prefer, the meanings in our heads.

When an artist like Lowell Cunningham or a film maker like Barry Sonnenfeld reaches into your heads and reworks that World’s Fair observation towers, they have changed the meaning (or the model) in our heads. And this is one of the reasons we write comix and go to movies, for the frisson of meaning (model) relocation, prefigurement, reconfigurement….whatever you call it. We like that.

This makes especially puzzling the fact that when we are all “large and in charge” and working for an organization of some kind, we don’t like to hear about meanings or models. We look at a book like Chief Culture Officer or The Power of Impossible Thinking and go, “no, really, is this quite necessary? I don’t think so.”
So I admire that Jerry and Crook took this on. It is a very tough sell. Meanings and models are a little like the dark energy of enterprise world. Yes, it’s out there but frankly managers don’t know exactly what it is, how to think about it, or what to do about it. And talking about it just makes heads hurt. This makes getting meaning or models into decision making and managerial discourse is ever so difficult!

Worse than that, I think people in their enterprise modality think of themselves having a “swift self.” (This was an idea that came out of research I did for a book called Transformations. More detail there.) People in enterprise mode see themselves as being aerodynamic, the better, the quicker to assimilate data, make decisions, and act. They love this swift self. It’s a thrilling way to be. But they often find that it eventually hollows them out, estranging them from family, friends, and other aspects of the self. Still, it’s great fun while the party lasts. In this swift self modality, the individual is formidably capable, forging a smarter, clearer path to market share, say, or the creation of potable water in the Third World.

My favorite example of the swift self is Khalil Younes, a young man I got to know when consulting in Atlanta. He was equal parts French, Lebanese and Harvard Business School and in his elegant, formidably way simply stared at problems til they dissolved into solution(s).

Here’s the problem. In the swift self modality, people see themselves as a creature who cuts through the ideas and confusions that stand between themselves and satisfactory outcomes. What Jerry and I call meanings and models, they think of things they are supposed to cut right through. In their world, meanings and models are the things that get in the way. As a swift self, Khalil is reason. He is Occam.

When Jerry and I ask Khalil to look at the meanings and models that mediate between the understandings and the world, it may well sound as if we are insisting on the impairment of this swiftness.

I think it’s likely for the swift self to reply with something like “Look, I have managed to be capable without entertaining the meanings or models you claim are active here, what are the chances this knowledge will make a difference? On balance, I’m guessing it is more likely to interfere, taking more than it gives.”

This is not a bad argument until we get to the meat of the argument that Jerry and I are making and that is that the world is getting faster, more confusing and less scrutable. And in circumstances like these, it makes sense to look hard at the meanings and models we use as instruments of apprehension…because when we don’t do this, we often can’t see the opportunities or the dangers now at hand.

Anyhow, I have just started the book and I will report back when I know more. At a minimum, I think those who are Chief Culture Officers (or fellow travelers) might look to The Power of Impossible Thinking as another and perhaps a better way of communicating cultural understanding into the organization. “Mental models” does sound a little less obscure than “meanings” and even this would be an improvement. This might make a good Google Plus hang out at some point. Anyhow, more to come. I want to get this posted before I run out of internet service on board.

(Filed from 32,000 feet somewhere on the way to Austin.)

Like this:
Loading...

This entry was posted in Uncategorized and tagged Barry Sonnenfeld, Chief Culture Officer, Colin Crook, culture, Jerry Wind, Khalil Younes, Lowell Cunningham, meaning, Men in Black, mental model, Power of Impossible Thinking on August 27, 2013 by Grant.
My nephew is up for an interview at the college of his choice. Everyone is thrilled. His speciality is the classics so I am no use at all.

But what, I wondered, would be a good way of quizzing someone about how much they knew about contemporary culture.

As it happened, I was working on a Keynote deck for which I produced the image above. It has several bits and pieces. We could just hand an applicant the image and invite them to comment. This would be one of several “quizzes” and is not meant to be the only useful test.

There are no right answers. But I think we would be able to judge very swiftly whether someone had depth, range, intelligence, and what do they call it in tennis, “touch.” I want you to identify each of these images and tell us how and why what they represent matters to contemporary culture. You should be able to speak for 5 minutes on each image…and that’s just for starters.

Please have a go and if you feel like banding off a thousand words I would be happy to put together a set of judges with the winner getting a Minerva award.

Or just work out your answers “in your head” and let’s discuss our various answers in a later post.

Click on the image to see the whole test!

I can’t supply attribution for these photos. If you recognize where they came from originally, please let me know!
This week I took part in a #TChat on employee engagement and specifically onboarding. (Thanks to Marla Gottschalk for including me.) I found myself arguing that onboarding should introduce new hires to the deep culture of the organization, the one that is buried in assumptions and largely hidden from view. Meghan M. Biro, a founder of TChat, invited me to “break it down.” Here goes.

The corporate culture is a complicated culture. It gets reshaped every time a new leader storms the C-suite. (Marissa Mayer is transforming Yahoo now.) It is changed by a succession the managerial models (“reengineering!”) and buzzwords (“tipping point!”). McKinsey and various other consultants introduce new ideas. Mergers and acquisitions bring in new ways of seeing and doing. The average corporate culture is a crowded house, an accumulation of ideas and practices.

