Do brands make life too easy?

Here is a definition of brand: not the first and certainly not the last. By creating powerful ideas, brands help us work out who we are and how we fit into the world we inhabit. They begin as simple propositions, and the ments which are inter-related but compete with each other. The ideal everyone agrees is the same inside and outside organisations: to balance paradoxes so that each element gets the same attention: employees as well as clients; long term as well as short term objectives; responsibility ched at its annual meeting in Davos) is to balance collective and individual interests. In practice not easy.

Innovation is a rare balancing act. When a company says it's innovative, it claims to have mastered both collaboration and dissent. Innovation is hard because these always

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successful ones become the IBM or Adidas or Louis Vuitton label we willingly attach to a much bigger personal story.

It is a long time since brands were only about products and services. Now they have to express corporate purpose too. It's not just what you're buying, they say: it's what you're buying into. This is an intelligent response to consumers who want more. They want less salt and fat and sugar in their Happy Meals, but they also want it to taste the same as before. Shareholders want growth, but they also need it to be sustainable. These demands are difficult for companies to solve, because they are often contradictory. Fortunately, there are marketing people who can create brands big enough to provide all the answers. But perhaps even the most brilliant marketers should remind themselves that these contradictions are hard for everyone.

A contradiction is a paradox. Hundreds of them are woven into organisational life, and it has always been this way. They have two eleas well as profit. Meanwhile, in a report published in January, 150 global CEOs testified that they struggle to solve these paradoxes in practice. The most striking feature of the report is that the CEOs spoke freely because they were guaranteed anonymity. Privately they can accept that they find these paradoxes difficult, often impossible. In public, however, the convention is to tell the world that you have already achieved the ideal. For example…

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The point of the World Economic Forum (the CEO Report was launfight each other. If the organisation does collaboration but not dissent, then it will just repeat its old successes, usually with diminishing success. But when the culture is individualistic, there will be plenty of dissent but collaboration will suffer. No wonder innovation happens less often than it's claimed.

After BP's oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, its 'Sustainability Review' declared: "BP's mission for 2011 and beyond is to grow value for our shareholders in a way that is safe and sustainable." Growth and sustainability? More easily said than done.

Brands rush to give customers what they want - before their competitors get there first. You want it decaffeinated? Of course. Skimmed milk? Mocha? Syrup? Easy! And World Peace on top? You've come to the right place! The entertaining philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, has suggested that Starbucks now includes a clear conscience in the price of each cup of coffee – thanks to all the good things the company does. Žižek argues that consumers are loyal to the brand because it delivers pleasure and, at the same time, absolution for any guilt about this pleasure.

Now, it makes perfect sense as a competitive strategy to tell the consumer: "Just choose us and we will take care of everything for you." And it is obviously good that Starbucks uses Fairtrade coffee, has a Shared Planet Program, and that one in 600 British cows is a Starbucks cow.

But if CEOs struggle with this stuff because the balancing act is genuinely difficult, should consumers not struggle also? Brands are here to simplify. The ones that offer great experiences and social responsibility are probably better for us than those that do not. But I can't help fearing that they are making consumers schizophrenic. We feed their appetite for simplicity, and they're grateful. On the other hand, all this simplicity makes them wonder if something has been hidden from them. All this feels like parents protecting children. Just wait until they become teenagers.

by Jamie Priestley

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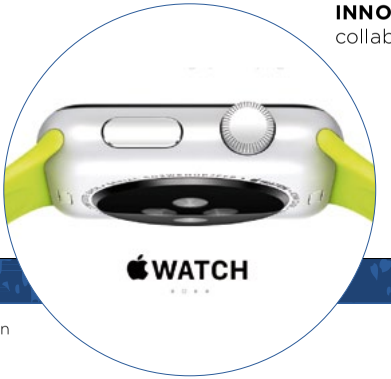
INNOVATION =
collaboration + dissent



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