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# From genericide to viral marketing: on ‘brand’

Robert E. Moore\*

*Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1126 E. 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA*

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## Abstract

The contemporary phenomenon of ‘brand’ is addressed within a Peircean semiotic framework, showing ‘brand’ to be an inherently unstable composite of tangible (e.g. product) and intangible (e.g. brand name) values. The professional literature of brand strategy is drawn upon for definitions, and branding work in an Internet-focused ‘New Economy’ consultancy is described. Three phenomena of branding—genericide, ingredient branding, and so-called ‘viral marketing’—reveal the vulnerabilities of brands, and show that it is not only material things, but events, experiences, and acts of communication that can be ‘branded’. The wider macro-economic implications of these semiotic vulnerabilities are briefly explored in conclusion.

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## 1. Introduction

A leitmotif in the academic literature of postmodernism is that a fundamental shift has taken place under late capitalism: value no longer inheres in the commodity itself as a tangible thing; rather, value inheres in something else, something less tangible: the aura, the simulacrum, the reproduction (as opposed to the original), the brand. The attempt to replace value with symbolic meaning grows out of a sense that production has been transformed, or replaced, by signification (see, for example, Baudrillard, 1988 [1968]).

A practical consequence of this is that sociologists, anthropologists, and others who have written about brands and branding have almost always been committed to seeing and understanding the phenomenon in a particular way—one that I think both obscures the complex interplay of materiality and the ‘intangible’ in the actual form and functioning of brands, and does not really help us to understand how brands are produced, circulated, and received in our society.

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\* Fax: +1-773-702-4503.

E-mail address: [rem10us@yahoo.com](mailto:rem10us@yahoo.com) (R.E. Moore).

In much of British cultural studies, for example, no distinction is drawn between brands and advertising. ‘Semiotic analysis’ is often little more than a decoding operation that reduces the images and text in an advertisement to a statement of their propositional content—i.e. to another text—in the style of Roland Barthes’ famous analysis of the cover of *Paris Match* that depicted a Black (African) soldier saluting the French flag (Barthes, 1968). As Webb Keane (this volume) writes, ‘cultural studies still often ‘reads’ such things as ‘representations’ as being *about* the world in ways that make little of how they may be materially located *within* it’ (see, e.g. Lury 1998, Tomlinson 1990).

And yet there is little doubt that the centrality and ubiquity of brands and branding is one of the defining characteristics of contemporary experience, across the globe. As we all know, products (Coca-Cola), services (H&R Block), experiences (‘the Hyatt Touch’), events of communication (‘Do you Yahoo?’), political leaders (George W. Bush; Tony Blair), whole polities (e.g. Hong Kong), and indeed, wars, are all now being branded. In view of this obvious fact, the absence from the academic literature of any semiotically sophisticated and ethnographically rich understanding of brands is downright shocking. If the lack of semiotic analyses of so blatantly ‘semiotic’ a phenomenon as ‘brand’ is to be accounted for in the same way as the absence of treatises on water written by goldfish, so much the worse.

My goal in this article is only to open up the subject of branding in a way that allows us to see where our notions of the materiality and/or ‘dematerialisation’ of the commodity start to break down, and to see where our notions of production, circulation, and consumption as distinct ‘moments’ in the creation of value are most in need of revision.

It seems clear from the outset that both brands and the commodity form itself are undergoing certain kinds of changes in the way they manifest themselves to us. Some of these changes may turn out to be interesting concomitants of recentering a macroeconomic order on a ‘service economy’; some of them may be connected to technological change. What difference does it make that the branded product is sometimes a tangible thing (e.g. a can of Coca-Cola), sometimes a set of services in an online ‘environment’ (e.g. Amazon.com), and sometimes an experience in—and of—the world (e.g. a ClubMed vacation)? On what basis are we able to imagine that two cans of Coke, or two ClubMed vacations, are in some important sense ‘the same’? How should a semiotic analysis of branding take account of the seemingly quite different ontological statuses of brands as such, versus branded products (as types), versus individual instances (tokens) of branded products, these last being what actual people engage with in activities of consumption, use, enjoyment, display, and so on? How can the concrete sensuous reality (e.g. color) of such tokens-in-use act as a relay for the more abstract associations (Young! Fresh! Edgy!) that branding professionals try to ‘encode’ in consumer experience?

The problem of the commodity’s materiality and tangibility is a very old one. In political economy at least since Adam Smith, commodities are not just typically material and objectual, nor are they accidentally so—they are tangible and material things in their very essence. It is, in fact, their tangibility and materiality, their very ‘thinginess’, one might say, that makes it possible for them to be the vehicles for, or

the repositories of, an added value: productive labor. Adam Smith, for example, differentiated sharply between what he called productive labor and unproductive labor (Smith, 1937 [1776], p. 314 et seq.). For Smith, ‘productive labor is that which is congealed in material perduring commodities which can be sold, carried around, or stored up—this type of commodity is typical of the bourgeois order; whereas service is unproductive labor, resulting in no commodity that can be stored up, because it is consumed instantly’ (H. Paul Manning, via email, 23 January 2003).<sup>1</sup>

Among those who took issue with this distinction of Smith’s was Jean-Baptiste Say, who devoted a chapter of his own *Treatise on Political Economy* to what he called ‘immaterial products, or values consumed at the moment of production’ (Say, 1824 [1803], pp. 69–78). Say observed that Smith and others had limited themselves to discussing

that kind of value only, which is capable, after its creation, of being, as it were, incorporated with matter, and preserved for a longer or shorter period. But all the values producible by human industry, have not this quality. Some there are, which must have reality, because they are in high estimation, and purchased by the exchange of costly and durable products, which nevertheless have themselves no durability, but perish the moment of their production. This class of values I shall define in the ensuing chapter, and denominate *immaterial products* (Say, 1824 [1803], vol. I, p. 69).

In a footnote to this passage Say reveals that he had considered, and then rejected, terming these kinds of products *perishable*, *intransferable*, *transient*, or *momentary* (footnote at p. 69). He opens his chapter on immaterial products with a parable:

A physician goes to visit a sick person, observes the symptoms of disease, prescribes a remedy, and takes his leave without depositing any product, that the invalid or his family can transfer to a third person, or even keep for the consumption of a future day. Has the industry of the physician been unproductive? Who can for a moment suppose so? The patient’s life has been saved perhaps. Was this product incapable of becoming an object of barter? By no means; the physician’s advice has been exchanged for a fee; but the want of this advice ceased the moment it was given. The act of giving was its production, of hearing its consumption; and the consumption and production were simultaneous. This is what I call an immaterial product (*ibid.*).

Notice that the ‘product’ here is a speech act—‘advice’. For Say, the industry and labor of several occupational classes is of the type that produces immaterial products, products produced and consumed in the same moment: in addition to physicians, he mentions jurists and lawyers, musicians, and actors, all of whom must undertake long training and apprenticeship in order to participate (e.g. as paid

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Manning for directing me to the work of Smith and Say.

professionals) in moments of the production/exchange/consumption of ‘immaterial products’.

