

Brands as ideology

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How many of your views and experiences are shaped by corporations with their commercial agendas?

Every product represents two types of utilities. The first is what could be called its fundamental utility. Fundamental utility refers to the core function that the product is expected to serve. Most hammers do nearly the same things, and most smartphones perform nearly the same functions as each other.

However, not all products are purchased purely to satisfy fundamental utility needs. A second form of utility is also contained in the product, which may be referred to as experiential utility. Experiential utility includes both tangible and intangible aspects. Tangible aspects include, for instance, product design choices that manifest in a particular user experience with the product. For instance, the pixel density that one smartphone maker uses on its screens versus another is the outcome of a specific design vision. Intangible aspects of utility include a variety of things that are only in the mind of the user – the ideas of meaning and connection that the user associates with the product and its makers.

It is interesting to note here that fundamental utility is easy to replicate. Tangible experiential utility is somewhat harder to, and may offer first movers advantages for a while as competitors catch up. Intangible experiential utility is the hardest to replicate, as ideologies are hard to change since their ideologues are deeply invested in them and therefore need something truly revolutionary to make a switch.

A current example in India could be Patanjali Ayurved's disruption of the FMCG market. The fundamental core of the brand here seems to be an ideology of "Indian-ness" which is positioned in opposition to western brands. This intangible utility in turn feeds into a tangible experiential utility expressed in design choices – namely, the focus on ayurvedic herbal active ingredients in most of their products, as well as pricing. It would be interesting to see which aspect the consumer accords higher weightage – the ideological, or the tangible.

Ideology as individual meaning

One could thus say that a product makes a sort of evolutionary journey from commodity to brand as it moves from mere fundamental utility to tangible experiential utility to intangible experiential utility.

It starts off as a mere basket of features, and ends up as a sort of icon of meaning, a sort of beacon indicating a particular world view. Thus the product-to-brand transition is really a transition from features to ideology.

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Consumers gravitate to ideologies they identify with. In a world where a lot of ideological battles in other spheres seem settled, outdated, or in some cases simply alienating, the idea of representing one's world view by being a devotee of, for instance, a technology company, or a movie franchise seems quite natural.

Thus, for instance, we have branded marathons in cities, whereby residents try to connect with some larger meaning of being citizens of a city, or connect with a cause beyond their routine lives, while inadvertently becoming vehicles for a brand's agenda of eventually selling something.

Questions of ethics

The pervasiveness with which brands attempt to influence consumers through the mechanism of ideology raises ethical questions. First among these is that ultimately brands are driven by the goal of achieving sales of goods and services. Thus any ideology they suggest (and our resulting affiliation with them) must be tested against their desire to sell something versus a true stake in the ground.

The second issue is that we receive brand messages almost involuntarily, and regardless of our age, background, gender, and such. The modern world offers few experiences of any sort, either on a screen or out in the real world, without a brand entering into in some way, and associating its own values with that of the experience.

Connecting both these issues are the extremely sophisticated ways marketers often use to manipulate emotions, and even rationality of the consumer.

Post-ideology world

It is hard to imagine a world where someone is not trying to sell us something all the time. Brands are not the only offenders. A 'white label' brand agenda-free world is utopian. It must be noted, though, that there are still many experiential arenas left in life where brand ideology is not as pervasive.

The internet and social media already offer a wide array of unbranded experiences created by individual users, where no brand agenda is served. Regardless, it is important to consider the consequences of the pervasiveness of brands, particularly their ideological agendas in the formation of our world view.

Otherwise we risk becoming consuming automatons serving the endless needs of the powerful.

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(This article was published in the Business Line print edition dated July 8, 2016)

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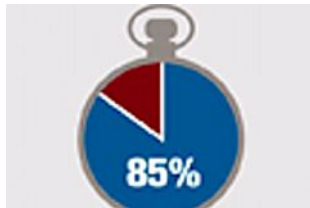
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