And it would be one thing if these ideas and practices were explicit and obvious and sat like a simple “subroutine” in the corporate code, there to be plucked cleanly out when we wanted to change things. But of course, these ideas live cheek by jowl in an unexamined mass. I can’t remember ever hearing someone say, “Oh, ok, now that we’re moving to this idea, let’s root out the old one.”

No, we muddle through, assuming, apparently, that old ideas will expire on their own, or leave in disgrace. But of course they persevere. Every so often someone will break one out during a committee meeting and we all silently think, “Welcome, old friend.” More often, they serve as an assumption we resort to “when things get complicated.” The trouble is, they have a way of making things still more complicated. After all, the ideas that works for one person or group often contradicts and wrong-foots the rest of us. You’re thinking one thing. I’m thinking another. Key projects end up as “ships passing.”

Good luck onboarding a new hire. A handbook may capture the most recent, the most explicit, and the most formal of the ideas and values that govern the culture, but that teeming mass of additional ideas it tends to leave out. It will take weeks, sometimes months for the new hire to glimpse all the ideas at work in the corporate culture and the rules that govern when and by whom they’re used. Time wasted. Value squandered. And sometimes a lost hire.

Who is responsible for this complicated culture? We have a COO for operations, a CMO for marketing, a CFO for finance. Why not a CCO, a Chief Culture Officer, for culture? As the party who grasps the welter of ideas that inform and animate the corporation, the CCO becomes a critical agent, an intervening angel. She can step in and say to two warring departments and say, “actually, you’re both right. You, department X, are using ideas that came to use from a talk Tom Peters gave here in 2005. And you, department Y, appear to be holding to the managerial mandate we got two years later when McKinsey came in. Here’s the Rosetta stone, the translation table, that sorts this out. Ok, begin again.”

Crisis management aside, the CCO can be there at the moment of creation, inventing the culture of the corporation, auditioning new ideas, integrating them with older ideas, helping clarify the mission, values and purpose of the organization. The CCO now fashions these not only as a grand statement for the annual report but as a work-a-day understanding that helps the organization day all the time.

In effect, this CCO would act as an organizing intelligence, a problem solver, a diplomatic officer, someone who can intervene when a team struggles to define its problem and its solutions. Corporations have always been complicated, but now as they learn to speak to complexity with complexity, things can get very murky very fast. A CCO, acting as an angelic intervention, would be extremely useful. “Ah, yes,” people say after a visit from the CCO, “that’s what we’re for, that’s who we are. Let’s start again.”

This is a grand calling, but I don’t think it exhausts the responsibility of the CCO. I think the corporation should ask the Chief Culture Officer to monitor and master the culture outside the corporation. And by “culture” here I mean, the cultural meanings and social rules that make up American life. When we know these meanings and rules, we negotiate daily life without a hitch. If we don’t know, life turns into a series of mysteries and frustrations. (Try ordering a cup of coffee in the Middle East and see what it’s like not to know the meanings and the rules.)

I recently gave a speech for a large, very serious federal bureaucracy. They wanted me to talk about culture in particular and Culturematics in particular, but I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why. Waiting back stage, preparing to go on, I turned to my handler and said, “What am I doing here? Why do they care about culture?” The reply was illuminating. “They keep losing their new employees. They work hard to find the right hires. But the kids come in and after a couple of weeks, they ask your question, ‘What I am doing here’ and leave.”

There will be several ways the CCO can address the issue of employee engagement but one is to use culture to craft a new connection with the hire. We can ask employees to serve as part of the intelligence net with which the corporation (or bureaucracy) keeps track of changes in the world “out there.” And now we have engaged them in something they care about. We have tapped their magnificent knowledge of popular culture. We can listen to them as they listen to one another and the world. They are now our eyes and ears. With this gesture, we honor the whole of the employee, and not the narrow part they bring to work each morning.

It is one of the peculiarities of capitalism that it has asked people to leave their other selves at the door. Someone may have a haircut that shouts “I
have a life outside this place,” but we don’t want to know. Traditionally, the response has been, “We don’t know what you do on your own time and we don’t want to know. Just do your job. Everything extraneous to “job performance” is precisely that, extraneous. At best a distraction. A worst, a sign of disloyalty!” When that guy from fulfillment wanders into the cafeteria, someone asks with a small note of horror, “What do you suppose Karl does in his spare time?”

As it turns out, on the weekend Karl becomes a formidable competitor in the gaming world, when he is not working on his Anime collection. Now, there was a time when it truly didn’t matter what Karl did with his free time, but these days, the corporation wants to keep an eye on the entire waterfront of contemporary culture, especially the world of gaming. If the corporation has anything to do with entertainment, marketing or innovation, a working knowledge is essential.

Karl has a working knowledge. And he would be thrilled to be asked. He would be honored to do a brown bag lunch with other members of the organization, swapping stories, comparing notes, mapping out what they know about our culture. The organization is filled with Karls. And between them, they can map a lot of American culture. For some reason, we now ignore our Karls. I was talking to Tom Guarriello about this the other day, and he just shook his head. “When was the last time the corporation left this much value sitting on the table?”