Much more recently, Webb Keane (2003) has addressed the problem of materiality within a semiotic framework derived at least as much from the work of Peirce (e.g. 1955) and Silverstein (2003) as from Barthes or Saussure. Building on the insights of Nancy Munn (e.g. 1986), Keane observes that ‘part of the power of material objects in society consists of their openness to ‘external’ events and their resulting potential for mediating the introduction of ‘contingency’ into even the most hegemonic of social orders’ (2003). ‘The openness of [material] things to further consequences’, he continues elsewhere, ‘perpetually threatens to destabilize existing semiotic ideologies’ (2003). Treating the ‘thinginess’ of things in the context of notions of ‘objectification’, Keane usefully reminds us that ‘objectifications’ take many different forms and are produced out of many different semiotic processes—none of which, however, are unavailable to analysis:

The exteriorizations involved in gift exchange and sacrifice, in altarpieces and fetishes, in performance and oratory, are all forms of objectification. But they are very different modes of objectification from map-making, census-taking, photography, statistical analysis, pricing mechanisms, and so forth. In order to accept their distinctiveness, we must do more than simply identify them with the actions of which they are a part. We need to examine scrupulously the modes of objectification, the potential for reflexivity they capacitate, and the specific character of their respective vulnerabilities to contingency (Keane, 2003).

Following Keane I want to treat brands and branding as a particular mode of ‘objectification’. More specifically, I will treat brands as composite entities, in the first instance as unstable conjunctions of tangible, material things (products, commodities) with ‘immaterial’ forms of value (brand names, logos, images). A branded product, in other words, is partly a thing, and partly language. The brand name functions as a ‘rigid designator’ in the terminology of Kripke (1972): it communicates information about the source, producer, and/or type of thing, and can provide quite rich sociocultural and ideological ‘captioning’ for the object (including by ‘keying’ it to definable activities) through the radical use of ‘condensation symbolism’ (Sapir, 1949 [1929]). Brand names are also a legally protected form of ‘intellectual property’, and so represent language being used in a way that heightens its own ‘thinginess’ (Silverstein, 1984). Advertisements, meanwhile, provide richly textualized, often narrative, representations of branded products in a wide range of imagined contexts and universes.

In part because of this particular configuration and ‘economy’ of semiotic potential, brands and branded products are vulnerable to contingency in any number of ways—indeed, the vast majority of brands fail, and disappear forever from the earth! The stories that get told about brands in the professional and other literature are almost always success stories, not least because failed brands by definition are the ones that nobody knows, that do not, in fact, exist (anymore).

Success and failure, of course, point to the irreducibly dialogic and transactional matrix that serves as one privileged (and consequential) cultural and institutional site where brands meet the world of contingency: the market. From Say I want to borrow the image of the roles of producer and consumer as being in some semiotically interesting sense analogous to those of speaker and hearer: ‘brand’ enters upon phenomenal reality as a mode of connection, of communication, between two parties. Successful branding, then, is successful communication, successful in the sense that it ‘secures uptake’ from its interlocutor(s) in the market, to use the terms of speech-act theory (Austin, 1961). Uptake, then, happens as a kind of ‘cooperative illocutionary act’ (Hancher, 1972), like a contract, or covenant. Whether to identify the social-semiotic moment of consumer ‘uptake’ of a brand with the decision to purchase, the moment of purchase, or various activities of consumption and enjoyment, is an ethnographic question. The professional discourse of brand strategy, as we will see, is haunted by a sense of the radical incompleteness of brands: they’re not ‘real’ until tokens of them are taken up by consumers—used, consumed, circulated—all of which is reminiscent of Say’s notion of ‘immaterial products’ that are consumed in the very moment of their production, which is itself a moment of circulation (e.g. the transfer of a doctor’s advice).

To review: the contemporary cultural phenomenon of ‘brand’ will be treated in this article as centered semiotically upon a composite object, or, more accurately, an unstable conjunction of a product (prototypically at least a material, tangible object), and a mark, logo, or brand name (see Fig. 1). ‘Brandedness’ as a semiotic process immanent in the contemporary commodity experience unfolds in relationships between two parties—producers and consumers. These relationships can be modeled as events of communication in several respects. ‘Brand’ summons people to participate in the market, it interpellates people to act as consumers, in particular ways. In the same moment, ‘brand’ is now the dominant means by which the producers—corporate entities, usually—extend themselves (in the ordinary as well as the philosophic sense) into the world inhabited by their erstwhile (or sought-after) consumers, indeed, into the world of contingency (success or failure) itself.

What I will do, then, is first to introduce the contemporary concept of ‘brand’, showing how it is defined and understood by professionals in fields like advertising, marketing, and business strategy. My starting point here is in the recognition of a very basic fact, albeit one not much talked about until the recent work of McCreery (2000), Moeran (1996), and Mazzarella (2003). This is the fact that *brands themselves are produced by labor*, even if it is the ‘white-collar’ labor of adpersons, strategists, account planners, market researchers, and other mandarins of the corporate world. I

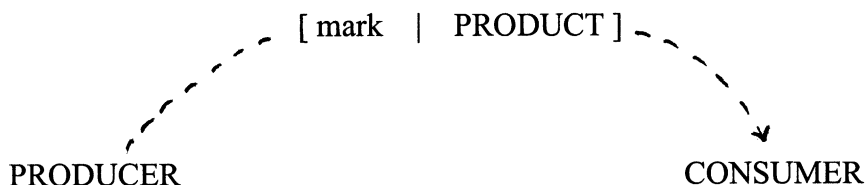


Fig. 1. A minimal model of branding as a form of communication (cf. Jakobson, 1980 [1956]).

will confine myself in this article to the production side of the phenomenon, partly because this aspect is least visible in the anthropological and cultural studies literature, and partly because this is where I can bring to bear—‘leverage’ as people say in the business world—some first-hand knowledge and experience.

I will then briefly describe how branding work emerged out of collaboration between brand strategists, anthropologists, and designers at a ‘New Economy’ (i.e. Internet-focused) consultancy where I worked for almost two years doing ‘applied’ ethnographic research for a range of clients (this company will be identified hereinafter as ‘the Firm’). This ‘New Economy’ branding work is interesting in part because the Firm’s task was usually to start with an existing brand (often of a ‘Fortune 500 company’ with a strong reputation), and ‘take it online’, usually in the context of designing and building a Web site, ‘portal’, or other piece of digital technology for the client company’s customers or employees to use. Anthropological research, brand strategy, and design were brought together in an attempt to identify and then ‘translate’ into the online environment the ‘core characteristics’, ‘personality’, and ‘values’ of the client company’s brand. In this context, the ‘online environment’ was conceptualized as one among an array of ‘touch points’—contexts, media, places—through which the client company establishes contact with its customers. The procedures used to get at the ‘brand personality’ reveal much about the ‘semiotic ideology’ (Keane, this volume) of branding in the corporate culture of the ‘New Economy’, as does the division of branding labor at the Firm, where brand strategists coordinated their efforts with anthropologists and graphic designers.

Finally, I will attempt to put this ‘New Economy’ branding work into a broader context by briefly examining three ‘insider’ phenomena of branding: genericide, ingredient branding, and so-called ‘viral marketing’. These three examples allow us to probe the instability of ‘brand’ as an uneasy conjunction of a word (the brand name) and an object (the product): they allow us, in other words, to ‘examine scrupulously the specific character of their respective vulnerabilities to contingency’ (Keane, 2003). For each example we will ask which component of ‘brand’ is affected, and whose job it is to manage the contingency.

