

**BRANDS AND  
BRANDING**

Stephen Brown



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# CHAPTER 7

## BRAND MANAGEMENT

### Overview

Outstanding brands are the sacred vessels of consumer society. They are venerated, worshiped, idolized, sanctified. And brand managers are the high priests of this secular belief system. The religion of branding has its rites, observances and sacraments. This chapter sets out the ten commandments of brand management.

### HOLY MOLY

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What is the world's greatest brand? That's a hard question to answer. However, it's a question John Hegarty tackled twenty-five years ago, when the branding concept was beginning to burgeon. Although you might not know his name, you'd recognize John Hegarty if you saw him. He pops up on every TV programme about branding, advertising, marketing and popular culture. A stalwart of Saatchi & Saatchi when it was Britain's foremost ad agency – and a founder of stellar hot-shop Bartle Bogle Hegarty – he was the person behind some of the most successful brand building campaigns in British history. These include those for Audi, Boddingtons, Häagen-Dazs and, most famously, Levi Strauss. If anyone was in a position to identify the world's greatest brand back then, that person was John Hegarty.

According to the ad man's own account, he was asked the 'Greatest Brand' question at an American marketing conference, where most of the other speakers played safe.<sup>1</sup> They singled out Coca-Cola (the original and best), Marlboro (the brand with personality to die for), the VW Beetle (subject of the best ever advertising campaign) and Nike (the ass-kicking new kid on the block), whereas our plucky Brit begged to

differ. He suggested – to the shock and awe of his audience – that the world’s greatest brand was the Catholic Church. It had the world’s best logo, a simple wooden cross. Its slogans were superlative: Seek and Ye Shall Find; Do As You Would Be Done By; Our Father, Who Art in Heaven. It was the first truly global brand, selling successfully in all five continents. It offered seven day opening at its monumental flagship stores, which were situated in prime locations. It had built a committed brand community before brand communities were invented. Best of all, it sold intangible beliefs rather than physical products. ‘The oldest brand in the world’, he concluded ...

... is actually the most modern. Nearly 2,000 years after its founding, it’s still going strong. It’s suffered competitive pressure – the Lutherans, Protestants, Episcopalians and Calvinists did their best to offer an alternative – but none of them matched the power and longevity of that ‘first in market’ position the Church adopted. Whatever your beliefs, you had to admire the innovation and commitment to brand building as demonstrated by this formidable institution.<sup>2</sup>

## EVANGELICAL BRANDING

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A quarter of a century on from Hegarty’s provocative presentation, his arguments would unsettle few branding experts. Regarding religious beliefs as ‘brands’ is standard practice. Many, in fact, might be inclined to add that the Catholic Church’s new CEO, Pope Francis, is restoring the fortunes of a badly damaged brand, one that lost much of its lustre during a series of reputation-ruining scandals. They might also be inclined to observe that, in today’s largely secular society, brands have become a surrogate religion.<sup>3</sup> Iconic brands akin to Hermès, Hennessey, Harley-Davidson and Hello Kitty aren’t short of worshippers, true believers who go out of their way to convert the multitudes. Having studied more than a few of these, including the *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* and *Da Vinci Code* communities, I’m familiar with the fervour of some brands’ disciples. And I’m not the only one. As an informant once made clear to me:

I like to think I have managed to remain neutral about Harry Potter, but because I am not a devout fan this can be very testing. It’s a bit like Christianity. Harry Potter lovers feel they must spread the message of the ‘good book’. They automatically make a dash for non-believers with the aim of saving them from their non-Harry Potter ways.<sup>4</sup>

Fool that I am, furthermore, I once wrote a light-hearted article about Harry Potter’s most dedicated devotees – those who wait in line for hours outside the Orlando branch of Ollivanders magic wand shop, then spend vast sums of money on what are, let’s be blunt, varnished twigs in a box – and my in-box swiftly filled with curses, death threats and burn-in-hell blasphemies from the boy wizard’s zealots.<sup>5</sup>

On a more positive note, Harry Potter's ability to instil that kind of blind loyalty is a model of branding best practice. It is a model that many brands aspire to nowadays and that many academic authorities have explored. Apple, for instance, has been subject to considerable spiritual speculation, up to and including impertinent parodies of the King James Bible:

In the beginning (of the Information Age) was the void. And the void was digital. But lo, there came upon the land, the shadow of Steven Jobs (and Stephen Wozniak). And Steven (Stephen) said, 'Let there be Apple'. And there was Apple. And Steven (Stephen) beheld Apple. And it was good. And Apple begat Macintosh. And it was good. And soon upon the land there began to appear, The Cult of Macintosh. For they had tasted of Apple. And it was good.<sup>6</sup>

Consider also these episcopal comments on Apple's celestial store in the Big Apple:

As you enter, you are faced with a stunning but simple glass staircase. On the first floor there are side chapels dedicated to the worship of digital photography, MP3s, and sleek laptops. Upstairs is the confessional – the Apple bar – where past mistakes are corrected and absolved on software misuse and hardware abuse. Worshippers' doubts are heard and some truths and answers are given here too. Along the galleries are the ecclesiastical libraries of software, and the sacred texts – the manuals and user guides. And everywhere, ministering quietly and reverentially, are the black clad acolytes, always on hand to explain the doctrine of loading software or give instruction on downloading music. At the top of the stairs you enter an inner sanctum. Congregants quietly gather there on slick pews facing a pulpit to the left of a giant flat screen exploding with colour and life. The pastor of the day (the sermons are advertised on hand-outs given to you as you leave the store) will preach on the doctrine of OS X, the uses of Adobe Photoshop, the salvation of FinalCut. Off to the right of the entrance is the altar, the last drop for a member's hour of supplication. A long smooth plinth of light coloured wood, cash registers accept offerings from the dedicated, mediated by the smiling deacons.<sup>7</sup>

Even Apple's ignominious failures, most notably the Newton handheld device, have been given the brand-as-religion treatment.<sup>8</sup> Whatever else is said about the i-conic brand, it's not short of militant missionaries.

## HEAVEN CAN'T WAIT

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Fun as it is to make 'fancy-that' comparisons between outstanding brands and organized religions, the analogy is more than a joke. Given that most brands in most categories are fairly nondescript, there's much to be said for spiritual approaches to brand management (Think Box 14). Managers are ministers of sorts. They believe in the brands they serve. They possess 'Brand Bibles' and consult them religiously.

