

Mad Myths 3: Brand Laddering

The cartoon here from Tom Fishburne would be simply funny if it did not remind me of so many of my own and other's attempts to imbue brands with significance beyond their capacity. However did we think that buying a snack or a new pair of shades could act as a lever to world peace, or the end of poverty or abuse?

The answer is simple: wish fulfillment. As Freud pointed out, there is a strong unconscious drive to fulfil our wishes, some of them noble alongside the more shady ones! There are many great people in marketing, advertising and market research, people who at some level may regret tying their working lives up in the promotion of goods and services that, while amusing and diverting, do not move us forward as persons or societies. They may be left with the desire to make a difference, to contribute to a better world.

This wish to build something better persists within us all and is relentlessly driven by the nightly invasion of chilling and horrific images of cruelty and suffering that haunt our living rooms via our TV screens - as we sit there sipping our drink and munching our snack. There is an unspoken feeling that we must/should do something, yet apart from giving to charity, what can we do? We are left feeling powerless, and guilty...

The unconscious mind, not using logic in the way that the trained mind does, attempts to rescue us by making a simple adjustment: why not conflate the promotion of snacks or washing powder with your ideal of a better world – and 'Hey Presto' you can change the world as you crunch your salt & vinegar. What a relief! Then struck by an uneasy feeling of ridiculousness at the naivety of this idea, we seek others as trapped as ourselves in the hurly burly of commercialism to gather in workshops to 'stretch the brand'. We employ what Janis (1972) called 'groupthink' – a mode of thinking where the desire for harmony and cohesiveness overcomes our realistic appraisal of alternatives.

Laddering is itself no mean idea, coming as it does from psychologist George Kelly who used it to understand the underlying beliefs driving our behaviour. Used in this way, within the integrity of a single person's framework it is a mighty tool. Stretched to provide a 'tool' for giving our sales work greater significance and influence in the world, it is simply a comforting delusion. No wonder the flipcharts from that workshop are forgotten somewhere on a shelf in D 43.

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