All commentators agree that a brand consists of much more than a brand name—but they also agree that without a protected brand name, a brand does not exist. It is the particular vulnerabilities of *brand names* that genericide reveals. Genericide happens when a court finds that a brand name has lost its source-identifying power and has become just another word in the language, a term identifying not a single producer’s products but the product class to which they belong (hence, ‘generic’). A finding of genericide results in cancellation of the trademark—the very thing that producers have spent time and energy promoting. Protection of trademarks and brand names, of course, is a duty that falls to legal departments, not creatives. The discussion of genericide shows that legal professionals, even as they agree with branding strategists about how best to regulate usage of the brand name to mitigate risk and limit its vulnerability, actually understand the phenomenon of branding very differently than brand strategists do.

In ingredient branding, it is the *product*, not the name, that is at issue. In ingredient branding, one branded product is absorbed or incorporated into another

(think NutraSweet, as a branded ingredient of Diet Pepsi, or ‘Intel Inside’). The consumer experiences—consumes—the branded ingredient only and always in the same moment as she consumes the ‘host product’. One result—one contingency—that flows from this is that branded ingredients begin to circulate in part independently of their ‘host products’, with a number of interesting consequences.

In ‘viral marketing’ it actually seems that the very product itself is brought into existence, produced, in the act of consumption, which is inseparable from the act of circulating it. This obviously recalls Say’s notion of a class of ‘immaterial products’, even as it allows me to connect my discussion with wider issues of ‘interactivity’ and the way that technology has provided new channels of communication between producers and consumers. I conclude by asking whether the ubiquity—indeed, the hegemony—of brands and branding in today’s economy actually imports many of the specific semiotic vulnerabilities discussed here to the macroeconomic system as a whole.

## 2. Definitions

Brands are increasingly being defined in financial terms as ‘intangible assets’. Since 1999 the New York-based branding consultancy Interbrand has published the results of its survey of the top 100 global brands, assessing the value of brands (e.g. as a percentage of market capitalisation) using a set of proprietary methodologies.<sup>2</sup>

A report by The Conference Board on ‘Managing Reputation with Image and Brands’—a report aimed at corporate leadership—tells this story:

‘[T]he value of the brand has historically been seen as a ‘soft’ asset’, says Allstate’s Rita Wilson, ‘not a ‘hard’ asset that can be pinpointed with a definite amount on a balance sheet’. Hence, many [corporate] leaders have a difficult time grasping it. But the value most definitely exists. Wilson cites Kohlberg Kravis Roberts’s (KKR) takeover of RJR Nabisco as a prime example: ‘When KKR made the purchase, RJR had \$5.9 billion on its balance sheet. But KKR paid \$31 billion, largely because of the substantial equity of RJR’s reputation and strong product brands’. According to Interbrand’s John Grace, intangible assets, including brands, can represent up to 97% of a company’s value. This is especially true for major brand corporations, including Coca-Cola, Kellogg’s, IBM, and AT&T (Garone, 1998, p. 21).

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<sup>2</sup> Called the Brand Valuation Approach, a model that combines a number of components, including financial forecasting based on projections of ‘all revenues the brands are expected to generate in the future’ (less operating costs, tax, etc.) and deriving ‘Intangible Earnings representing all earnings generated by the intangibles of the branded businesses’, a determination of the ‘percentage of intangible earnings that are attributable solely to the brand’ (Role of Branding Analysis), and a calculation of Brand Risk. The rankings represent ‘the net present value of the projected Brand Earnings’. Interbrand offers its clients this ‘formidable tool to establish value based brand management’, as well as a wide range of consultative services in product naming, brand architecture and planning, and so on.



In *No Logo*, Naomi Klein offers a very similar account of this transition to seeing the value of brands as real and quantifiable:

By the end of the 1940s, there was a burgeoning awareness that a brand wasn't just a mascot or a catchphrase or a picture printed on the label of a company's product; the company as a whole could have a brand identity or a 'corporate consciousness', as this ephemeral quality was termed at the time. ... The search for the true meaning of brands—or the 'brand essence' as it is often called—gradually took the agencies away from individual products and their attributes and toward a psychological/anthropological examination of what brands mean to the culture and to people's lives. This was seen to be of crucial importance, since corporations manufacture products, but what consumers buy are brands. It took several decades for the manufacturing world to adjust to this shift. It clung to the idea that its core business was still production and that branding was an important add-on. Then came the brand equity mania of the eighties, the defining moment of which arrived in 1988 when Philip Morris purchased Kraft for \$12.6 billion—six times what the company was worth on paper. The price difference, apparently, was the cost of the word 'Kraft'. ... [W]ith the Kraft purchase, a huge dollar value had been assigned to something that had previously been abstract and unquantifiable—a brand name (Klein, 2002, p. 7–8).

In the literature of business and brand strategy, brands are often defined as a form of protection: they protect the consumer from counterfeit goods, and they protect the producer from unfair competition. According to one strategist, 'if brand names did not exist there would be no trustworthy marketplace' (Batra and Ljungberg, 1998, pp. 6–7). David Aaker—probably the most cited author in the brand strategy literature—picks up this theme:

A brand is a distinguished name and/or symbol ... intended to identify the goods or services ... and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors. A brand thus signals to the customer the source of the product, and protects both the customer and the producer from competitors who would attempt to provide products that appear to be identical (Aaker, 1991, p. 7)

Jean-Noel Kapferer, another leading commentator and strategist, focuses much more on branding as a strategic effort on the part of the producer:

A brand is not a product. It is the product's essence, its meaning, and its direction and it defines its identity in time and space.... Too often brands are examined through their component parts: the brand name, its logo, design, or packaging, advertising, or sponsorship, or image and name recognition, or very recently, in terms of financial brand evaluation. Real brand management however, begins much earlier, with a strategy and a consistent integrated vision (Kapferer, 1992, p. 11).



And yet many define brand—to choose an admirably succinct example—as ‘the tangible product plus the intangible values and expectations attached to the product by the consumer or prospect’ (Brandt and Johnson, 1997), i.e. a definition in terms of ‘component parts’. Stephen King (a pioneering account planner at J. Walter Thompson London during the 1960s) articulated this dualism at the heart of brand in a memorable way, one that instantly became axiomatic:

A product is something that is made in a factory: a brand is something that is bought by customers. A product can be copied by a competitor: a brand is unique. A product can be quickly outdated: a successful brand is timeless (King, 1973, p. 37).

Gardner & Levy in their 1955 essay ‘The Product and the Brand’ captured this duality much earlier, and much better, than most in the field:

A brand name is more than the label employed to differentiate among the manufacturers of a product. It is a complex symbol that represents a variety of ideas and attributes. It tells the consumers many things, not only by the way it sounds ... but, more important, via the body of associations it has built up and acquired as a public object over time. ... The net result is a public image, a character or personality that may be more important for the overall status (and sales) of the brand than many technical facts about the product (Gardner and Levy, 1955, p. 34).

An elegant and concise definition of ‘brand’ might be a name and a logo, joined to a set of regimented associations, with source-identifying indexicals.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Brand as experience in the ‘New Economy’

The subject of brands and branding is one to which I was formally introduced almost instantly upon joining the Firm. On the final day of my week-long orientation to the Firm’s ‘corporate culture’ in July of 2000, a group of us participated in an event that our trainers, Human Resources professionals, assured us would be very special: the Rebranding Call. We gathered with a large group of other employees in a mostly empty room, and listened over a spider-shaped speakerphone as the Firm’s head of marketing and two others from leadership unveiled the new brand.