What the corporation needs is someone who fully grasps the corporate culture inside the corporation, someone who can make this knowledge more supple, more available, more strategic and more tactical than it is now. And it needs someone who knows about culture “out there in the world.” What the corporation needs is a Chief Culture Officer.

Or so it seems to me. I welcome thoughts and comments from the HR community. I can only really to speak to “culture outside” and I welcome the chance to work with people who know about “culture inside” the corporation.

Please leave a comment below, or feel free to send me a note at grant27@gmail.com.

References

Baribeau, Paul. 2012. 5 ways to become the Chief Culture Officer. Workplace Tribes. August 23. Click here.


Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Meghan M. Biro and Avi Lambert who encouraged me to participate in the #TChat and for the conversation that followed. Thanks to Tim Sullivan and Tom Guarriello for several discussions on the theme.

Explanations

The image is an “umbraculo” in Barcelona. I like a wall that lets the inside out and outside in.
Is Barbara Lippert old enough?

My world rocked recently when it was revealed that Barbara Lippert was leaving Adweek for Goodby, Silverstein where she has been made “curator of pop culture.”

Yes, of course, I would have preferred that she be called a Chief Culture Officer. But it’s enough that the appointment was made.

As readers of my blog will know, I was a fan of Lippert’s weekly Adweek column on advertising. It was superb.

Stuart Elliott’s announcement of the event was marred slightly by two of the reader comments that followed it.

[I have removed these comments at Barbara Lippert’s request]

Assumptions, assumptions!

Assumption 1: that Lippert was hired as a trend spotter.

Jeff Goodby doesn’t say anything about trend spotting. In fact, Lippert has been hired as an expert on pop culture. God spare us, Goodby and Silverstein, if she fulfills her duties by spotting trends. Culture is only about 20% trends. Agencies and corporations that spend their time spotting these trends lock themselves into an endless game of catch up. Lippert is responsible for the whole of the water front of our culture, and here her age becomes an advantage.

Assumption 2: that you have to be one to know one. (Specifically, only someone who is 18-34 can report on this demographic group.)

This notion was dispatched during the political correctness debates. When members of excluded groups insisted that only they could report on these groups, the world had to remind them that the argument would cost them the right to report on any other group. They stopped.

Assumption 3: that it’s ok to trade in stereotypes about [removed at Barbara Lippert’s request].

If you were generalizing about gender, race or ethnicity in this way, the world would have put you in a small room with John Galliano, the fashion world’s ranking anti-semit.

The real question:

Is Barbara Lippert old enough to be a curator of pop culture? Has she lived, studied and observed enough to make good on the responsibility with which she’s been charged? Studying ads and the ad business for 20 years is actually an excellent perspective from which to study our culture. And she is, to judge her by her column, a real talent. My plan: wait and see.

References

Cultural assignments as (or for) a Chief Culture Officer

A friend of mine writes to say she is looking for someone who writes well and can help her “communicate creative projects.”

This would be an interesting assignment because a) this person has an extraordinary cultural knowledge, b) she works for an international organization which extraordinary cultural reach, and c) there is a good chance she will end up as a Chief Culture Officer somewhere and, God willing, there. On all accounts, this would be a great assignment.

Here’s the deal. If you are interested, send me an email with a one page CV attached. I will pass the email along to my friend unopened and unread. Please don’t ask me for any additional information. I know only what I’ve told you. And please don’t ask me for the secret password for this assignment. It’s secret!

On other matters to do with the Chief Culture Officer, I was thrilled to hear that Goodby, Silverstein and Partners have appointed Barbara Lippert as their pop culture curator. Readers of this blog will know that I am a huge fan of the work that Barbara did on advertising for Adweek. (And I remain convinced that if the New York Times did not harbor a contempt for popular culture, they would have hired Barbara as their advertising critic long ago.) I owe news of Barbara’s appointment to a friend of this blog (and mine), Rick Liebling. See Rick’s treatment here. As Rick points out, Goodby, Silverstein also employs Gareth Kay as their head of planning. This gives the San Francisco firm two powerhouses in the cultural field.

References

Here in Connecticut, Thanksgiving means Christmas.

And Christmas means catalogs.

And catalogs mean everything. Here in Connecticut.

We gather together by the fireplace and take turns reading.

When my turn came, it was the Restoration Hardware catalog. Thrilling.

My favorite part of Restoration Hardware were always the retro gadgets. Messages in a bottle. Things straight from popular culture. Returned from memory to circulation, from childhood to retail.

Before the discovery of “experience marketing,” before the discovery of “artisanal marketing,” before the discovery of “Chief Culture Officer,” Restoration Hardware was featuring consumer products that floated up out of someone’s childhood on to the retail tide. When so much of capitalism, especially big business retail, was virtually tone deaf to culture, Restoration Hardware somehow managed to be note perfect.

I did a little investigating and discovered that the author of this innovative approach to retail was a guy called Stephen Gordon. Gordon was the founder of Renovation Hardware. At the moment of investigation I was teaching at the Harvard Business School. I thought to myself, “This guy is the perfect topic for a Harvard Business School Case Study.” Mr. Gordon very graciously agreed to do an interview and then life got complicated and I left HBS and the case study never got written.