They deliver salvation to consumers, in theory at any rate. They may lack the cassocks, surplices and dog collars traditionally associated with the clergy, but many are evangelicals when it comes to branding. Praise the Lord and Pass the Loyalty Card.

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## THINK BOX 14

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### Holy Water?<sup>9</sup>

Situated in the depths of the Irish countryside, Slaughterhouse Farm has been in Paul Piper's family for generations. Although their land, on the lower slopes of Mount Slemish, isn't the most fertile in County Antrim, the Pipers somehow managed to build a solid agricultural business around barley, beef, lamb and a little bit of rural tourism. A local legend – invented by Paul's great-great-grandfather, Peter – that St. Patrick quenched his thirst from the nearby spring in Quare Quarry, attracts a trickle of visitors from all parts, usually around Eastertime.

For years, Paul has joked about getting into the bottled water business. With an outstanding source of supply on the premises, the Pipers have been sitting on an aqueous goldmine for ages. True, tests suggest that their spring water contains numerous impurities. But only healthful ones like potassium, magnesium, silica, sulphate and zinc. The basalt in Slemish's famous volcanic plug not only serves as a natural filter and a source of invigorating minerals, it imparts a very distinctive flavour to the Slaughter water. Unfortunately, it reminds many drinkers of ammonia. 'Tastes like piss', some say, though Paul often wonders how they could possibly know that.

Luckily, the impurities are easily removed and, with the aid of a small, second-hand bottling machine, Paul sells Slaughter Water to tourists in his farm shop alongside fresh vegetables, cured meats, St. Patrick T-shirts and so on. When they ask about the name, often with a worried look on their faces, he laughingly explains that 'slaughter' is an Anglo-Norman mutilation of an old Irish word 'slachmhar', meaning neat, tidy and in good condition. The water is especially good, he goes on with a wink, when added to locally-distilled poteen, though he can't guarantee that they'll be in good condition afterwards. Slaughter Water also helps with the hangover to come ...

Never more than a side-line – the bottles are recycled, the packaging is haphazard, the name and story are the selling points – Slaughter Water took on new significance when the weather went wild in 2015 and wreaked havoc on the Pipers' core agricultural operation. So Peter, thinking strategically, decided to seek salvation in his water supply.

After consultations with a friend of a friend, who worked in the branding business, Peter was advised to abandon 'Slaughter', since the word carried unsavoury connotations, and reposition the product as a spiritual water predicated on the St Patrick connection. However the owner of Slaughterhouse Farm isn't convinced.

### Thinking Outside the Think Box

Should Peter follow his friend of a friend's advice? Or is sticking with Slaughter Water a better, if offbeat, branding bet? How can he make best use of the St. Patrick connection and spirituality more generally? Is he wise to enter the bottled water market at all?

Everlasting life is every brand's aspiration. In order to achieve it, however, managers must be familiar with the Ten Commandments of Branding. These comprise the creed of contemporary brand management. Read them. Learn them. Act upon them. Otherwise eternal damnation ensues. Or a lifetime in brand limbo at least.

## FIRST COMMANDMENT: THOU SHALT NOT FAIL

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Books about branding, marketing and business more generally present an idealized picture. The case studies, the concepts, the bullet-pointed lists of dos and don'ts are Photoshopped representations of reality. The same is true of rigorously researched academic articles, the carefully structured narratives of which camouflage the messiness of the research process. There's no intent to mislead, rest assured. The cropping and filtering and retouching is perfectly in order. They help make the picture more striking, more memorable, more instructive. However, it's easy to get the wrong impression, to assume that all brands are as successful as vaunted exemplars like Armani, Bulgari, Chobani, Disney, eBay, etc.

If only. Would it were otherwise, but the reality of business life is that most start-ups stop, most companies collapse, most innovations implode, most mergers misfire, most R&D founders, most forecasts flub, most new products flatline, most advertising campaigns are ineffective, most killer apps die an agonizing death, most star CEOs turn out to be black holes, most brands either buckle or are a bust or have a backstory full of botches, blunders, clangers and catastrophes.<sup>10</sup>

The first rule of branding, then, is to survive. As the great marketing guru Ted Levitt once quipped, 'the business of business is to remain in business'.<sup>11</sup> And despite what it says in the textbooks, that's much easier said than done. Failure is the norm. You only have to watch a few episodes of *Dragons' Den* – sensationalized though they are – to realize that Reggae Reggae sauces are few and far between. Notwithstanding all the hype surrounding Kickstarter, the crowd-funded source of peer2peer venture capital, most of the proposals don't get enough financial pledges to make them viable. More than a few get nothing at all.<sup>12</sup> Research repeatedly shows that between 80% and 90% of new business ventures fail.<sup>13</sup> Most brands are stillborn. They don't last long

enough to become the living, breathing, consumer-consuming brands encountered in chapters 5 and 6. The brand that has benefitted most from Kickstarter is Kickstarter. The brands that benefit most from *Dragons' Den* are the brands run by the dragons themselves.

I'm conscious of course that this reality check is disheartening. No true believer likes to hear that perdition not paradise is their likely fate. On reading the names of once brave brands that fell by the wayside – Moonshine Aftershave, Oasis Deodorant, Sudden Soda, Panda Punch, Tingle Pants, Skunk Guard, Climax Ginger Ale, Hagar the Horrible Cola, Puss 'n' Boots Cat Food – one can't help but be reminded of war graves, Remembrance Sunday and the poignant poppy display at the Tower of London.<sup>14</sup> The good news, though, is that failure assails even the biggest brands in the world. Remember Google Glasses? Remember Apple Maps? Remember Unilever's Persil Power? Remember Amazon's Fire Phone? Remember Disney's *John Carter*? Remember the WiiU handset? Remember Microsoft 8, the operating system that no one could? Remember the Airbus A380, the superjumbo jet that was supposed to revolutionize the airline industry (but is still struggling to reach cruising altitude)? Remember Li-Nang, the cheap and cheerful Chinese sportswear brand that dominated the market with 8,000 retail stores from Guangzhou in the south to Changchun in the north, then tried to compete with premium-priced sportswear brands like Adidas? All fell by the wayside.<sup>15</sup>

The other piece of good news is that there are degrees of failure. None of the brands just mentioned went belly-up because of their marketing mishaps. Sunny Delight died but P&G didn't lose much sleep. Google's glasses shattered but its driverless cars are coming ever closer. The Edsel famously flopped but Ford is still ticking over. *John Carter* tanked but Disney bounced back with *Frozen*.