The call began with some general statements; several voices on the phone emphasized the idea that ‘*a brand is a promise*’ (this is when I began taking notes). In fact, two brands would be unveiled that day—or, more accurately, two faces of a single brand: an internal brand (‘a promise we make to ourselves, what we say to ourselves in the mirror,’ not to be shared outside the company), and an external brand, which

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Julie S. Hastings for this elegant and compact formulation (p.c., 16 October 2002).

will serve as ‘the lens through which the media can view our actions, a promise we make to clients, customers, the world’.

Here followed an extended metaphor, really a parable: ‘Imagine you are going to a party’, began the marketing chief, ‘and you want the people you meet at the party to think you’re beautiful. How to create that impression? You could go around at the party, and tell everyone you meet that you’re beautiful—but that would be a strange approach’, she began. Instead, fashioning the (external) brand means ‘Working out the logic, the story, finding the words that will elicit this [impression] from our customers, that will create this impression about us in the minds of others’. The ‘method’, she explained, was *storytelling*: construct a story, but leave it unfinished, ‘so that people reach this impression about us, and think of it as their own’.

This Rebranding Call was an important event in the Firm’s unfinishable project of fashioning an image of itself that it could communicate effectively both to itself and to others. Meanwhile, the Firm’s actual work had much to do with the brand identities and self-images of client companies.

To understand the division of branding labor at the Firm, some background is necessary. The Firm emerged in the first instance to address a market need created during the 1980s, when the business landscape was dominated by leveraged buy-outs and mergers and acquisitions activity. It was founded in 1991 as a ‘back-end systems integrator’: when a number of inherited ‘legacy systems’ of computer networking, hardware, and software were brought together as a result of merger or acquisition, the Firm’s job was to make these legacy systems ‘talk to’ each other.

In 1995, the company’s leadership, discerning that digital technology would have a far-reaching impact on business systems, decided to make what it called a ‘run to the fence’, and reconfigured The Firm from top to bottom as a provider of ‘e-business solutions’—Web sites, portals, and other digital applications. The message to potential clients was clear: ‘You need to move your business to the Web; we understand technology, we understand the Internet, we understand consumers, we will take you there’.

A period of exponential growth began with the ‘run to the fence’ in 1995, transforming the Firm from a systems integrator to a full-service Internet consultancy. In this period the Firm proceeded to ‘grow its business’ by the very method that created the conditions under which it began operation: it began acquiring companies, and ‘integrating’ their offerings, skills, and personnel into a large menu of research, design, business consulting, and technology services. From here, the Firm rode the crest of the Internet wave, both up and down. There was an IPO in the mid-1990s, and by 1999 the Firm had annual revenues in excess of \$276 million, without any new infusions of venture capital, and without any significant debt; by the middle of 2000 the company had over 100 client projects underway, and was listed on major stock exchanges (from some of which it has since been de-listed).

In 1998 and 1999 the Firm acquired several existing companies: two design firms and an ethnography-and-design consultancy. This last was a somewhat unusual enterprise composed heavily of people with training in the social sciences (chiefly anthropology), but also populated by designers, artists, actors, and others. This group conducted ethnographic and other forms of qualitative research on consumer

behavior for a wide range of clients in the retail, over-the-counter-pharmaceutical, grocery, automotive, and other industries. Upon acquisition, the ‘legacy’ skills and offerings of this ethnography/design company were replicated by the hiring of anthropologists in most of the Firm’s major offices (at one time, over 70 of them), and the expertise so amassed was redirected to do research on consumer behaviors relevant to the success or failure of a single class of products: Web sites and related forms of digital technology. In July 2000 I was recruited to work in the Firm’s New York office with a group of colleagues, most of them anthropologists with PhDs from places like Rice University, Princeton, and the University of Chicago.

By early 2000, the Firm comprised a number of ‘Disciplines and Practices’ ranging from Technology through Digital Business Strategy to four Creative practices (Content Strategy, Graphic Design, Information Architecture, and Site Development), and more. To understand how branding activities unfolded in this context, we need to focus on only three of these practice groups or ‘disciplines’: Brand Strategy, User Research (a.k.a., anthropology), and Design.

According to an internal memorandum dated July 2000 that defined these, the value of brand strategy is that it ‘defines the role of a client’s brand in reaching their e-business goals and advocate[s] for the brand throughout the project lifecycle’. To accomplish this, brand strategists were expected to ‘define brand attributes’ and work with designers to ‘bring Brand into the concept creation’.

The value of ethnographic and other research into ‘user experience,’ by contrast, is that it ‘ultimately ensures that solutions are in line with the behaviors and needs of the people using them by observing people’s real experience to explain and organize what people think, do and use,’ leading to the creation of ‘new user experiences more attuned to real user needs and behaviors’. To accomplish this, user experience researchers routinely carry out a range of tasks: ‘observ[ing] and gather[ing] information about people’s real experience through interviews, ethnography, and other methods’, interpreting that information ‘to create user experience models that explain behavior,’ leading to the creation of ‘valuable, compelling experiences-online and offline-which benefit real people’.

The value of the Creative Discipline of Design is that it ‘define[s] the visual expression of the client brand and employs visual elements to support the user interface’. ‘Graphic design,’ the July 2000 document continues, ‘is a manifestation of a brand’s visual identity and how it is applied across different media and user interfaces, including computer screens, television, product packaging, and corporate identity design systems’. The function of design is to ‘creat[e] a visual link that draws users to a company’s brand’. To accomplish this, designers ‘create logos and assets’ and ‘translat[e] visual identity to different media and interfaces’.

The division of labor at The Firm was different from that usually found in advertising agencies, where it is the job of account planners both to carry out research on consumer preferences (using focus groups, forced-choice exercises, and so on), and to develop brand attributes and personality. And purposely so: it was the unique qualities of ‘the online environment’ (or, the perception of these) that drove the decision to divide the labor in this way.

The anthropologists, then, were responsible for uncovering useful insights into the pre-existing (often, offline) experiences of users, the designers designed the new (online) experience, and the brand strategists in effect policed the whole process to ensure that the new experience was ‘on brand’—that it was consistent with the canonical set of regimented associations, and effectively deployed the source-identifying indexicalities.

The Brand Strategists did their work not by working directly with consumers, but by developing brand personality traits, attributes, and promise statements in Socratic-style ‘workshops’ with employees of the client company.

These workshops—day-long affairs with catered lunches, held in rooms called ‘Design Centers’ with whiteboards on all the walls—are meant to elicit, or extract, from the participants, a number of specific things: a *brand promise statement*, a *brand personality*, a set of *personality attributes* and other characteristics, and related *associations*. Often this begins with an examination of the current state of the client’s brand. A Brand Strategist, acting as a workshop ‘facilitator’, might well ask questions designed to elicit current perceptions of the brand: are these perceptions ‘aligned with business objectives, and desired positioning?’ Are the ‘competitive advantages of the business being communicated effectively?’ (these quotations come from a PowerPoint presentation by one of the Firm’s Brand Strategists).

To develop a *brand promise statement*—the ‘value proposition’ that a brand offers to the market—a brand strategist leads the group through a kind of free-association exercise, capturing words and phrases on the whiteboard with a dry-erase marker to define the ‘guiding principles of the brand that guides what will and won’t be done’—‘In other words, what you believe in’.

To establish *brand personality*, the procedure, again, is to get workshop participants to free-associate in response to a question like ‘If [ ] were a person, who would it be?’ Answers to this question can begin by identifying the brand with existing celebrities and public figures, but always progresses to an enumeration of a number of specific human characteristics: age, sex, appearance, hobbies, tastes, and emblematic possessions (e.g. ‘what kind of car does s/he drive?’), and so on. Again, the exercise is often repeated twice: first to establish the pre-existing brand personality, then to establish the new personality that the online brand aspires to become.