I heard Gordon left Restoration Hardware and it showed. I would visit the Restoration Hardware, at retail and in catalogue, and the small, perfect object approach to objects seemed to flicker and disappear. Clearly, this was an idea that sprang Zeus-like from his consciousness and distinctly not from the managers who replaced him. (And honestly what were the chances that it would. I mean, this guy was unexampled in retail at the time. Of course, his tradition was not going to survive his departure.)

So it was a great pleasure to see that the current Restoration Hardware catalogue is once more object rich. The approach now is bundled by a lifestyle logic. The object march in groups. There is Vintage Games (antique Bingo!), Inner Child (complete with a slinky), Angler (with a Stanley Flask). This is not quite as evocative as one would like. One feels that if Stephen Gordon were still in charge at least one of these lifestyle kits would be called “gum shoe” and it would include everything required of a Noir detective on a stake out (with a Stanley Flask!)

But the spirit of Gordon is stirring once more. The RH catalogue is normally disaggregated objects: lamps, sofas, art objects. They are gathered together for the catalog photograph, but otherwise they are completely modular. This Christmas catalog sends objects out in groups, in flight, the collective effect of which is to give them all additional meaning, evocative meaning.

The Gordon approach is deeply cultural. It delivers cultural meanings that are present in our lives but mostly missing from our retail experience. What a pleasure to see Restoration Hardware glimpsing a restoration of its own.

References


http://www.amazon.com/Culture-Consumption-Approaches-Character-Activities/dp/0253206286/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1290643503&sr=8-1

For more on this contribution of Stephen Gordon and Restoration Hardware, go here http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/Restoration-Hardware-Inc-Company-History.html
What business are we in? Just business, actually

A couple of days ago, in the WSJ, I noticed an ad for Chevron. They claimed to be getting out of the dirty energy business into the clean energy business. The other day I was surprised to see that Nike Plus has embraced a new model that dispenses with one of their revenue sources, the chip.

Nimble business are learning to abandon the existing business model before someone rips it out from under them.

This marks a move away from the literalism of capitalism. The old corporation was founded to make a particular widget and these widgets came to define this corporation’s essential concept of itself, its identity, sometimes its very soul. People who made heavy equipment saw themselves (sexist language warning) as “tractor guys forever.” A company like this might branch into monorails, say. But they were unlikely ever to contemplate book binding.

But I think that has to change. Especially if we are a big corporation. To survive in a really dynamic marketplace, we have to be prepared to reinvent ourselves very substantially. That might be the only path to survival. So the corporation can no longer say, “we’re in this business.” The best it can hope for is, “we’re in business.”

Even Theodore Levitt’s famous dictum, “What business are you in?” is beginning to feel a little literal. He asked this question of the people who owned the trains. When they came up with the wrong answer (“the train business?”), the Professor was obliged to chide them, “You are in the transportation business.”

Yes, Levitt helped them out of the literalism, but “the transportation business” is still too narrow. Even this larger idea is too small.

The trouble here is that it is a deep familiarity with one particular industry or sector that makes some companies so good at what they do. The devil is in the details, and these companies know the details all the way down to the nitty gritty. This matters a lot less now that so much is outsourced, but this problem remains a problem. And I intend to set it aside.

I think every company has a purview. This is the part of the world that’s visible while it gets on with business as presently defined. (If we make heavy equipment, we can “see” monorails. Bookbinding, probably not.) The corporation doesn’t act on everything it sees in this purview but it has this ambit or peripheral knowledge. The purview is all the knowledge the corporation ends up knowing in order to know things it really needs to know about.

Whew.

The trouble with the purview is that it may be partial but it’s just so very available. Indeed, the purview may even masquerade as a comprehensive view of the world. In any case, this is where the average corporation is going to go looking for new opportunities when it is having second thoughts about its present ones.

Bad luck. The purview is spectacularly partial knowledge. Nothing appears here unless it happens to be near useful knowledge. Or let’s put this another way. The corporation is a kind of glass bottom boat. It makes a window on the sea. But what gets into this window depends entirely on proximity. The new opportunity, the new industry, may well not be visible from here.

We know that there are very good reasons for the corporation to have something like a 360 degree view of the world. After all, blind side hits can come from anywhere. To pick them up early, we need to be looking everywhere. But now it looks as if there is a positive reason to have a comprehensive view of the world. Only this will guarantee that we see all our options in the event that we will have to up and suddenly change our stripes.

And this will take a Chief Culture Officer and a big board.

References


What the corporation can learn from the TV this Fall season

Please have a look at my blog post at The Conversation at Harvard Business Review.

It's about the cultural lessons to be extracted from the Fall season of TV.

There were 17 new shows with 58 shows returning.

Please [click here](http://example.com).
We have two winners for the latest Minerva essay contest.

Lauren La Cascia and Diandra Mintz.

Hearty congratulations to them both. Here’s the question Lauren and Diandra took on.

The Essay question:

The Preamble:

The Big C, the new show starring the deeply talented Laura Linney gives us a glimpse of what is now possible on cable. It resembles a second show on Showtime, Weeds.

Together these shows give us a glimpse into the Showtime thinktank. (One of the principles, apparently: let’s see what happens to suburban living when we mix things up.)