Others are less fortunate. When Gerald Ratner, the boss of a cut-price chain of jewellery stores, made a frivolous remark about his company's 'crap' products, the brand was tainted for ever and ever, amen. When the lauded e-tailer Boo.com went live, everyone thought a new Amazon had arrived. But it was soon engulfed in a rainforest of failure thanks to its sluggish website, appalling logistics and ill-thought-through returns policy. Arthur Andersen was once one of the highest of high-flying firms of accountants. But when Enron crashed and burned, the Andersen brand burned as well, because it had been fiddling the books all the while. Thus did a hero become Nero.<sup>16</sup>

A spectrum of failure can be discerned. At one extreme there are simple slip-ups, such as Penguin Books' botched attempt to reorganize its logistics, which left brand name authors out of pocket. At the other extreme brands can succumb after an epic fail, as Dasani water demonstrably did in the United Kingdom.<sup>17</sup> Most fails are either stumbles, such as Virgin's God-awful cola, or slumps, where a brand loses the lustre it once enjoyed and never really recovers. The Body Shop's halo slipped badly when Anita Roddick was accused of being a gimlet-eyed businessperson who 'built an entire enterprise on a lie'.<sup>18</sup> Her brand, however, is still in business. At present, it possesses 2,500 retail stores worldwide.

## SECOND COMMANDMENT: THOU SHALT GET LUCKY

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The Body Shop escaped eternal damnation. Its deeply unpleasant backstory, involving intellectual property theft, barefaced fibs about its eco-friendliness and failure to practise what it preached on fair trade, should have consigned the sinner to the flames. But Roddick's brand got lucky. The same is true of Alibaba, the Chinese e-tailing titan, which took off during a SARS outbreak when western buyers were unwilling to travel to the PRC and ordered online instead. It's no less true of Highland Spring, the sparkling Scottish water, which came on-stream at the very moment when market leader Perrier was withdrawn from sale because of a benzene contamination scare. In a similar stroke of good fortune, Paul Smith found a lucky charm that had fallen off someone's bracelet and thought to himself, 'that would make a great button for a shirt'. Thirty thousand shirts later, the fashion brand founder still counts his blessings. Chance really can be a fine thing.

Luck, however, is four-letter word in business and management circles. Managers like to think that they're in control, call the shots, make things happen and, with the aid of powerful computer algorithms, predict the short- and medium-term future. Academics and educators are especially prone to this kind of thinking, since their careers are built, by and large, on rigorous analytic methods, models, mind-sets. The honest truth, though, is that luck, chance, serendipity, happenstance, good fortune and so forth play a big part in business and branding both.<sup>19</sup>

Kellogg's Corn Flakes, Dom Pérignon champagne, 3-M's Post-it Notes, Nike's waffle sole, Lindt milk chocolate and the once imperious Sony Walkman are just a few of the blockbuster brands that came about by happy accident. Procter & Gamble is renowned as the most rigorous brand builder bar none. Yet the history of the company reveals that everything from Ivory soap and Tide detergent to Pampers nappies and Pantene Pro V were a consequence of chance. McDonald's mighty fast food empire was likewise founded on a whim when Ray Kroc, a milkshake machine salesman, was sufficiently intrigued to make a trip to San Bernardino where the McDonald brothers' burger bar was selling shakes hand over fist. Pfizer was searching for an angina alleviant when it discovered the ithyphallic side-effects of Viagra and thereby earned the undying gratitude of erectile tribulation sufferers.<sup>20</sup>

And if that lot is insufficient to convince you of serendipity's unpredictable importance, take a look at Apple. Now everyone knows that it was Steve Jobs' reluctant visit to Xerox's PARC facility in 1979 that inspired his 'invention' of the GUI, drop-down menu and mouse-manoeuvred point-and-click procedure. What is less well known is that he wanted to withdraw the classic *1984* commercial from its pre-booked slot during the Super Bowl. He was unable to do so and the ad ran despite Steve's misgivings. It was the most fortuitous branding decision he ever made because Apple's rebellious image was established by Ridley Scott's superb commercial, a counter-cultural image it has exploited ever since. Luck moves in mysterious ways.

Luck doesn't last, though, as the cautionary tale of FCUK attests. Formerly known as French Connection, Stephen Marks' formulaic fashion retailer was going nowhere fast. Despite the owner's best efforts, it was firmly stuck in midmarket mediocrity. Enter an enterprising ad man, who'd been called in to sprinkle some marketing magic dust on the bland brand. Purely by chance, he noticed that the abbreviation FCUK (short for French Connection United Kingdom) was in widespread use throughout the organization (on its internal documents, memos, faxes and so forth). Recognizing a lucky break when he saw one, he seized upon this almost offensive acronym and turned it into one of the most provocative, high-profile advertising campaigns of the 1990s. Plastered across enormous billboards, the deathless words 'FCUK Fashion' stopped traffic, caused outrage and generated enormous sales for next to nothing. The brand was instantly transformed from a minnow to a monster:

Beginning as it intended to go on, French Connection quickly squeezed every conceivable variation out of its unforgettable acronym. FCUK me, FCUK fear, FCUK off, FCUK FM, FCUK Santa and so forth all had their moment in the fcukin sun. The unspeakable initials were plastered on everything from FCUK deodorant and FCUK lingerie to the company's flagship store, 'the biggest FCUK in the world'. Sales space doubled, turnover burgeoned, America was invaded and everyone wanted a slice of the FCUK action, even Boots the Chemist, which stocked the complete FCUK range. Heaven only knows what Jesse Boot, the company's Puritan founder would've made of it. Fcukin hell. Hell indeed was where FCUK finished up. In classic Icarus brand fashion, the company crashed and burned in five short years. A joke can only be told so many times and FCUK wore out its welcome faster than most. By 2004, it was well and truly fcuked.<sup>21</sup>

FCUK lucked out. Ditto the Aflac duck, the Michelin Man, the Marlboro Man, Aleksandr Orlov and many other much-loved brand mascots, all of whom came from serendipitous strokes of good fortune, as did Velcro, Teflon, Kevlar, NutraSweet, Minoxidil, Penicillin and Louboutin's legendary red-soled stilettos, which were the result of an accidental spillage of China Red nail varnish. As John Lewis, the founder of the eponymous department stores, once observed, 'It would surely be manifestly absurd to suggest that mere luck is not a very great factor in the making of enormous fortunes.'<sup>22</sup> Or, as Daft Punk put it more succinctly, you got to get lucky.