The fundamental brand characteristics uncovered in the Brand Strategy workshops are canonically expressed in the form of abstract nouns. One typical brand strategy deliverable was prepared for a client building a Web portal for people who receive stock options from their employer as part of their compensation package. In this case there were four fundamental brand characteristics, *Knowledge*, *Trust*, *Community*, and *Value*. Each of these received additional elaboration via ‘adjectives that are synonymous with the core brand characteristics’; these ‘provide the tools to expand the visual and verbal expression of the brand personality’. The characteristic of *Knowledge*, for example, was elaborated to include *Experienced* (glossed with the phrase ‘We’ve done this ourselves in the real world’), *Educated* (glossed as ‘We know what the books say’), *Smart* (glossed as ‘We’re savvy, and we understand what’s going on’), *Cutting-edge* (glossed as ‘We strive to have the latest and greatest’), and *Proficient* (glossed as ‘We’re good at what we do’).

The four core characteristics of this client's brand—*Knowledge*, *Trust*, *Community*, and *Value*—were also elaborated visually through the use of what are called Mood Boards. These are essentially collages of images drawn from image banks and existing advertisements, and tacked onto foam boards. For this client, the Mood Board devoted to *Trust* featured photographs of a lighthouse on a rugged coastline, a silver-haired physician with white coat and stethoscope, a gold ingot in Fort Knox, and other images.

One clear characteristic of the Brand Strategy work is the strongly associationist character of all its assumptions about consumers' thought processes. The goal of any branding project is to establish a strong and stable set of associations in the minds and memories of consumers. Strategists work to help client companies achieve consistency across all 'touch-points', so that the consumer's in-store experience (to take a retail example), the experience of the catalogue, the Web site, the call center, and any face-to-face dealings with any representatives of the company, are all consistent and mutually reinforce the brand values. Redundancy here is a virtue, of course, and it is essential that associations be multiplied and reinforced across all media and channels (print, online, in-store, broadcast). The sheer quantity of associations is also important, since to this way of thinking the greater the number of associations in the consumer's mind, the stronger the recall.

But in the context of the Firm's relationships to client companies, the image-rich and lexically elaborated materials on brand 'personality attributes' and associations become mere supporting material (almost a form of 'brochure-ware'). The central document of any branding engagement at the Firm was always something called a 'Brand Brief'. While this document contained a highly condensed statement of the results of brand strategy workshops, it was mostly devoted to the results of design work: it presented one or more recommended colour palettes, a set of recommended font types and sizes, and perhaps a mock-up of a new Web page. It was this document that the client 'signed off on'.

Viewing the division of branding labor at the Firm within a Peircean semiotic framework, one can see that designers—who are charged with the task of 'executing the brand' through a set of templates and colour palettes, fonts, and other design features—are in charge of regimenting the sensuous qualities of the brand, which is to say, in Peircean terms, Firstness (qualisigns; see Keane, this volume). The anthropologists, by contrast, are in charge of regimenting Peircean Secondness: their research identifies the source-identifying indexicalities of the brand, and reveals how—and where—the client's product(s) is embedded in the landscape of consumers' 'pre-existing' activities and routines. The brand strategists, finally, were in charge of regimenting the brand in the realm of Peircean Thirdness: the brand personality, attributes, characteristics, positioning, and so on are calibrated in relation to those of other brands in the client company's competitive landscape, and in relation to the stated aspirations and self-image of the client company's leadership. Brand strategists above all were responsible for ensuring consistency of the brand's qualisign characteristics and indexical associations across all channels and media.

#### 4. Genericide

*Genericide* is a piece of insider slang from the world of intellectual property law (a blend of ‘generic’ and ‘suicide’). This is what befalls a product when its brand name migrates into the language in general—think kleenex, cellophane, aspirin, thermos, all of them once protected trademarks, all of them now generic terms designating product categories (see Fig. 2).

A finding by the Court that the term in question has lost its source-identifying significance, and has in consequence become for consumers a ‘generic’ term for the relevant ‘genus’ or class of products can result in cancellation of the trademark in accordance with provisions of the Lanham Act (15 U.S.C.A. §1064), signed into law in 1946 by President Truman, and amended by the Congress in 1984 (in the Trademark Clarification Act). Such a finding transforms the status of the product in its relationship to other products in its market, and at the same time that of the producer, in relationship to competitors. The name, then, as a protected form of intellectual property, in effect disappears. A finding of genericness, then, takes account of a change that has already taken place in the use of the contested term by the relevant public: it now circulates within the community of users of language in a different way than a brand name, and has acquired a new ‘primary significance’.

On what bases do the Courts arrive at such findings? First, it is important to realise that the Courts have generally employed a four-way classification of trademarks and brand names as ‘(1) generic, (2) descriptive, (3) suggestive, and (4) arbitrary or fanciful, in ascending order of distinctiveness, giving the most protection to arbitrary or fanciful terms and the least to descriptive terms’ (Lockhart, 1999, p. 22).

The case of the brand name *Thermos* typifies the phenomenon, since here the Courts found that even the extraordinary efforts taken by the company to ‘recapture’ the name from generic status proved to no avail:

In *King-Seeley Thermos Co. v. Aladdin Industries, Inc.*, 321 F.2d 577 (2d Cir. 1963), the court held that the term ‘thermos’ had become the generic term for vacuum-insulated bottles and that the original registrant of the trademark had failed to recapture it from its generic status. The court accepted the trial court’s finding that from 1907 to 1923 the trademark registrant had undertaken advertising and public relations campaigns that had tended to make ‘thermos’ a generic term by attempting to popularize the name as the name of the product without including any generic term such as ‘vacuum-insulated bottle’, thereby

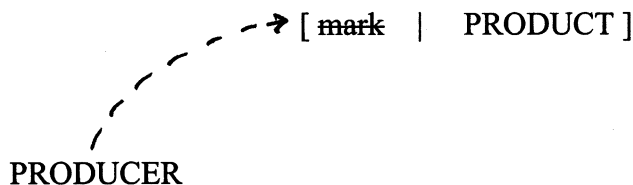


Fig. 2. Genericide.

causing the term to acquire firm roots as a descriptive or generic word. The court also agreed that, although the trademark registrant had thereafter attempted to protect its trademarked status by use of the term ‘vacuum’ or ‘vacuum bottle’ as a generic term, by taking affirmative action to protest generic use of the term ‘thermos’, and, after 1954, by diversifying its product line to cause the brand name ‘Thermos’ to attach to other types of products and by intensified policing activities, the generic use of the term ‘thermos’ had become so firmly impressed in everyday language that these extraordinary efforts had failed to keep the term from falling into the public domain (Lockhart, 1999, p. 29).

Brand strategists and intellectual property lawyers agree that the key to avoiding genericide is always—*always*—to use your brand name as an *adjective* modifying a noun that identifies product class, even to insert the word ‘brand’ itself into the formula, as has been done in the case of ‘*NutraSweet brand sweetener*’. King-Seeley’s attempt to establish ‘vacuum bottle’ as the noun identifying the product class was too little, too late (though they were allowed to continue to capitalize the T of Thermos; it is still a fully protected brand name in Canada).