There is another experiment at work at USA Networks, from which a string of hits has recently issued (Burn Notice, Psych, Royal Pains, White Collar). (One of the principles, apparently, stay as far away from the suburbs as possible.)

The question:

1. Compare and contrast Showtime and USA Networks. Identify the grammar or algorithm that produces the shows in question. (Consider my "suburb" reference a hint, but merely one very rough indicator of the possibilities. Please do feel free to contradict me.)

2. What larger cultural significance do you attach to the fact that these two approaches to making TV now exist? Did they exist in the 20th century. Why do they exist now?

Conditions:

Fewer than 1000 words.

point form preferred.

points for being crisp and clear.

Contest winners

Contest winners will receive a Minerva (as pictured) and a place on the winner’s list.

Contest judges

Rick Boyko, Director and Professor, VCU Brandcenter
(Mr. Boyko recused himself because one of the essay contestants is a VCU student)
Schuyler Brown, Skylab
Bryan Castaneda
Ana Domb
Mark Earls, author, Herd
Brad Grossman, Grossman and Partners
Grant McCracken
Christine W. Huang, PSFK, Huffington Post and Global Hue
Steve Postrel

Previous Winners

Juri Saar (for the "Who’s a good doggie woggie?" contest)
Reiko Waisglass (for the "Who’s a good doggie woggie?" contest)
In this first episode of Oz in 1997, a homophobic white supremacist repeatedly rapes and uses a Bic pen to brand a swastika on his cellmate’s buttocks after lights out. With the scene, HBO introduced its version of “original programming” to audiences—in both the unique and primary sense—forever changing television. It debuted the omniscient narrator, point-of-view camerawork, violence, hard language, male frontal nudity, drug use, homosexuality, mature content and verité grittiness—all tropes usually reserved for cinema. Sex and the City and The Sopranos followed quickly, making clear HBO’s version of television meant new and different. And successful: once HBO proved risk-taking led to commercial and critical reward, Showtime followed their lead, first rebranding with the “No Limits” tagline in 1997, then launching the groundbreaking Queer as Folk in 2000.

Showtime is still applying cable’s “Is it new and different?” litmus test to great effect. Examining their current line-up, one can verify the shows have no obvious forerunners; imagined (Dexter), implausible (Weeds) and genre-blending (The Big C), the network has no trouble devising kooky premises and giving characters a long leash. This license allows shows to create themselves organically, to build long arcs while still delivering each week, to shock by exploring paths broadcast never could. On another level, Showtime’s thesis reveals a connection to Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio: to shred any idealized depiction of small-town American life left and expose the alienation, standardization and soullessness pervading actual existence. It finds the bizarre and alien—a drug-dealing mom, a serial killer who kills serial killers—contending always that uncanny inner lives belle generic exteriors.

If Showtime is about invention, USA Networks is about reinvention—of the police procedural, the medical drama, the spy thriller. Its programming has definite roots: Psych is made possible by Sherlock Holmes and the kitschiness of Columbo, while Royal Pains seems ripped from the headlines with the death of Michael Jackson highlighting concierge medicine; if Burn Notice is a hybrid of MacGyver and the Bourne franchise, then White Collar’s premise is a straight rip of Catch Me If You Can. By piggybacking off a lineage, USA wisely increases appeal. By executing their versions so well, they maintain broad acceptance and court more discerning segments. The retail industry coined the term “masstige” to illustrate this sweet spot between mass and prestige; USA is the Target of basic cable.

All the mainstream-cool shows in USA’s line-up offer a fresh take on classic escapism. Like much of the screen storytelling from the last century, concepts are built around idiosyncratic personalities barreling through implausible scenarios. The shows read as fiction, acted by “real characters,” and, in fact, two of their keystone programs—Burn Notice and Psych—have led to spin-off novel series, so easy is the leap from viewer to reader. Taking a cue from riskier programs pioneered by non-ad-supported channels like HBO and Showtime, USA’s update comes in execution: the in situ production design’s look and feel, better camerawork, well-researched stunts that border on just possible, witty quips we’d never be able to think of in the moment. The marinated slices of Miami or the Hamptons impart reality even to locals, and it’s this legitimacy that keeps the shows believable even if they aren’t probable. If Showtime is new and different, then USA is familiar but different.

The sturdiest common ground Showtime and USA share is in their mutual fascination with new beginnings: a cancer diagnosis is dropped on Laura Linney, Mary-Louise Parker’s husband dies, newly ex-spy, Jeffrey Donovan, must adapt to his burning, a confidence man is reborn on the straight and narrow. This need/desire of protagonists to reinvent themselves seems especially modern. Recent events, though, have necessitated adaptation at speeds and to degrees historically reserved by Industrial Revolutions and Iron Ages. Our concept of entertainment, too, likes characters to adjust as we have—to quickly-eclipsed digital advances, to terrorism, to economic slides, to mega natural disasters. The stories reflect our dynamism and explore what it means to survive financially, physically, professionally and emotionally in these times. We love seeing the steps and missteps taken to acclimate, the humor people can find in it all, the heartbreaking undercurrents as they beat back gloom. They thrive like phoenixes, whether criminal (Dexter, Weeds, Royal Pains, White Collar), cancer patient (The Big C), the network has no trouble devising kooky premises and giving characters a long leash. This license allows shows to create themselves organically, to build long arcs while still delivering each week, to shock by exploring paths broadcast never could. On another level, Showtime’s thesis reveals a connection to Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio: to shred any idealized depiction of small-town American life left and expose the alienation, standardization and soullessness pervading actual existence. It finds the bizarre and alien—a drug-dealing mom, a serial killer who kills serial killers—contending always that uncanny inner lives belle generic exteriors.

