

If Brands Reveal Who We Are, I'm a Sara Lee Pound Cake

By Sally Reed Howald

You can say you **love** brands. You can say you **hate** brands. But you can't say you're immune to the messages brand name products send to consumers.

I teach advertising classes at Webster University in St. Louis and I'm always surprised to learn how many students believe they are unaffected by marketing messages. In my experience, this is partly a matter of pride. "I don't fall for that marketing hype," some students say. Or, "I'm smarter than that." And yet, over time, I've come to believe that if you think you're not affected by marketing messages, you're just not thinking.

For starters, you can't escape brands. You drive a brand name car. You drink a brand name brand beverage. You talk on a brand name cell phone. (What's really scary is you probably do all three at once.)

Even your dog eats brand name dog food. "We feed him Iams," some dog owners proudly boast. Why do they bother? Because theoretically the "Iams" brand means these dog owners love their dog more than the heartless dolts who buy a no-name brand at a discount store.

Brands speak volumes about us. They reveal how much money we make, what we value, and how we were raised. Brands act as a short-cut to our life story. They're part of our cultural DNA.

At a recent neighborhood party, we all shared stories about our relatives. One woman talked about her German grandmother, another man was proud his parents came from Japan. The new couple on the block was proud of their lineage too: "We're Chevy people," they said.

Brands define us, unite us, and divide us. You can even use brands to test a friendship. Ask a buddy if he or she prefers Miracle Whip or Hellmann's mayonnaise. Then, vehemently disagree with your friend's answer and say you prefer the opposite brand. Chances are you'll see more passion about the merits of a gooey condiment than a political candidate.

"YOU LIKE WHAT?" your friend asks. "YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING? And all this time I thought I *knew* you."

The look of shock. The palatable sense of betrayal. You would think the police found a decaying body buried in your backyard. And all you did was disagree with your friend's choice of mayonnaise. How dare you! Now try again:

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P. 2

Pepsi or Coke?
Target or Wal-Mart?
Apple or Dell?

Marketers make sure our brand preference says a lot about who we are (or who we *think* we are). And our culture encourages us to make sweeping judgments about people based on the brands they buy.

A great example is the popular TV ad campaign for Apple computers, which pits a middle-aged, pudgy, bald guy against a young hipster in tight jeans.

If you're wearing an advertising "decoder ring" you've figured out that people who use PCs are unattractive, out-of-shape, have lousy sex lives, and probably vote Republican. By contrast, Mac people are (you guessed it) COOL!

Okay, I get it. But somehow I still suspect the hipster lives in his parent's basement and the pudgy bald guy has just paid off his ski condo in Vail. (That's my call.)

Ask college students about brands of vodka and everyone has an opinion. Several scream out: "Grey Goose!" Others insist: Kettle One! Skyy! Or Absolut! (Note: Very few people in my class are over 21 and I would guess most can't afford to pay for these high priced brands.) Yet the discussion is combative and heated. Even a guy in the back row who slept through the first 40 minutes of class is defending his favorite brand of vodka.

Some say the look of the bottle is important. Others claim the difference lies in the taste. Yet when a blind taste test was conducted with young "vodka snobs" on ABC's show *20/20*, the group's **least** favorite vodka was Grey Goose. Exactly the brand many testers originally said they preferred. (<http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=3201973>)

Whether it's vodka, computers, shampoo, dental floss, or indie bands, everyone is a snob about something. Recently a student in one of my classes confessed that her six-year-old sister cries if her family buys anything other than Fiji brand water. She loves the pink flower on the bottle.

"That kid has a screw loose," a guy shouts from the front row. But take away that guys' daily Starbucks—and replace it with cup of joe from McDonald's—and he'll act like you've sentenced him to spend Spring Break in an orange jumpsuit at Gitmo.

In his book *Lovemarks*, Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide, calls it: "loyalty beyond reason." And every day brands like Starbucks, Red Bull, and Doc Martens prove the intimate and intense power of advertising.

"Brands have no influence on me," says a student wearing a pair of Nikes and a faded Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirt.

P. 3

When I say: “You’re busted pal. You’re a walking billboard,” he counters with: “These were gifts, I would never buy this stuff.”

“If I gave you t-shirt with a JC Penney’s logo on the pocket would you wear it?” I asked.

A female student jumps in to say: “Personally I could care less, but brands change the way others perceive me.”

So we buy status brands to send specific messages to strangers, right? We want to influence what they think of us. Why can’t we just walk up to a total stranger and say: “Hello! Your opinion is important to me. I want you to like me. And it would really be great if you thought I was better than you.”

Maybe that’s silly and unrealistic, but it’s no sillier than buying a pair of Prada footless socks. (Fall collection 2007).

You say you shun status brands and only shop at Value Village? Ah ha. You’re still drinking the marketer’s Kool-Aid. You’ve bought into the anti-brand brand. Remember Sprite’s slogan: “Image is nothing. Thirst is everything. Obey your thirst?” Projecting an image that you don’t care about image is a powerful image that has makes *The Man’s* cash register ring.

Darlin’, you can run in your Nike Air Jordans, but you can’t hide. The marketers saw you coming a long time ago.

We accuse advertisers of using manipulative tactics. We look down our nose at the our superficial consumer culture, yet how many of us have to have the newest Nano, flat-screen TV, or I-phone the second it hits the shelves?

We don’t need it. But we do *want* it. And we worked hard to pay for it.

Can’t we just admit it? The pictures and models are pretty. The seduction works.

We’re not above it all.

We enjoy it.

And, yes, we’re *buying* it.

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