The question of what counts as evidence is crucial here, since it reveals the wide epistemological gulf that separates the construal of brands by legal institutions as a form of intellectual property from the construal of brands by branding and marketing professionals. In accordance with (§3[a]) of the act, registered trademarks are presumed valid, which means that the party seeking cancellation bears the burden of proof, and must show by a preponderance of the evidence (§3[b]) that the mark has become generic (Lockhart, 1999, p. 22). The party seeking cancellation of the mark ‘must prove what the relevant public for the trademarked product is and show that this public primarily identifies the registered word or term as a generic term rather than as a term identifying the specific source or producer of the article’:

Evidence of genericness may take the form of direct testimony of members of the relevant public or direct evidence of use; consumer survey or poll results; use of the term in books, newspapers, or periodicals or in dictionaries and other texts on contemporary word-usage; use of the term by the trademark registrant or competitors; or any of the preceding together with expert testimony derived from the foregoing sources (ibid.).

A single case involving an anti-capitalist board game resulted in Congress passing the Trademark Clarification Act of 1984, which amended the Lanham Act to include the final two sentences: ‘A registered mark shall not be deemed to be the generic name of goods or services solely because such mark is also used as a name of or to identify a unique product or service. *The primary significance of the registered mark to the relevant public rather than purchaser motivation shall be the test for determining whether the registered mark has become the generic name of goods or services on or in connection with which it has been used*’ (emphasis added).



In *Anti-Monopoly, Inc. v. General Mills Fun Group, Inc.*, 684 F.2d 1316 (9th Cir. 1982), the court found that the term ‘MONOPOLY’ was generic as applied to a board game. Relying largely on consumer survey evidence, the court found that, even though only one producer, the registrant, had ever produced the game, the primary significance of the term was as a type of product, rather than an indication of the source of the product. The court therefore found that the term had become generic and no longer valid (Lockhart, 1999, p. 65).

Congress later rejected this finding of genericness because it was based on evidence about ‘purchaser motivation’ rather than data about the actual usage of the term by a relevant public. Even in this case, where ‘only one producer has ever produced’ the product, ‘so that the product is its own genus and the public necessarily associates the product with that particular producer’, purchaser motivation is ruled out as a basis for determination:

Under this rejected view, the trademark would be valid if a customer asking for the product by its brand name wanted the existing producer’s version of the product because the customer liked the producer’s products but would not be valid if the customer merely wanted the type of product in question and was indifferent as to who produced it .... [T]he amendment makes clear that it is the primary significance of the mark to the relevant public, not consumer motivation, that determines whether a mark has become generic (*ibid.*, p. 29).

Now recall the branding workshops I described above, which in their founding assumptions and in their very procedures are typical of what goes on in branding work generally: in that context, uncovering ‘purchaser motivation’—the very thing ruled out by Congress and the courts as determinative in cases of genericide—is the single focus and *raison d’être* of the work! Market researchers routinely gather groups of *purchasers* together and use focus groups, forced-choice exercises, and so on, to uncover material on the attitudes, motivations, and mental associations in the minds of consumers. At the Firm, brand strategists in fact worked with ‘stakeholders’—i.e. people who had not only ‘purchased’ the product, but in fact had ‘bought into’ the company’s value proposition. By contrast, the significance of the product or service for a ‘relevant public’ was precisely the focus of the anthropological research, which used ethnographic methods to develop an understanding of the wider context of the offering in the lives and experiences of possible customers.

Anyone who can show through the use of ‘naturalistic’ observational and other empirical techniques that the speech practices of a definable (sociological) ‘community’ have in fact shifted—that the ‘extension’ (in the philosophic sense) of the term *kleenex*, for example, now includes a whole group of similar products from many different producers—has shown that the name is circulating independently of the particular product (type) to which it was first attached. The essence of a finding of genericide is exactly this.

## 5. Ingredient branding

*Ingredient branding* is a special case of so-called ‘co-branding’—think NutraSweet, the Woolmark label, and Intel Inside. In the context of technology and electronics, ingredient brands have been defined as ‘input components which are exposed to the consumer by [means of] a brand’ (Norris, 1993). Some of this is captured in Fig. 3 below.

One branding consultant has nicely captured this phenomenon: ‘Ingredient branding, as the name suggests, is the strategy of both borrowing from and lending to the cachet of an end product by positioning your [ingredient] brand as one of the essential components that makes the end product worth purchasing’ (George n.d.). I will return to this point below.

I want to concentrate here on cases in which the ingredient brand (e.g. NutraSweet) cannot be experienced by the consumer as an independent product, because it is hidden inside another product (Diet Pepsi). In order to ‘consume’ the Intel microprocessor chip, one must consume (i.e. use) the computer in which it is embedded; in order to consume NutraSweet, one must drink the can of Diet Pepsi that contains it (see Fig. 3).

In this case, the marks, logo(s), or brand name are the only aspect of the ingredient product that remain tangible and available to the senses of consumers. The sensorial inaccessibility of the ingredient product is seen by many branding strategists as a problem: consumers, it seems, need help overcoming the ‘intangibility’ problem, and this requires the company offering the product to make special efforts to communicate with consumers. One commentator enumerates several of these:

- ‘the concept of the ingredient must be explained more thoroughly’
- ‘the marketer must visualize the function’ and features of the ingredient for the benefit of consumers, ‘and explain why the ingredient is crucial for the choice of host product’—TV commercials and the slogan ‘The Computer Inside’ were effective for Intel
- ‘Companies using a corporate brand on many different products can probably benefit from the experienced quality of tangible products being transferred to invisible components. One example is Bosch that uses its brand on tools as well as on components in cars’
- ‘However, . . . consumers are more easily perplexed if the brand is exposed in the wrong environment. Therefore, Intel has decided only to expose the Intel Inside logo on PCs and not on other products equipped with Intel microprocessors’ (Batra & Ljungberg, 1998, p. 60).

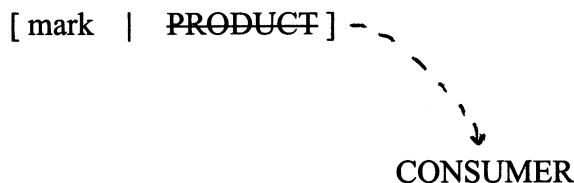


Fig. 3. Ingredient branding.

George (n.d.) also addresses the apparent problem posed by the ‘invisibility’ or intangibility of the product associated with the ingredient brand:

The customer must understand the functional benefits of the brand before deeper, more emotional associations are created. The functional benefits should be clear, credible, and easily identifiable, leveraging the ingredient to simplify a complex purchase process. Interaction, education, and recognition help ensure that the end-customer is aware of your ingredient and understands the associated benefits. How can this be achieved when your brand is just a piece of the puzzle? Some creative companies have experienced success with these techniques:

- Allow the end-customer to experience the brand visually. Most successful Ingredient brands have used a symbol—such as the Nutrasweet swirl and the Dolby ‘double D’.
- Encourage or underscore interaction with the brand. For example, Dolby noise reduction technology has to be actively turned on and off on a cassette player. Therefore, customers have for years actively engaged the Dolby brand with tangible proof of its benefits.
- Develop the brand as having an implicit seal of approval, which can be done visually. The Intel symbol looks like a check mark in circles as though to emphasize that a necessary component in the PC has been verified. It can also be done through associations of reassurance and comfort. The Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval has long been represented as standing for quality, for example (George, n.d.)