In this first episode of Oz in 1997, a homophobic white supremacist repeatedly rapes and uses a Bic pen to brand a swastika on his cellmate’s buttocks after lights out. With the scene, HBO introduced its version of “original programming” to audiences—in both the unique and primary sense—forever changing television. It debuted the omniscient narrator, point-of-view camerawork, violence, hard language, male frontal nudity, drug use, homosexuality, mature content and verité grittiness—all tropes usually reserved for cinema. Sex and the City and The Sopranos followed quickly, making clear HBO’s version of television meant new and different. And successful: once HBO proved risk-taking led to commercial and critical reward, Showtime followed their lead, first rebranding with the “No Limits” tagline in 1997, then launching the groundbreaking Queer as Folk in 2000.
character, cousin Oliver. Of course execution matters, but it’s difficult to imagine a successful show today unable to handle such minor tweaks.

Perhaps we, dear viewers, have sophisticated or writers have exhausted all the iconic sitcom premises, but the old constructs seem unforgivably juvenile now. As viewers, we’re like middle-aged men who’ve finally started dating our age. And what a golden age it is. The modern situational comedy/dramedy has been redefined to include more complex, sticky and unpredictable situations. Unafraid of actual character development, writers reject the use of two-dimensional archetypes and trust viewers will join them in exploring the unchartered. Unfailingly, this new covenant between writer and viewer has brokered great television. Perhaps we all were branded in that opening episode of Oz, held in TV’s thrall since.

Essay answer by Diandra Mintz

The male and female fantasies of breaking traditional mores and what it means to be extraordinary.

Algorithm

Woman + composed suburban lifestyle + unexpected tragedy out of her control + newfound self-sufficiency + unorthodox redemption = Weeds, The Big C (Showtime)

Man + remarkable talent + fall from grace + sidekick who tempers and fuels man’s efforts + unorthodox redemption = Burn Notice, Psych, Royal Pains, White Collar (USA)

Ordinary vs. Extraordinary

Showtime gives us ordinary people living in extraordinary circumstances. Nancy and Cathy are going about their lives when they suffer sudden and unexpected setbacks. They seem in no way equipped to deal with tragedy and yet their underlying resilience shines through. Conversely, USA portrays extraordinary people living in ordinary circumstances. Each protagonist possesses an innate talent honed over time through discipline and practice. Standouts in their fields, the men are resourceful and cunning when necessary to come out on top — with their wit and charm in tact.

Gender

There is a marked difference in the protagonists’ gender on each network that is echoed by the gender of the shows’ creators. Showtime’s programs are led by women both on and off-screen, while USA’s programs star men and were created by men. Furthermore, the role of gender is complicated on both networks as each protagonist’s progression is threatened and frustrated by the presence of the opposite sex.

On Showtime, the women have been in some way failed by the men in their lives and seek to take matters into their own hands. The women must overcome the shortcomings of the men who continue to surround them.

Self-Sufficiency

At the end of the first episode of The Big C, Laura Linney’s character pours her heart out to an unseen companion: “I’m warning you that this laughter might turn into a sob in a second.” With a wider shot, the companion is revealed to be her dog. Even if they want a shoulder to cry on, the women make do on their own, demonstrating self-sufficiency.

USA’s protagonists are cushioned by the presence of sidekicks. The sidekick serves a variety of purposes in each program, but across the board the most important task is keeping the main character grounded. At moments when the leading male may seem too quirky or start to veer off plan, the sidekick is there to reel him in and reinforce an objective.

Aspiration and Identification

Not just any actors, Linney and Mary Louise Parker are accomplished actors in their own rights. They made names for themselves long before Showtime came calling. Both actors have the clout to carry a show and the ability to engage an audience on the small screen over the course of an entire series.

In a different vein, relatively unknown actors portray the protagonists on USA series. The actors are good looking enough to be realistically desired by the opposite sex, but not too good looking as to alienate the same sex from identifying with them. In this regard, the shows take a step back from focusing too tightly on the main character and open up to the ensemble cast.

Echoes of the 90s
The programming on Showtime is an extension of an approach seen on the small screen in the form of *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) later in the decade on the silver screen in *American Beauty* (1999). David Lynch’s television series asked viewers to take a closer look at suburban life. Below the guise of a smooth veneer, character flaws bubble to the surface. The difference now, in 2010, is that we are painfully aware that things are not what they seem. Bubbles have burst and dips are doubling and we are ready to examine the traditions and ideals that have become cumbersome. While Parker and Linney’s faces are familiar, just as familiar are the darker underbellies exposed in the storylines. As a culture we are re-educating ourselves on what it means to be satisfied.

