

“The Logos Fight back”

(taken from nettime mailing list)

by James Harkin
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The culture jammers tried to subvert the big brand names. But the smart advertisers now use guerrilla tactics themselves, writes James Harkin

In a recent newspaper interview, Kalle Lasn was interrogated about Adbusters, the Canadian anti-advertising magazine that he founded. The dialogue went like this:

Do you think that Adbusters isn't a brand?

KL Well, I think that you can see it as a brand, but that's not the dominant thing about it from my perspective or the perspective of the 15 people that, at the moment, work at Adbusters.

But you did buy time on CNN . . .

KL Yes, we did.

If you tell me about it in the context of an interview that will be printed in a newspaper, that is about you as the editor of Adbusters, what you're doing is building your brand, you're building equity in your brand.

KL No I'm not.

You are.

KL I know that is one of the things that is happening, too, but I personally, right now, am not building my brand.

Maybe not consciously.

KL Yes, not consciously. I'm basically trying to be a spontaneous, authentic human being who is talking to another human being. The exchange highlights one of the dilemmas facing the movement against brands. If the raison d'etre of Adbusters is to combat the white noise of the messaging industry, how does Lasn justify a special claim on our senses for its anti-advertising propaganda? Or, to put it another way: what exactly is it that distinguishes an anti-brand from a mainstream commercial brand?

The argument is revealing, because the boundaries between mainstream brands and the anti-branding activists are becoming increasingly blurred. Kalle Lasn's Adbusters is a magazine produced by radical advertisers for an audience of media workers jaded with what they see as the "ethical neutrality" of the advertising industry; its artwork is designed to flip the meaning of advertising campaigns so that those campaigns end up carrying an unintended message.

The magazine, beautifully produced, has created its own distinctive aesthetic and boasts a global circulation of 100,000: the highlights include a vodka bottle embossed with "Absolut Nonsense", and a spoof on a Tommy Hilfiger campaign featuring a herd of sheep and the tag line "Tommy follow the Herd". While the Adbusters are busy flipping meanings and subverting messages, their colleagues in the Culture Jammers Network - the paramilitary wing of the movement - are hard at work using guerrilla tactics to play companies at their own marketing game. Derived in part from the situationist pranksterism of Guy Debord - and the idea that images

lifted out of their immediate context can help shock people awake from their consumerist slumber - the practice of culture jamming involves the street-level subversion of brand messages, the parodying of advertisements, the altering of billboards and the publishing of satirical ads. Culture jammers' initiatives have included organising a competition to plant a tree or a flower in the most unlikely urban space, descending on malls to throw money at bemused shoppers and sponsoring an annual "TV Turnoff Week" - an event that its organisers claim attracts the attention of six million people around the world.

But the anti-advertisers have a problem: increasingly, mainstream advertising reaches into their creative armoury and helps itself. The online bank Egg has recently flaunted its anti-advertising credentials by paying Stephen Hawking to parody his previous ads and explain why he's back doing another endorsement. Sprite has been using anti-advertising techniques for several years: its "image is nothing, thirst is everything" and "don't believe the hype" tag lines are designed to reassure its savvy teenage consumers that drinking Sprite will do nothing other than quench your thirst. The ads work because of their sneering rejection of the importance of advertising; they appeal to advertisers who are desperate to reach out to a generation of cynical and hostile young consumers. As with anti-advertising, so with the guerrilla tactics of the culture jammers. Baulking at the huge expense and phenomenal clutter of the mainstream media, advertisers increasingly supplement their mass-marketing campaigns with leaner and more focused interventions in a host of subcultures and informal social networks - and they find that "guerrilla marketing" strategies borrowed from the antis are ideal for the job. Guerrilla marketing involves direct, apparently spontaneous and frequently risqué interventions in daily life in order to raise consciousness about a product and to manufacture a "buzz". In this country, it is the business of the London agency Cake, whose street-level stunts target the instinctively rebellious youth market: for example, Cake has painted a whole street red to celebrate Barbie's 40th birthday. Some guerrilla activists, such as the graffiti gang the TATS Crew, have migrated en masse to the other side and now create street advertising for companies such as Coca-Cola. Anti-corporate activism is on the increase in most advanced industrialised countries, as witnessed by the consumer boycott of Exxon and the demonstrations in Seattle and Prague. The most articulate voice of the anti-brand movement, Naomi Klein, the author of *No Logo*, argues that the multinationals' superbrands eat up our culture and our lifestyles. Brands that used to tell us something about their products are now, according to Klein, free-floating entities waiting to hijack ideas and innovations as they arise within popular culture. The end result of all this colonisation of our mental space, predicts Klein, will be a popular backlash against the ubiquitous brands.

Brand managers have taken the view that popular resistance to their messages will remain isolated and specific. But those isolated protests have stoked a more general suspicion of multinationals and their influence over our lives. Anxiety about the harmful effects of corporate activities - pollution or low third-world wages, for example - has put marketers and public relations experts on a permanent war footing in which "crisis management" is becoming the watchword. But if branding is part of the problem, it is also sure to be a central ingredient of the solution. Various defined as a "promise", an "identity", a "commitment" or a "belief", the concept of a brand is so elastic and so intangible that it can be manipulated to mean whatever marketers want it to mean. While there is nothing in a simple logo that can grow an economy or add any value to the products that a company sells, astute branding can shore up and augment a company's share of the existing market. Increasingly unwilling to gain competitive advantage by investing in expensive new plant and machinery, and finding themselves unable to compete on price alone, companies instead put their money into brands. They want "share of mind" and "share of heart".