### **THIRD COMMANDMENT: THOU SHALT NEVER GIVE UP**

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Another brand that got a lucky break is Scrabble. The legendary board game broke through in 1950, when the president of Macy's department store played it on holiday. He enjoyed scrabbling so much that, on his return to work, he commanded branch managers to carry the brand. Within five years Scrabble was selling 4 million sets per annum. For twenty years prior to that, mind you, Alfredo Butt had been

trying to get people interested in the word game that he'd invented at the height of the Great Depression. Although the unemployed architect's idea was turned down by every board game maker, Parker Brothers included, he refused to give up and eventually got lucky.<sup>23</sup>

Perseverance in the face of failure may not be the secret of branding success, but it is a quality that all great brand owners and managers possess in abundance. Clarence Birdseye, as noted earlier, struggled for decades to sell the idea of frozen food. Colonel Sanders failed as a soldier, salesman, lawyer and, believe it or not, freelance gynaecologist before he came up with the idea of franchising fried chicken. Ruth Handler, the brains behind Barbie, was denounced as a pornographer by her peers, toy stores refused to handle her busty creation and even the employees at Mattel rebelled before the brand started selling like hot cakes. Hot buns, I should say.

Henry Ford furthermore was a complete failure for much of his early career. From 1899 (when he set up the Detroit Automobile Company) to 1908 (when he finally hit pay dirt with the Model T), every single car 'Crazy Henry' invented failed to set the world on fire (an electric one included). More recently, Sir James Dyson spent ten years developing his innovative vacuum cleaner. Five thousand plus prototypes were tested to destruction. He faced ridicule, experienced rejection and toiled away with very few resources. However, he won through in the end when his range of bagless cleaners not only transformed the market but remain the bestselling brand in Britain, despite an ultra-premium price point.

Chance and persistence are interrelated. Those who try hardest for longest make their own luck. As Gary Player, the multiple major-winning golfer, is reputed to have said: 'The more I practice the luckier I become.' Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the legendary 1990s advertising campaign that transformed Levi's jeans from a once-fashionable label utterly out of touch with the youth market into a super-cool icon of contemporary style with brand cachet to burn. John Hegarty – he of the Catholic Church contention – had just left Saatchi & Saatchi to set up his own agency. As a tiny hot shop start-up, Bartle Bogle Hegarty had nothing going for it except the partners' reputations. That got them added to the short list of major agencies pitching for Levi's lucrative account. All of the others had resources to spare. BBH didn't even have their own offices. They hadn't a hope. They were there to make up the numbers. Embarrassingly, their seat-of-the-pants presentation was made in an empty boardroom, with bare walls, no desks and a bunch of brand new office chairs, just delivered from Italy:

The big day arrived and about eight people from Levi Strauss turned up, stepping over half-completed office walls smelling of wet paint.

Lee Smith was one of the group. Lee was the head of Levi Strauss Europe. In the end he was the person who had to approve the appointment of the agency. Lee was about 6 feet 4 inches tall, suntanned and Californian. He looked as though he jogged every day and had a handshake that could crack a bag of walnuts. He'd flown over

from San Francisco for the pitches. As soon as I saw him I thought, 'It's all over. He's never going to buy an upstart new agency, without walls in their office. Not a chance. He's too corporate.'<sup>24</sup>

But BBH gave it their all. They told the Levi's people the unvarnished truth about their uncool brand. They gave it to them straight. Their once brilliant brand was a bust:

When the presentation finally finished Robin Dow, who was the President of Levi Strauss in the UK, turned to Lee and said, 'You've not said anything. Is there anything you'd like to say?' Lee leaned back in one of our incredibly stylish Italian chairs and said, 'There's only one thing I want to say'. We all waited with bated breath. This was the moment he was going to say 'You must be joking. These people haven't got any staff, they've hardly started their company and haven't even got an office.'

He didn't. He said, 'You know, these are the most comfortable chairs I've ever sat in.' We had won the account.<sup>25</sup>

The ability to find positives in negatives is an attribute of never-say-die brands. Bailey's Irish Cream, far from being based on an ancient Hibernian recipe, as many imagine, was invented in the mid-1970s, as a means of using up surplus stock of Irish whiskey and milk. Burt's Bees, the massive lip balm brand, resulted from a glut of honey on the Dexter, Maine, farm of former bohemian Burt Shavitz. Rather than sell off the golden gloop for a song, Burt and his partner Roxanne Quimby put on their thinking caps, came up all sorts of possible uses, including furniture polish and hand lotion, then knocked on doors until the elixir was sold at a profit.<sup>26</sup> When the VW Beetle was launched in the United States, the tiny, underpowered, fin-free car brand was the antithesis of everything 1950s automobile buyers had come to expect. Coming so soon after the Second World War, what's more, the American public's perception of Hitler's people's car was wholly negative. If ever a brand was certain to be strangled at birth, and simply not worth the effort, it was the VW Beetle. Yet by treating the car's shortcomings as reasons to buy – Think Small – and by constantly repeating the message through a brilliantly innovative advertising campaign, Doyle Dane Bernbach created a brand icon and transformed the US advertising industry into the bargain.<sup>27</sup>

## **FOURTH COMMANDMENT: THOU SHALT BE DIFFERENT**

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Being different is what branding is all about. Difference is its most central tenet, enshrined in law, and integral to the definitions included in chapter 1. Every able-bodied manager strives to differentiate his or her brand from the competition and, if asked, could count the ways in which theirs is the best. In this regard, renowned branding gurus like Kevin Keller make a key distinction between POPs and PODs.<sup>28</sup>

POP stands for points of parity. What it means is that a wannabe brand has to match the offer of all the others in its category. POD refers to points of difference. These are what lift and separate a would-be brand from the rest. A brand isn't a brand unless it's got a POD or two to its name.