USA’s programs echo another sentiment of the early 90s represented in the television series *MacGyver* (1985-92). *MacGyver* followed ever-resourceful secret agent Angus MacGyver as he solved problems with nothing more than his scientific know-how and ability to improvise with everyday common items. When put to the test, the protagonist comes through no matter what it takes — a mantra especially relevant today when we are recalibrating our lifestyles and learning how to do more with less.

**Earned Success and Everyday Heroism**

In an era moving past reality television when just about anyone could get their fifteen minutes by being in the right place at right time, the programming on USA and Showtime reflect the common desire to see earned success. As a culture we have moved beyond ascribed fame and fortune and instead hold earned heroism in higher regard. We leap to hear the stories of everyday heroes like Chesley Sullenberger and Jaycee Dugard, who have each signed movie and book deals respectively. We understand that success won’t be handed to us, and there is an inherent value in what is rightfully earned.

USA and Showtime have defined algorithms that resonate with an audience that values the talented and irrepressible spirit. When the chips are down and our flaws are showing, there is the hope of an underlying resilience that will come through in the end. Just test us.

Congratulations to Lauren and Diandra.

---

**Burberry’s Angela Ahrendts and the next generation**

*She listens intently. [She] has trained herself not to interrupt or seem rushed. Her eye contact never wavers, and while she insists she couldn’t function without her briefing folders, she never seems to need to look at them. [She] mixes folksy sincerity and laser focus […] effortlessly. Unlike corporate chiefs who favor an inaccessible, imperial style, Ahrendts seems comfortable with dissent; her executives joke easily with her, and aren’t afraid to press their points.*

This is the stuff of managerial grace, isn’t it? A boss who solicits staff opinion. A boss who listens well.

Listening is a good idea for lots of reasons. It is the signature of corporations in which information moves easily and well. It is the stuff of candor which is the stuff of transparency which is one of the vital signs of the corporation (Bennis, Goldman, and O’Toole).
But listening well matters for Ahrendts especially because she is, as every CEO is, an exalted creature. She travels and lives in a well upholstered, carefully modulated world. Limos, corporate jets, luxurious homes and hotels.

This doesn’t matter much if you make electronic components, but it matters a lot when you are the CEO of a luxury brand. Burberry has survived aristocratic lows, licensing lows, and it will flourish now only if it learns to run the rapids of contemporary culture.

And the trouble is that there is some kid in Norway, or maybe it's Cheng Du, working on music, software or a video that will help shift our culture. This kid is extremely hard to see from the deep comfort of a corporate limo.

Now, of course, Ahrendts is not without resources when it comes to staying in touch with culture. Christopher Bailey serves as her brilliant Chief Creative Officer. Her kids create and curate culture. She lives in the American heartland so there is no island (i.e., Manhattan) captivity to worry about. Burberry has experimented successfully with social media and cocreation. Plus, it sounds like Ahrendts can pick up the phone and call David Bowie any time she wants and that has to be quite a good thing.

The trouble is it’s not just that kid in Norway. The malls of America are a Petrie dish. At the moment they are nursing a new set of values. These values won’t matter directly to a luxury brand like Burberry, but they will matter indirectly and that’s the question in its fully difficulty. How will they matter? How will they concatenate into the world Burberry must master? America is having one of its periodic thinks on the ideas of fashion and luxury. This is hard to conger with from the inside the world of fashion and luxury (and a corporate limo).

And this is why it is so very critical that Ahrendts listens well. Because she is surrounded everyday by a small army of young people who are a little less cushioned and a little more connected. (It’s not perfect, but hey…as they say.) But this body of information, opinion and pattern recognition is only available if you are the kind of boss who invites people to insist on what they know. These kids are the aquifer out of which Ahrendts can and plainly does draw great things.

I believe it’s true that most corporations are a little less inclusive. Most corporations ignore the great stock of knowledge that generations X and Y bring to work every morning. Occasionally, from the precipice of a decision, someone will say, “run this down the hall and see what the intern thinks.” Tthis is listening very badly indeed. I keep hoping that new generations will find a way to insist on their inclusion, that they will stage a palace coup if necessary. Indeed, I hoped Chief Culture Officer might serve as a rallying cry. But so far I’m not seeing any evidence of a fifth column. Just the noblesse oblige of a CEO listening well.

References


Post Script

On the listening question, there’s a nice opportunity to compare Ahrendts’ style to that of another CEO in the garment industry. Here’s how Paumgarten describes Mickey Drexler, the CEO of J. Crew.

His inquisitions have an auctioneer’s temp and a depositional intensity, but they also project an ease that derives from the pleasure he seems to take in them, and the pleasure, albeit of a wary and poised kind, that his employees seem to take in him. Some combination of self-possession, insecurity, good humor, and good tailoring makes him approachable. His command of a room is sneaky; it is unexpectedly fortified by curiosity and self-effacement.

References

Culture Contest: Showtime vs. USA Networks

Preamble

*The Big C*, the new show starring the deeply talented Laura Linney gives us a glimpse of what is now possible on cable. It resembles a second show on Showtime, *Weeds*.

Together these shows give us a glimpse into the Showtime thinktank. (One of the principles, apparently: let’s see what happens to suburban living when we mix things up.)

There is another experiment at work at USA Networks, from which a string of hits has recently issued (*Burn Notice*, *Psych*, *Royal Pains*, *White Collar*). (One of the principles, apparently, stay as far away from the suburbs as possible.)

