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# It's Human Behaviour, Not Rocket Science

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# It's Human Behaviour, Not Rocket Science:

## UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE AS THE HEART OF BRANDING

**Few things are as misunderstood, overblown or undervalued as brands.** Talk to a guru and you get buried in his 'How to' books full of clever new names for common sense. Talk to an adman and brands become secular icons imbued with deep meaning or deserving of love. Talk to an average Westerner in the street and all he or she sees is a symbol.

I'm certainly not suggesting branding is smoke and mirrors. In an age of consumerism, competition and commoditisation brands are many companies' lifeblood – the means of differentiating and adding value. It's the confusion-generating, mumbo-jumbo wrapping around branding I have a problem with.

I strongly suspect the desire to mystify rather than simplify notions about branding has financial roots. Browse through any business bookstand and you can see there's a dollar to be made in anything that vaguely smacks of breakthrough thought. And there's nothing like a juicy bit of 'new theory' to drag punters from your book to your business offering.

In essence, brands are no more or less than the collective emotional attitudes of your customers towards your product, service or your company. The logo is just the tip of the iceberg – one small visual expression of your brand. Assuming consistent quality is there, if you successfully differentiate your offering, tell an engaging story and have the right internal culture, you can generally build a psychic premium for your brand over time. That effort can equate to improved market share, healthier mark-ups and increased business viability.

**The heart of branding really lies in understanding people generally and your customers specifically. Resisting the urge to pigeon-hole or find formulas and instead appreciating your potential customers 'wants'. You need to have an empathy with, and an instinct about, people.**

When it comes to communicating with people, the proliferation of media is an ever-expanding universe. A bit mind-boggling to a generation raised on the familiar staples of television, print and radio. Comfortable cruising for the more nimble new breed of consumers. To an increasingly savvy and skeptical audience, the bulk of conventional media advertising can start to seem like loud wallpaper. Something you learn to live with but don't like very much.

For all the technical and visual wizardry now made possible, there is an unmistakable desire for people to be more intimately and

physically connected. A mantra of commercial radio, as I recall, was to give the impression of talking to your audience one-on-one. Now, phenomena like reality TV, The Internet, YouTube and blogging make this individual and interactive engagement possible. For the participants, this really is about 'me'.

The high and increasing numbers participating in the so-called new media can be very seductive. But it's a bit like selling your wares to China. The sheer scale is enticing but if you don't fully comprehend its special characteristics you can rapidly lose your shirt. The interactivity and viral nature of most new media means its adherents can just as easily sing your praises as collectively crush you with brutal honesty. So integrity, astute tailoring and open dialogue are musts.

**In addition to the more open forum created by new media, we see more people wanting to buy things with product credibility – an accompanying rationale to satisfy an environmental or health concern or simply to ease their consumption conscience.** Consumers are also getting a bit more circumspect about the more blatant luxuries. By way of example, the new Louis Vuitton stores just being opened in Europe are incredibly understated. The idea of "understated luxury" and how to communicate this to the audience is an interesting challenge.

As brand strategists, we are continually fascinated by ways in which people's hearts and minds are captured. At BRR, we are great believers in storytelling. Why? Because in this highly visual world, slick images can flick the surface like summer mayflies and often lack any real penetration or memory retention. Simple, engaging stories, on the other hand, have been around since the dawn of civilisation but still retain the power to connect. Done well and accompanied by powerful complementary imagery they have a way of 'speaking' that resonates with universal audiences.

It's tempting to think that because the world is increasingly wrapped in complexity that the way we interact with each other needs to be similarly complex. In fact, cut-through with your internal or external audiences will largely hinge on how well you respond to basic human dynamics. If you're in any doubt about this, just pay a colleague or a customer a simple genuine compliment.