The problem nowadays, though, is that PODs are increasingly difficult to tell apart. In category after category, be it bottled water, battery chargers, baby-grows, backpacks, bicycles, beauty creams, barbecue grills, beard trimmers, or blockbuster movies, what once were PODs are POPs offered by all. Go into any electrical store and, although the choice of cookers, fridges, televisions, washing machines, microwave ovens, tumble driers, sound systems, satnavs and so on is never less than vast, the products themselves are practically impossible to tell apart.<sup>29</sup> There are plenty of variations. But no variety. You have to be a real connoisseur of the category to appreciate the differences that brands brag about so blithely.

As Youngme Moon explains, category after category suffers from heterogeneous homogeneity.<sup>30</sup> Yes, there are differences between individual brands of laptop, airline, detergent, dishwasher, e-reader, DVD player, 4G provider, utility supplier, insurance agent, music streaming service and so on. However, the differences are so microscopic only the brand managers responsible can recognize them. For the rest of us, they're all the same. With the noteworthy exception of those few that aren't. Real difference is rare, but it does exist. Google's uncluttered homepage was a WTF revelation when the brand first appeared. Established web search sites, such as Excite, AOL and Yahoo!, were cluttered, confusing and clunky by comparison. The Wii radically rewrote the rules of the computer console handset back in 2006, when it blew Xbox and PlayStation out of the water. The first low-cost airlines, such as easyJet and Southwest, completely transformed the air travel experience. Innocent Drinks and Benefit Cosmetics were unlike anything else in the fruit smoothies and personal care sectors respectively, not least on account of their clever packaging and cute positioning. Heston Blumenthal's culinary creations may be a bit bonkers – Snail Porridge in particular – but there's no denying that his delirious dishes are deliciously different.<sup>31</sup>

Points of difference are quickly denuded through competitive pressures, though. These days, brand managers must aspire to POWs. Points of Wow! That is, breath-taking, bedazzling, stunning, staggering, simply stupendous branding achievements that boggle the mind and beggar belief.<sup>32</sup> Red Bull Stratos, Felix Baumgartner's supersonic skyfall in 2012, is a POW and a half, as are Olympic Games opening ceremonies, as is Fondazione Prada, a totally over-the-top exhibition experience in Milan, as is the Guggenheim Bilbao, which rebranded a declining industrial city in one fell swoop, as is the world's biggest shopping mall, the New Century Global Centre in Chengdu, as are Sony's truly stunning series of television ads for the Bravia, starting with *Balls*, as is the annual Neiman Marcus catalogue, which naturally includes his-and-her snowmobiles (diamond encrusted, doubtless), as was the gull-winged DeLorean back in the day, as are Japanese department stores every day of the year, as are the fabulous dancing fountains at the Bellagio casino complex in Las Vegas.

POWs don't have to be expensive, BTW. Zappos shifted the paradigm of online shoe selling with its nothing-is-too-much-trouble customer service. The Ice Bucket Challenge cost buttons, yet it raised \$100 million for motor neurone disease. New Zealand Air's innovative flight safety videos, such as the legendary *Lord of the Rings* spoof, were made for a song and, more importantly, appreciated by millions. Yeo Valley yogurt raised its profile, and substantially increased market share, through a single parody ad (featuring a boy band of rapping dairy farmers) that was broadcast during the finals of *X Factor*. As Sir John Hegarty adroitly puts it, 'I'd rather be noticed once than missed a dozen times.'<sup>33</sup>

## FIFTH COMMANDMENT: THOU SHALT GET THY STORY STRAIGHT

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In chapter 4 we noted the importance of storytelling. Storytelling, in truth, has become a bit of a buzz word. In certain respects it's a 21st century synonym for strategy. Strategic planning used to be a pretty big preoccupation for brand managers. Rigid, formal, rigorously quantified exercises that took a long time to prepare, strategic plans were taken very, very seriously.<sup>34</sup> They contained confident predictions that were considered sacrosanct within organizations. All manner of proprietary models were developed to improve these prognostications – including the Boston Consulting Group's much-imitated matrix and Michael Porter's famous five forces framework – and many management consultancies enriched themselves during the great strategy boom of the 1980s and 1990s.

However, the bloom has since faded from the strategy rose, partly on account of the speed of change in today's hyper-connected world, where iPOW brands pop up from nowhere determined to overthrow conventional wisdom, and partly because of the great economic crash, which even the most far-sighted strategists on Wall Street failed to anticipate. The old testament beliefs about strategy – this is the word of God, written on tables of stone – have been shattered. The title of a recent book on the subject, *Your Strategy Needs a Strategy*, says it all.<sup>35</sup>

None of this means that strategy is passé. The word may be tainted but the planning process – deciding what a brand stands for and where it wants to be – is as important as ever. The most successful strategists these days are storytellers akin to Mauborgne and Kim, who tell and sell a spellbinding tale involving inviting Blue Oceans where buoyant brands swim and splash to their hearts' content.<sup>36</sup> The problem with many contemporary brands, however, is that they are confused about which story to tell. They try to be all things to all people, telling meandering shaggy dog stories, rather than tightly plotted yarns that keep customers captivated and coming back for more. They are closer to James Joyce than E.L. James, not so much Edgar Wallace as David Foster Wallace.

Bushmills Whiskey is fairly typical in this regard. The oldest distillery in the British Isles, it has illustrious heritage to spare. Once visited by Peter the Great – the father of Russia, the founder of St Petersburg, the most enlightened monarch of his day, a man who considered Bushmills' ambrosial nectar to be the best in Europe – the ancient Irish brand isn't short of storytelling raw material. Yet it has consistently underperformed in the key North American market, despite steady growth in the brown spirits category. Back in 1989, Bushmills was neck and neck with Jameson, Ireland's bestselling whiskey. But its US market share has since fallen from 22 to 8%. This disconcerting decline has been laid at the door of Diageo, the parent company, where Johnnie Walker is cock of the whisky walk and Scotch is held in higher esteem than Irish. But Bushmills' seeming inability to tell a convincing tale – a story that's different from the standard whiskey narrative of authenticity and ingredients – is partly responsible for its plight.<sup>37</sup>

Twitter is another case in point. Although the tech titan has been prodigiously successful – 300 million weekly active users, 500 million daily tweets, annual revenues of \$1.4 billion – the brand is not as successful as it could, and should, be. According to the *Financial Times*, Twitter is 'the startup that never grew up'.<sup>38</sup> And as far as Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg is concerned, 'It's as if they drove a clown car into a goldmine and fell in.' Zuckerberg would say that, of course, since dissing rivals is the norm among nerds. However, the difficulties new users experience with Twitter's interface, the constant chopping and changing in the corporation's C-suite, and the lack of consensus about what the brand is, or what it wants to be, suggest that the plot has been lost. When CEO Jack Dorsey invited users to describe the site in three words, he reinforced 'the sense that the people running Twitter had trouble defining the social network themselves'. In the opinion of the brand's new CFO, Anthony Noto, 'The number one reason people don't use Twitter is because they don't understand why people should use Twitter.'<sup>39</sup> Is it 'a media platform', 'a democratic community', 'a free-speech sanctuary', 'trolling with brevity', 'broadcasting for introverts', 'time absorbing hell' or 'better than Facebook'? Who knows? Twitter doesn't.