Brand strategists have noticed several consequences that seem to flow from this curious situation: the ingredient brand can ‘leapfrog’ over the host brand or OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer), and address the consumer directly. The proprietary name and marks of the ingredient brand can be reinterpreted by consumers, who treat them as if they were a ‘seal of approval’ vouching for or endorsing the OEM or host product. For these reasons, the branding of ingredients comes more and more to resemble the branding of a service, according to several commentators.

Ingredient branding, then, introduces certain vulnerabilities: the ‘alliance’ or combination of one branded product with another (e.g. with one as an ingredient of another) is inherently unstable, leading, for example, to the construal by consumers of the ingredient-brand marks as identifying a *service* that is somehow embedded in the (OEM) product:

the problem of making the ingredient tangible to the consumer is similar to the marketing of a service. In today’s market of mobile communication, network operators are starting to use the ingredient branding strategy. Orange Telecom, a British GSM operator, has from the beginning demanded that the Orange logo should be exposed on phones connected to the company’s network. Recently, the Swedish network operator Europolitan has adopted the same concept by selling a private labeled cellular phone. Exposing the service brand logo on the hardware

gives the impression to the user that the intangible service is a physically integrated component of the phone and may increase [consumers'] reluctance to change network operator (Batra and Ljungberg, 1998, pp. 59–60).

Strategists have also described a phenomenon called 'image transfer':

When being exposed together with leading OEMs, the ingredient brand takes advantage of their premium image. Because the premium OEMs are [less] vulnerable to punishment from consumers, the alliance signals that the ingredient is of a high quality. This means that the premium [brand of the] OEM serves as a warranty for the unobservable quality of the ingredient. If the ingredient brand is frequently exposed together with leading host brands, their premium image may eventually be transferred to the ingredient. . . In other words, when the ingredient brand becomes a seal of approval, it means that the ingredient manufacturer makes profits from trading the image of premium OEM brands to less known OEMs (Batra and Ljungberg, 1998, pp. 61–62).

## 6. 'Viral marketing'

'Viral marketing' is a name applied to a group of family resemblant marketing strategies, some of them quite old, though the term itself dates from the height of the Internet bubble economy. According to one of the venture capitalists who launched it, viral marketing amounts to little more than 'network-enhanced word-of-mouth'. Word of mouth is one of the oldest and most effective of all branding and marketing strategies (see Rosen, 2000). The beauty of 'viral marketing' in the Internet economy was that it turned every user into 'an involuntary salesperson'.

Viral marketing situates the brand directly in the context of what Say would call 'immaterial products', products consumed in the very moment they are produced (see Fig. 4). Or so the story goes.

Around 1996, 'viral marketing' was being positioned as the 'killer app[lication]' that would finally awaken the vast potential of the Web to be a 'push medium' (Madsen, 1996). In viral marketing, the brand seems to underwrite (or sponsor) acts of communication, transforming users of the service—i.e. authors of email messages sent over the network—into *de facto* product endorsers.

[Viral marketing's] original inspiration came from the pattern of adoption of Hotmail, beginning with its launch in 1996. Tim Draper persuaded the company to include a promotional pitch for its Web-based email with a clickable URL in every outbound message sent by a Hotmail user. Therein lay one of the critical elements of viral marketing: Every customer becomes an involuntary salesperson simply by using the product. The product is fundamentally a communications product, and the marketing piggybacks on the message. Viral marketing is more powerful than third-party advertising because it conveys an implied endorsement from a friend.

Although clearly delineated as an advertisement, the spillover marketing benefits are powerful—much like the efficacy of radio commercials read by your favorite DJ. The recipients of a Hotmail message learn that the product works and that their friend is a customer. A key element of consumer branding is usage affiliation: Do I want to be a member of the group—in this case, my friends—that uses the product? (Jurvetson, 1998).

How can Hotmail achieve these parasitic effects, in which the consumer ‘voices’ an implied endorsement of the product in the very act of consuming it? Partly it is because the main product, the text of the email message, is in fact produced by the consumer, and consumed in the act of exchange.

Almost off-handedly, the author reveals a crucial bit of ‘ethnographic’ insight, namely that ‘Hotmail was typically used as a secondary or personal [email] account for communication to a close coterie of friends’. This knowledge about consumers’ usage patterns—and thereby about the circulation of email messages bearing the clickable Hotmail URL as a set of brand marks—was undoubtedly of crucial importance.

Indeed, the original plan was for the clickable Hotmail URL to be literally included in the email message, disguised as a ‘PS’!

In our next meeting, Tim Draper suggested that they should append an advertising message to every outbound email: ‘P.S. Get your free email at Hotmail’. It was very contentious at the time. Would users balk at having this automatic addition to the content of their private messages? Hotmail tempered the idea by clearly demarcating the promotional plug, and removing the ‘P.S.’ (Jurvetson, 1998).<sup>4</sup>

One commentator puts this phenomenon into a broader context:

Interaction is a deliberately chosen word, because people are connecting with brands in an increasingly two-way relationship... Brands that thrive are no longer simply trying to publicise themselves in a monolithic way, they are inviting consumers to join them in creating meaning and being a part of the process. Interaction is key; e.g. the computer games which have hidden levels or secret passwords for dedicated gamers; or the Britney Spears re-mixer which breaks down her songs into individual elements like drums, bass, her voice, etc. and then allows you to remix it how you prefer it (whilst ensuring everything remains in time so you can’t have a bad mix); or Nike, who allow you to remix the colour schemes of their trainers online and brand them with your name. Consumers are becoming producers, which some herald as the next stage of the consumer revolution—mass-customisation. ‘Passonability’ is key in a multi-channel communication world full of phone calls, emails and text messages—if brands can

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Hotmail grew its audience from zero to 12 million members in 18 months, more rapidly than any company in any media in the history of the world. Fair enough—this is the Internet, after all. But it did so with an advertising budget of \$50,000—enough for some college newspaper ads and a billboard... From an epidemiological perspective, it was as if Zeus sneezed over the planet’ (Jurvetson, 1998).

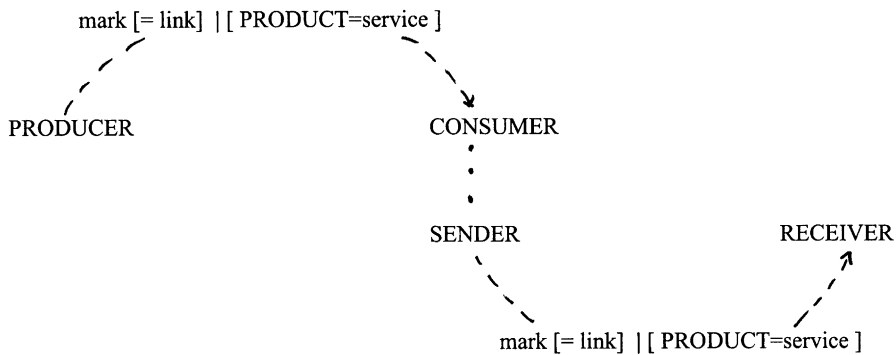


Fig. 4. Viral marketing.

involve people in playful ways which are passed on and disseminated organically, they are far more likely to be successful... Brands which are perceived to enhance our relationships and be worth sharing with friends are the ones which will prosper (Hodder, 2002, p. 16).