**Your essay question:**

1. Compare and contrast Showtime and USA Networks. Identify the grammar or algorithm that produces the shows in question. (Consider my "suburb" reference a hint, but merely one very rough indicator of the possibilities. Please do feel free to contradict me.)

2. What larger cultural significance do you attach to the fact that these two approaches to making TV now exist? Did they exist in the 20th century. Why do they exist now?

**Conditions:**

Fewer than 1000 words.

point form preferred.

points for being crisp and clear.

**Contest winners**

Contest winners will receive a Minerva (as pictured) and a place on the winner’s list. (And immortality as a contest winner, of course. See the list of previous winners, by clicking [here](#).) (Note: the Minerva used to be called the "VOWEL.")

**Contest judges**

Normally I do the judging for Minervas. But this is a recipe for provincialism. So I am invited several people to act as judges. They are:

Rick Boyko, Director and Professor, VCU Brandcenter

Schuyler Brown, Skylab

Bryan Castañeda

Ana Domb

Mark Earls, author, Herd
This is precisely the kind of question I would expect a CCO to hit out of the park. If you are having trouble with this question and fancy yourself CCO material, you are not watching enough TV. (When spouses or colleagues complain, look them straight in the eye and say: “It’s doctor’s orders.” (Trust me, I’m an anthropologist.)

Previous Winners

Juri Saar (for the “Who’s a good doggie woggie?” contest)
Reiko Waisglass (for the “Who’s a good doggie woggie?” contest)
Brent Shelkey (for the ”Who’s a good doggie woggie?” contest)
Daniel Saunders (for the "JJ Abrams vs. Joss Whedon" contest)
Tim Sullivan (for the "Karen Black vs. Betty White" contest?)


“It” extraction (killing a brand softly)

Last week, quietly and without fanfare, ThinkPad decided not to renew its flagship model, the X301.

The X301 is a beautiful machine. It has that wonderful ThinkPad keyboard, a huge screen, and it weighs only a little bit more than a ballet slipper. It is a miraculous demonstration of what design and engineer can do.

And now it’s done for. Lenovo is proposing the ThinkPad T410s as the x301s replacement. When called upon to explain himself, Lenovo Marketing Director, Wang Lipin said that T400 series was more powerful than the x301, and cheaper by a thousand dollars.

The trouble: the T400 doesn't have “it” quality. It is a business machine in the most pedestrian sense of the term. No trace of elegance. No claim to being the pick of the technological litter. No “wow” factor. The T410 is just another business machine.

This takes us into one of the thorniest issue in the branding world. What is “it?” And what’s “it” worth?
It’s a difficult discussion because “it” is inscrutable. We can point to “it.” We know “it” when we see it. But when it comes to anatomizing, measuring, and pricing “it,” well, this proves difficult and all the marketing and pricing models break down.

This would be a mere irritation if “it” weren’t such a gusher in the tech world. But it is. All of us can buy a phone that is smarter, faster and cheaper than the iPhone. But none of these has “it” status. We may not be able to measure “it,” but we don’t hesitate to pay the premium it demands of us.

Apple turns out to be pretty good at “it.” In fact, Apple now pretty much owns “it” in the computer world at the moment.

Except when it come to the lightest, full function laptop. The Apple entry in this category, the MacBook Air, is a pretty good machine. But that’s all it is. A pretty good machine. It doesn’t have “it.” Until last week, that belonged to ThinkPad.

So why did Lenovo perform an “it” extraction? That’s clear enough. It was making a rational business decision. It was applying a pricing model. It may well have been working from Robert Dolan’s exemplary text book on the topic. This was a perfectly sensible marketing decision.

But it was of course an absolutely disastrous business decision, one that may cost Lenovo dearly. When Lenovo took the “it” out of ThinkPad, it gave up the only branding advantage it had over Apple. Sadder still, it destroyed much of the brand value that prompted Lenovo to buy ThinkPad from IBM in the first place. Having taken on a brand that would help it fight its way out of the commodity basement, it has now descended into that commodity basement, slamming the door behind it as it goes.

Lenovo’s “it extraction” was a good, rational, pricing decision. But if we are not protecting “it” when our designers and engineers gift us with it, if we are not building the brand that protects us from the commodity basement, our decision, rational by some narrow standard, is wildly irrational by any broader one.

Commerce isn’t good at imponderables. And “it” is nothing if not imponderable. The fault lies largely on the side of the design house and the ad agency. When asked to measure and account for “it,” and every cultural moments has it’s its (it girls, it brands, it activities, it restaurants, it industries), designers and agency people demurred. “Oh, listen, don’t bother your pretty little heads about it,” they said to the client. “This is what you pay us for. We’ll keep track of it. You just get product on the shelf.” (If only they had a Chief Culture Officer.)

So it’s not entirely surprising that pricing models don’t have anything to say about “it.” And it’s not surprising that senior managers boot this sort of decision with some frequency. But when you think about how much value “it” creates for us, how essential it is to the life of the corporation, and how much there is at stake in terms of careers and brands, isn’t it time we did better?

Put these on the business conference agenda. What is it? What’s it worth? How do we price it? How do we manage it? In the meantime, hire a CCO.

References