## **SIXTH COMMANDMENT: THOU SHALT NOT WORSHIP CUSTOMERS**

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The basic problem with most brand strategists turned storytellers is that, despite their best efforts, they don't CLAMP consumers. They need to get a grip. They need to get a grip by letting go. They need to eschew the holy writ of marketing and embrace the idolatrous. They need to recognize that the most important lesson to be extracted from Twitter's tangle, its three-word trip-up, is that customer consecration is a mistake. Dorsey's act of customer engagement, inclusion, participation,

co-creation – whatever you want to call it – only added to the confusion and exacerbated the brand’s existential angst.

As noted in the previous chapter, there’s a widespread belief within marketing that the customer is not just king but the king of kings, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-important. This belief is reinforced by branding experts when they contend, as many do, that brands only really exist in consumers’ minds. This fatuous notion is further re-reinforced by the recent, web-fuelled rise of co-creation, crowdsourcing, user-generated content, etc., where brands approach consumers for suggestions on the best way forward. Unilever, P&G, Chevrolet, Honda, Nestlé and PepsiCo’s Walkers Crisps, to name but a few, have swallowed the co-creation Kool-Aid and brought ‘prosumers’ on board as fully-fledged partners in the brand building business.<sup>40</sup> Wikipedia, Linux, Firefox, YouTube and Android, what’s more, have been loudly lauded as exemplary instances of user-generated open-source branding. The wisdom of the consumer crowd, we’re told, is much greater than that found in the Blofeld-like lairs of old-school brand managers.

The basic problem, though, is that consumers don’t know best. Research repeatedly shows that, marketing savvy though they often are, consumers tend to think in conventional terms. In terms of what they already know. Audi’s iconic strapline, *Vorsprung durch Technik*, was extensively market researched and the carmakers were very strongly advised not to use it (‘nobody in Britain understands German!’). The revival of Levi’s 501s was almost abandoned after focus groups couldn’t get their heads round the brand’s button fly (‘zip fasteners are readily available’).<sup>41</sup> The proposed relaunch of *Dr Who* was likewise researched by the BBC and it got the thumbs down from children and adults alike (‘a niche show for sad, sci-fi followers’). The commissioning editor buried the research report and a huge, ratings-busting brand regenerated.

Now, this does *not* mean that consumers should be ignored. It does *not* mean that Unilever, P&G, Guinness, Sony, Adobe, Chevrolet, Gap and so forth were wrong-headed when they co-created, crowdsourced, conducted consumer research or whatever. It does *not* mean that Jack Dorsey was a duffus when he invited his followers to define Twitter in three choice words, like Listening to Customers. There is a crucial difference between listening to customers – attending to them, considering their suggestions, getting informative feedback – and worshipping customers, working on the assumption that the customer knows best. By all means include customers in the conversation but their words, no matter how eloquently phrased, should never be regarded as gospel. As one cynic observed about crowdsourcing, ‘if you wouldn’t ask just about anyone to get involved in building a high speed train, why trust anonymous third parties with marketing activity?’<sup>42</sup> The market itself is a crowd, remember, with lots of brands jostling for attention. In such circumstances, it takes a single-minded POWER brand to stand out from the crowd and single-minded POWER brands are often the product of single minds like Jobs or Branson or Roddick or Zuckerberg.

When it comes to open-source branding, what's more, even the most evangelical exponents of this over-praised approach have been forced to recant their customer-is-all credo. Wikipedia's open edit system, where anyone can make changes to existing articles, has often degenerated into a fractious free-for-all as contributors fight over the content of particularly contentious articles.<sup>43</sup> The infighting over Gdansk/Danzig become so serious that Wikicops, so to speak, were appointed to keep the peace. With extreme prejudice. Certain parts of the site are off limits to all but the most senior administrators. The wisdom of the crowd is one thing. The warring of the crowd is something else again. Customers should be listened to not given a licence to kill the offspring of brand managers.

**THINK BOX 15**

**Secrets You Must Keep**

Mysteries move merchandise. Fact. Consider the secret recipe that helped sell all sorts of comestibles including KFC, Heinz Ketchup, Kellogg's Frosties, Mrs Field's Cookies, Caramilk, Nutella, Bid Macs and, the ambassador's choice, Ferrero Rocher. Consider the secret ingredients in beverages such as Coca-Cola, Courvoisier, Benedictine and Red Bull, the last of which includes macerated bull's testicles. Allegedly. Consider the secret menus in Mickey D's, Burger King, Subway, Chipotle, In-N-Out Burger and Starbucks, which includes 'backchannel' specifically formulated for kidlike coffee consumers. Consider the cosmetics industry (secret of youthfulness), the proprietary medicine business (secret of healthfulness) and the tourist trade (secret hideaways & speciality).

Consider also blockbuster movies with their staggeringly expensive teaser trailers (wanna know what happens next?) and no-budget indie films which ride reviewers not to reveal the secret (or issue a spoiler alert at the very least). Consider the Secret Cinema brand, where moviegoers don't know what they'll be seeing till they get there only to find themselves involved in an immersive, film-themed experience. Consider Secret Sales, which offers 'designer labels' in two- to four-day bargain donations for fashion cognoscenti only. Consider JAR, the world's most elusive jeweller designer based in Paris, who makes the Scarlet Pimpernel look like a shamesless show-off.

While you're at it, consider Victoria's Secret, the secret of which is that there's no secret. Everyone knows that sex sells. And seriously sexy sells even better.