Design, it turns out, is significant not only as the name of one of the three ‘disciplines’ centrally involved in branding work at the ‘New Economy’ firm where I worked (along with brand strategy and anthropology). It is also the name of an overarching value system that can be invoked to authorize, and evaluate, the whole enterprise:

To design is basically to give instructions, to create a plan that can be followed in a manufacturing process of some kind. One result of designing has always been multiple copies. Another has been objects of one kind or another: a book, a magazine, a newspaper, a computer, a dress, a toaster, a car... The emergence of interactive communication technologies, the Internet and especially its public/consumer face—the Web—changed all that. While design is very close to the surface in Web based, Internet-mediated information... its manifestation is not an object, thing, product, or anything tangible, in fact. The outcome of designing in and for these new interactive technologies... is insubstantial, immaterial, abstract, and elusive—but profoundly important. Some herald the Internet as a disruptive, transforming technology as significant as the movable type perfected by Johannes Gutenberg... (Brown, 2000, pp. 2–3).

## 7. Conclusion

In *genericide*, consumers in a sense ‘take over’ the brand: when the brand name becomes a mere word of the language, the product is transformed into a mere commodity, and the producer ceases to be identified as its source. A finding of genericness takes account of a change in the way that the *brand name* circulates within the

community of users (construed as the ‘relevant public’ for the goods or services in question), and shows that the erstwhile brand name has in fact begun to circulate independently of the product to which it was first attached.

In *ingredient branding*, one brand (the ingredient) appropriates to itself whatever ‘cachet’ has accumulated around the host brand, and then ‘lends it back’ to that or other (potential) host brands. Ingredient brands and host brands, then, circulate in part independently, making it possible for one brand (that of the ingredient) to appropriate some of the value of a prestigious host brand, and lend it to lesser host brands.

*Viral marketing* as exemplified by Hotmail involves the branding of events of communication: now the service provider ‘sponsors’ and underwrites (literally) the act of communicating, and the sender of the email message lends an involuntary ‘personal endorsement’ to the brand. The attached brand marks put the addressee (the recipient of the email message) just a few ‘clicks’ away from becoming another ‘involuntary spokesperson’. In the act of consuming the service, then, the sender both produces the product (i.e., writes or encodes the text of the email message), and circulates it (by sending it to a friend).

What these three cases show is that ‘brand’ as a semiotic phenomenon is centered upon an inherently unstable composite of elements—the brand name, and the product, service, or ‘experience’—each of which has its own semiotic and expressive potentialities, each of which is vulnerable to different types of semiotic vulnerability and contingency (Keane, this volume). What might be the wider implications of such a finding?

The notion that brands provide a new basis for social relationships among strangers in contemporary society has found a voice in several places (Lipovetsky, 1994; Giddens, 1994; cf. Warner, 2002, Hodder, 2002), and perhaps never so articulately as in these words of Andy Warhol:

What’s great about America is that this country started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching the TV and see Coca-Cola, and you can know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke too. A Coke is a Coke, and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All Cokes are the same, and all Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum on the corner knows it and you know it’ (quoted in Keough, 1994, at p. 31).

But so far as I know very little ethnographic evidence has ever been adduced to support this view.

In the process of *producing* brands, branding professionals attempt to capture, and turn to their advantage, a set of fairly recondite—even, ineffable—facts about how brands *circulate* in society, even as they try to create the conditions that allow brands to circulate. So circulation is fundamentally part of the production process, even if not quantifiably so. The use of ethnographic methods represents an effort to uncover and understand likely patterns of circulation and consumption, *in advance* of production, every bit as much as efforts to develop the ‘brand personality’ are attempts further to define them.



But a large part of the phenomenon of ‘brand’ remains beyond the grasp of all these experts. Branding professionals freely admit that ‘intangible factors’, while they are of crucial importance,

are, however, very difficult to estimate even individually. When a number of such elements is blended together to form that unique creation, a branded product, evaluation of these separate but interrelated constituents is far from easy. Prior to a brand’s launch, measuring its likely success is notoriously difficult. Even after launch it may not be possible to ascertain with any certainty the reasons for the success or failure of a brand (Murphy, 1998, p. 2).

A startling admission. My argument here is that because of the inherent semiotic vulnerability of brands, we may need to rethink some of post-modernism’s fundamental assumptions about the materiality of the commodity form, and the immateriality of the simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1988 [1968]). We are accustomed to thinking about *production*, *circulation*, and *consumption* as three discrete ‘moments’ or cycles. In a world where the phenomenon of ‘brand’ is so pervasive and important, it becomes very difficult to tell where one leaves off and another begins—so we may need to rethink those relationships, too.

Brands and branding are now hegemonic in every sense of that term. They are very powerful and economically significant—but they are also very fragile, as I have tried to show. Brands today are a primary medium through which consumers make contact with the market, and they are a primary means through which corporations extend themselves into the world inhabited by consumers. Their ubiquity and centrality in public life are definitional of the contemporary moment in global culture. Are any of the forms of semiotic vulnerability identified in this narrow disquisition on brands also more broadly characteristic of the contemporary macroeconomic order?

US Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan pointed to some of these vulnerabilities in testimony before Congress on 27 February 2002:

[t]he very technologies that appear to be the main cause of our apparent increased flexibility and resiliency may also be imparting different forms of vulnerability that could intensify or be intensified by a business cycle. From one perspective, the ever-increasing proportion of our GDP that represents conceptual as distinct from physical value added may actually have lessened cyclical volatility. In particular, the fact that concepts cannot be held as inventories means a greater share of GDP is not subject to a type of dynamics that amplifies cyclical swings. But an economy in which concepts form an important share of valuation has its own vulnerabilities. As the recent events surrounding Enron have highlighted, a firm is inherently fragile if its value added emanates more from conceptual as distinct from physical assets. A physical asset, whether an office building or an automotive assembly plant, has the capability of producing goods even if the reputation of the managers of such facilities falls under a cloud. The rapidity of Enron’s decline is an effective illustration of the vulnerability of a firm whose market value largely rests on capitalized reputation. The

physical assets of such a firm comprise a small proportion of its asset base. Trust and reputation can vanish overnight. A factory cannot (Greenspan, 2002).

The anthropologist Jules Henry, writing in 1964, presciently addressed some of these same issues from the vantage point of young consumers, who are now the preferred target for many of the branding messages of the contemporary world:

Against the reality of economic vulnerability private enterprise has erected the international corporate network, whose primary object is the attainment of such power that it will be invulnerable to economic uncertainty; ... Yet even such power, unmatched in the history of our culture, is still inadequate to convince us that the economy is here to stay; and for this reason people must be taught to buy as they breathe; and the average person must be trained to feel a sense of pecuniary suffocation if he does not spend much of what he earns. A consequence of this is the suburban Saturday at the department store, where teenagers and younger go to while away the week-end, have rendezvous and perhaps pick up a free sample... Department stores have become the new museums of our culture. Not the Art Museum or the Museum of Natural History, but the Museum of Dry Goods is the greatest centre of culture of our time. These children are learning much more that is worthwhile in the department store, much more that will save the culture from disaster, than they would in a conventional museum; they are learning how to buy, how to ransom us from the catastrophe of a vulnerable economic system (Henry, 1973 [1964], pp. 84–85).

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**Robert E. Moore** in 2002–2003 was a Visiting Lecturer and Research Associate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago, and an Instructor at the Institute of Design (IIT), also in Chicago. He has served on the faculty of the Department of Anthropology and Linguistics Program at Reed College (Portland, OR), and in the Department of Anthropology at New York University. He has conducted ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork in American Indian Reservation communities in the northwestern US, and has written a series of articles on language obsolescence, narrative performance, the semiotics of dress, and language use in contemporary 'corporate culture'.