But branding will undergo subtle changes in its form. On 27 March, for example, the Independent banished all advertising for one day and printed only news and features.

This was merely an exercise in "silent" and non-intrusive branding, sponsored by Bradford & Bingley. We can also expect to see more cryptic branding, where the brand is built less around a company logo than around combinations of colours and gestures that are properly recognised only by those in their target audiences - think of the impenetrable collages that tobacco advertisers have been forced to introduce, or the trademark wink that greets readers of the monthly style mag i-D.

The most promising way for companies to adapt is to reinvent themselves as ethical brands - concerned spokespersons within civil society, rather than companies that exist simply to maximise profit. Faced with setbacks in its European operation and the perception of "cultural imperialism" in its brand identity, Coca-Cola has already decided to reinvent itself as a corporate citizen. Last year, its chief executive, Douglas Daft, told the Financial Times that Coke's new pitch will be to "lead as model citizens". "In every community where we sell our brand," he explained, "we must remember we do not do business in markets; we do business in society." Many brands, according to Brand Strategy magazine, "are now openly talking about a second bottom line: the social one. Many more will need to talk about it in the future. If they do, then maybe buying a brand won't be about being seduced but will be asking to having a passionate affair with your wife - pleasure without guilt."

In a recent interview, Martin Sorrell of the leading global advertising and communications group WPP argued that marketers ignored such movements at their peril. He warned that "the [anti-branding] movement is a serious and important one, not a passing fad, and one that our clients have to take notice of". Sorrell admitted that he had not read Naomi Klein's book but, if you are wondering why it is a heavy seller, and why such a long and serious (though readable) book is so well known among young people, the answer is that a high proportion of its buyers work in the advertising industry.

At the forefront of moves toward ethical branding are those companies that have been forced to react to consumer discontent about the harmful effects of their activities: big tobacco, for example, and the oil companies. But other multinationals have been quick to follow suit: Starbucks has associated its brand with support for "fair trade" and eco-friendly coffee cups; Citibank with giving credit to lower-income clients; Nokia with learning disability; and McDonald's with community football. In his new book, *Citizen Brands: putting society at the heart of your business*, Michael Willmott, the co-director of the independent think-tank the Future

Foundation, forecasts that ethical branding will soon become one of the most crucial determinants of business success. The new wave of citizen branding, according to Willmott, will not be about corporate benefaction, but about "a company showing that it understands societal issues and cares about them". The result, he concludes, "is likely to be more a roller-coaster ride for companies with more brand volatility as consumer cynicism increases and loyalty decreases . . . It will not be so much 'no brands' as an ever-changing pastiche of brand as people switch in and out on the basis of ethical or other concerns."

Marian Salzman, a highly regarded American trend-spotter and the global director of strategy and planning for the ad agency Euro RSCG, is in broad agreement with that. Today, Salzman argues, "a brand is only as powerful as its total package. Consumers judge brands more holistically, that is, totally - and expect a company to be a good citizen, a good employer, a fair and not excessive marketer. Our research shows that consumers will go out of their way to support brands which are completely on their page in terms of ethics, causes, considerations." Finding the right ethical connection, however, is going to be a competitive business. "Highlight the right cause and you're still in the game," Salzman warns. "Highlight the wrong cause and you lose."

Talk like this is usually the cue for a discussion about the infinitely supple nature of consumer capitalism and its ability to accommodate anything that it can turn to its advantage. But there is also a peculiarly contemporary inversion at work here. As politics has become the stuff of focus groups, PR spin and endless rebranding of institutions (such as schools), personalities and parties, marketing itself takes on the techniques and values of politics. Traditional modes of solidarity, through trade unions, churches and political parties, are in steep decline. So people search for new forms of politics and new sources of belief. At the same time, the modern corporation, uncertain about the future direction of its business and determined to hold on to its consumers, is finding that ethical branding is an ideal strategy with which to promote customer loyalty. In the hands of the brand managers, a political vacuum becomes a gap in the market.

What this suggests is that the war against brands has already been won, that the brand activists have been kicking against an open door. Naomi Klein told me that she has been approached by about half a dozen ad agencies to come and present to their executives. Her policy is always to decline. But how long before companies that now use the techniques and ideas of activists start to hire those same anti-brand campaigners to help reposition their brand identity? Some of the more astute anti-brand activists are aware that they have been overplaying their hand, that the war against brands is a mirage and that the presence of a Nike swoosh on a pair of trainers does not, on its own, turn us into walking automatons. No matter: the business of branding will continue to be pervasive, but the next big thing is going to be an unseemly tussle for a share of our conscience.

James Harkin is a trend forecaster for the Social Issues research Centre in Oxford and a consultant to global intelligence projects at HeadlightVision