Once you've recovered, consider Kinder Eggs, Tiger Balm, Listerine, WD40, Google's secret algorithm or the one and only Robert Galbraith, aka J.K. Rowling.

As Hannah et al. show, the simple fact of the matter is that secrecy is marketing's secret weapon.<sup>44</sup> Always has been. Always will be. It's important, though, that brand managers spill the fact that a secret exists. And still the fact that they've spilled the fact that there's a secret. Keep that to yourself, BTW. It's our little secret.

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### Thinking Outside the Think Box

or taking advantage? Evaluate the pros and cons of Pepsi's options. Would you have handled the situation differently? Is there a case for saying nothing? Pepsi refused to take advantage and promptly alerted their competitor in Atlanta. Pepsi's attorneys approached Pepsi and tried to sell them the famous formula (for \$2.1 million). A few years ago, in July 2006, several of Coke's trade secrets were stolen. The perpe-

## EIGHTH COMMANDMENT: THOU SHALT TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

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It is of course difficult to resist consumer pressure. The lines of customer communication are so open these days that their voices are unavoidable and can't be cancelled with corporate earphones. The ideology of consumer orientation is so deeply engrained in branding's belief system, what's more, that ignoring customer input is considered preposterous, perverse to the point of lunacy. Yet many brilliantly successful brands adopt a like-it-or-lump-it attitude. They refuse to pander to customers. They take a take-it-or-leave-it position. They know they're not for everyone. They are proud of the fact that they alienate some consumers, divide opinion and generate more than a modicum of hostility.

Marmite is arguably the most extreme manifestation of this, with its adore it/abhor it advertising, its website, which is divided into love-Marmite/hate-Marmite sections, its bestselling board game, Love It or Hate It, and its large-format brand book, half of which sings Marmite's praises while the remainder revels in the consumer revulsion that the spreadable yeast extract stimulates. The brand name indeed has entered the vernacular for someone or something that divides consumer opinion. Russell Brand is a Marmite celebrity. Kanye West is a Marmite musician. Ed Sheeran is a Marmite singer-songwriter (and is proud of the fact).<sup>45</sup> Stewart Lee is a Marmite stand-up comedian. Piers Morgan is a Marmite television personality. Red Bull is a Marmite beverage, so is Guinness. The Prius is a Marmite automobile, so is the Hummer. Crocs are Marmite footwear, so are Uggs, Scholls and Birkenstocks. Tesco is a Marmite supermarket, so is McDonald's for anti-fast food fundamentalists and Starbucks for coffee connoisseurs. Marmite, in short, is shorthand for schismatic branding.

Marmite may be an outstanding exemplar of the my-way-or-the-highway school of brand management. But it isn't the only one. Pot Noodle takes pride in its standing as the junkiest of junk foods from the junk food farm. A Bathing Ape is a Japanese brand of T-shirts that not only plays hard to get but is practically impossible to find and will only sell to those consumers it deems suitable. Lululemon, likewise, is not reluctant to lambast cruiser weight customers who aren't the right shape for

its super-stylish sports gear. Its brand name, bizarrely, includes three l's to make it unpronounceable by Japanese nationals. Huh?

Much the same is true of Hollister, which sells a way-cool So-Cal lifestyle to impressionable teenagers. Provided they're petite enough to fit into the restricted range of styles that the brand-for-beautiful-people makes available. The kids' parents are unwelcome too. Hence the dimly lit, nightclub-like interiors, the blaring indie music, the overpowering smell of seriously sexy scent and the extra-lengthy queues at the changing rooms and checkouts. Parents'd pay anything just to get the hell out of there.

Kerching!

According to Moon, this take-a-stand stance began with Benetton back in the 1990s.<sup>46</sup> A vibrant brand of Italian casual apparel, its United Colours poster campaign comprised a series of provocative images – a collage of condoms, the aftermath of a car bomb, a nun kissing a priest, a dying AIDS victim surrounded by his grieving family, a new-born baby complete with uncut umbilical cord – which aspired 'to raise awareness' of serious social issues. The brand, unsurprisingly, was accused of hideously exploitative behaviour. However its determination to take a stand on undeniably unpopular issues paid dividends. Heretical brands are heavenly for the chosen few, albeit Benetton ended up in hell when its luck ran out in FCUK fashion.<sup>47</sup>

## **NINTH COMMANDMENT: THOU SHALT SERVE A HIGHER PURPOSE**

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As the mainstream reaction to badass brands like Benetton illustrates, many consumers are more than a little cynical when corporations attach themselves to 'issues' or 'ideas' that are 'bigger than the bottom line'. If Ryanair started campaigning on conservation or environmental protection, most of its passengers might smell a rat. Or the stench of a PR stunt at least. Yet, in a world of increasingly identical goods and services, many, many brands are 'getting soul' in order to rise above the rest. These include good living brands like Ben & Jerry's, Innocent Drinks, Boost Bottled Water and TOMS shoes (which donates footwear to the unshod in destitute nations), to say nothing of Children in Need, the Salvation Army, Amnesty International and the Rainforest Alliance.

Unilever is also doing good deeds. In addition to its Sustainable Living Plan, which aims to improve the health and wellbeing of 1 billion people worldwide, a benevolent member of its brand family, Dove, masterminded the brilliantly successful Campaign for Real Beauty. This did much to improve self-esteem among women around the world. Fair Trade, with its yin-yang yellow-and-blue logo is likewise committed to the betterment of often grievously exploited agricultural producers in emerging economies. Fair trade is only fair, they maintain, and big name brands who sign up to Fair Trade's credo are allowed to place the iconic emblem on their

packaging and promotional material. The BMW Mini, meanwhile, captivated the American market with a campaign that condemned – in a good-natured way – the gas guzzling gigantism that had spawned massive SUVs, hog-the-road Hummers and a widespread sense among consumers that, when it comes to automobiles, bigger is better big time. ‘Let’s sip,’ Mini said, ‘not guzzle.’<sup>48</sup>

Now, this is all very worthy. Admirable even. Acting the Good Samaritan is seriously good for business. But it also invites close scrutiny. Fair Trade has been accused of ‘being a do-gooders badge that fails those it was set up to support’.<sup>49</sup> Unilever’s commitment to women’s issues has been derided because a delinquent member of its diverse brand family, Lynx (aka Axe), is irredeemably sexist. American Apparel was lauded for its eschewal of far eastern sweatshops and praised for paying fair wages to its all-American workforce.<sup>50</sup> More than a few of the latter, however, turned out to be illegal immigrants. BP claimed it was committed to renewable energy sources. Proudly proclaiming that BP stood for Beyond Petroleum, it changed its logo to a ripening flower in eco-friendly green. Then there was a fatal explosion at Texas City Refinery, caused by poor maintenance, swiftly followed by the infamous Gulf oil spill at Deepwater Horizon.<sup>51</sup> When subsequent investigations revealed that BP was aware of the dangers beforehand, the brand’s reputation plunged so precipitously that it seriously contemplated a name change to Amoco.

It’s clear, then, that if brands purport to be holier than thou, someone is certain to scrutinize their holy-roller credentials and publish the results on social media. Nike, Nestlé, Starbucks, Walmart, Coca-Cola and UK charities, such as Oxfam, Macmillan and the British Red Cross, have been exposed as egregiously hypocritical brands. Tesco too is detested for its two-faced behaviour, whispering Every Little Helps to customers while crucifying its suppliers with ruinous demands. Like-it-or-lump-it brands like Ryanair are at least open and honest about their profit-making orientation – ‘maximizing shareholder value’ is the preferred euphemism – and there’s nothing wrong with that. Strange as it seems, they garner consumer respect for their candour:

Ryanair is the unashamed villain of the corporate world. Other companies probably do worse things but Ryanair is the only one that delights in stepping into the public eye wearing an opera cloak and laughing maniacally ... This approach is unusual and refreshing. Most companies persist in trying to persuade us that they’re nice and care about charitable causes, the obesity epidemic, equipment for schools and the environment. But these are publically traded corporate entities, so they’re incapable of caring – they’re merely trying to make money for their shareholders and believe that this affectation of human feelings will help them do so.<sup>52</sup>

Alan Sugar, similarly, once bragged that he’d sell mass-produced nuclear weapons if he could turn a decent profit on them. Whatever else is said about him, you can’t deny that this gives a whole new meaning to ‘You’re Fired!’

## TENTH COMMANDMENT: THOU SHALT NOT WORSHIP FALSE IDOLS

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The problem with spiritual branding – or corporate social responsibility, if you prefer – is not the hideous hypocrisy of, say, high street bank brands telling consumers how much they care for their welfare. (Do they really imagine that their nefarious behaviours have been forgotten or forgiven?) The real problem is that, instead of being true to themselves, they've fallen for the latest management fad. There's an enormous industry devoted to 'thought leadership', to formulating tools and techniques and theories and tablets of stone that save management sinners.

The thought leadership industry began with Tom Peters' classic co-authored text, *In Search of Excellence*. Based on an empirical study of 43 (originally 62) high-performing American organizations (including NCR, Wang and Xerox), and published at a time when Japanese brands like Honda and Toyota were making significant inroads into the US marketplace, his eight rules of excellence became the management mantras of their day: Stick to the Knitting; Productivity Through People; Close to the Customer, etc.

There have been many management mantras since Tom Peters' most excellent heyday. The new product category he created was, like all new product categories, soon filled to the brim with competing brands. These idea brands are trademarked for the most part and sold with a degree of ruthless efficiency – via books, seminars, websites, consultancy gigs – that'd put Costco to shame. Jim Collins' *Good to Great*, Gary Hamel's *Leading the Revolution*, Nordström and Ridderstrale's *Funky Business* and *Funky Business Forever* are just some of the better known brands in what is a vast, highly competitive and utterly unregulated market. Business isn't getting any easier, after all, and sellers of catechisms, indulgences and holy writs have a ready market among C-suite sinners keen to follow the gurus' straight-and-narrow testaments, especially those whose profits have been backsliding.

Although many cynics rightly disdain such hellfire-and-brimstone, three-steps-to-heaven, snake-oil-suffused sermonizing – most of Peters' excellent exemplars went belly up, Collins' great group didn't do so good after his parables about their prowess appeared, and one of Hamel's foremost role models was none other than Enron – the reality is that much-hyped ideas like re-engineering, relationship marketing, crowd-sourcing and so on do indeed work for the early adopters. However, when everyone is swimming in a blue ocean or orbiting a giant hairball or wondering who moved the cheese (don't ask) or is *au fait* with the iceberg model of branding or, for that matter, has embraced the marketing concept of customer orientation, then the advantages are cancelled out. That's the problem facing marketing at the minute. The marketing concept has been too successful. We live in a world where marketing is ubiquitous, where every executive is familiar with marketing principles, where every degree programme contains the same core modules, where every textbook writer parrots the parrots that parroted previously.

What, then, is the secret of success when the secret of success is known to all? Ah, that would be telling. It's a secret. Nothing less than the secret seventh commandment on page 135 (Think Box 15).

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## BRAND TASK

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Formed in Paris in 1833, the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) is an international Christian voluntary organization dedicated to defeating poverty and disadvantage. Neither discriminatory nor judgemental, SVP helps the homeless, single-parent families, asylum seekers and socially isolated individuals. The causes it champions, however, are less high-profile than those pertaining to, say, animal welfare, environmental protection, political oppression or infectious disease. Come up with a POW to put SVP on the map. Big up the brand.

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## RECOMMENDED READINGS

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Russell W. Belk and Gülnur Tumbat, 'The Cult of Macintosh', *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 8 (3), 2005, 205–217. Many books and articles examine the brand-as-religion/shopping-mall-as-cathedral analogy. This adaptation of the idea to Apple is as good as it gets.

Sir John Hegarty, *Hegarty on Advertising: Turning Intelligence into Magic* (Thames & Hudson: London, 2011). Hegarty's book's here not solely on account of his Catholic Church contribution or the wry yarn about the Levi Strauss account. It's just a great read, as is his companion book on creativity.

Youngme Moon, *Different: Escaping the Competitive Herd* (Crown: New York, 2011). Moon's book follows in the footsteps of fellow Harvard professor Ted Levitt, who claimed that everything can be differentiated. She fills out his insight with lots of readable stories concerning iconic brands, from IKEA to Hollister.

David Hannah et al., 'It's a Secret: Marketing Value and the Denial of Availability', *Business Horizons*, 57 (1), 2014, 49–59. Wanna know a secret? I once wrote some stuff on secrecy. Keep it to yourself. Not least because this article is better than anything written by me. Don't let on to my publisher.

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