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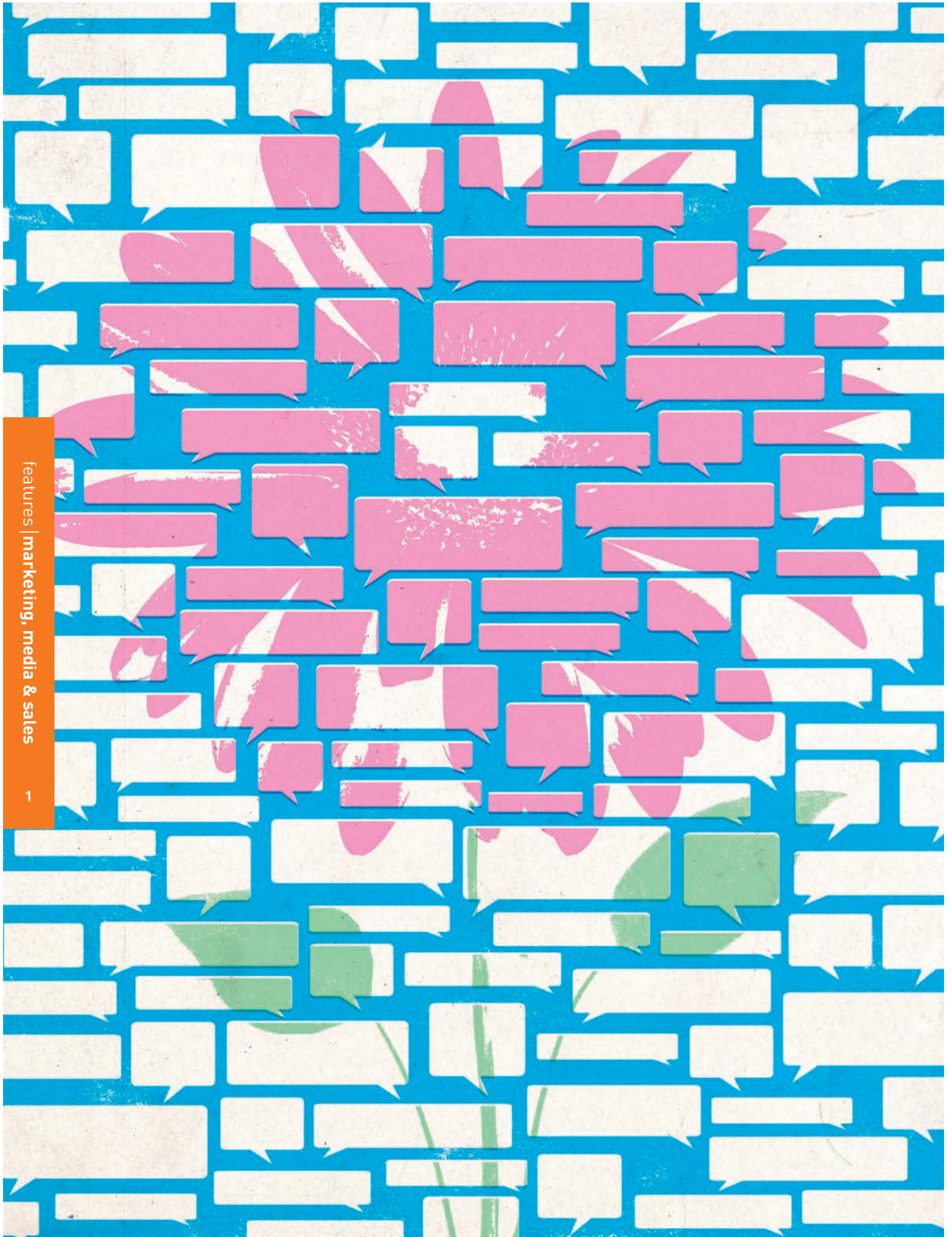
## The Social Life of Brands

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BY MATTHEW EGOL, MARY BETH MCEUEN,  
AND EMILY FALK



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# The Social Life of Brands

A marketing strategy informed by neuroscience can help companies enhance customer engagement — and make better use of tools like social media.

by Matthew Egol, Mary Beth McEuen, and Emily Falk

**It was love at first sight for Nathan Aaron.** The North Carolina graphic artist, illustrator, and social media proprietor first saw Method Inc.'s high-style, environmentally conscious household cleaning products on display in his local Target store. He was smitten.

“What caught my attention immediately was mint dish soap.... Now, I'm a mint fanatic! Crazy about the stuff.... Plus the gorgeous Karim Rashid packaging didn't hurt things one bit. And that was the beginning of my, should I say, lust affair, with Method.” Aaron wrote that in 2008, in the first post on his new blog, [methodlust.com](http://methodlust.com). Since then, he and a community of like-minded consumers have posted more than 1,000 paeans and gripes there, all devoted to the Method company and its brand proposition (fashionably designed, beautifully scented, nontoxic cleaning products). [Methodlust.com](http://Methodlust.com) is nothing more or less than a fan site, similar to one you might see for a hit movie or television show. It contains reviews of the company's products, commentary on its marketing strategy, interviews with employees at all levels, and reader polls — plus fierce critiques when Aaron (or a reader) thinks that the com-

pany has made a misstep.

Eric Ryan and Adam Lowry, the cofounders and chief executives of Method, are not put off by Aaron's familiarity or independent-mindedness. On the contrary, they think he's a dream consumer, and their marketing strategy is built around people like him. “To succeed in a world of earned and social media requires you to shift your mind-set from talking to customers to inspiring advocates,” they wrote in *The Method Method: 7 Obsessions That Helped Our Scrappy Start-Up Turn an Industry Upside Down* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2011). “Not only do advocates make good business sense by buying more of our products more often, but also they engage us — online, in writing, on the phone, and in person — teaching us all sorts of stuff we wouldn't have figured out on our own.”

Would your company consider Nathan Aaron a dream consumer or a loose cannon? Would you encourage his public affair with your brand and listen to his ideas, or demand that he stop? Would you even know he was out there? Your answer says a lot about your approach to marketing and customer relationships.

**Matthew Egol**

*matthew.egoll@booz.com*  
is a partner in Booz & Company's communications, media, and technology practice. Based in New York, he focuses on marketing strategy and capability development related to digitization, social media, and shopper marketing.

**Mary Beth McEuen**

*marybeth.mceuen@maritz.com*  
is vice president and executive director of the Maritz Institute in St. Louis, Mo. The institute is an independent network of thought leaders working to create next-generation business practices based on human science research.

**Emily Falk**

*ebfalk@umich.edu*  
is an assistant professor of communication studies and psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where she directs the Communication Neuroscience Lab. She is also a research associate at the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Institute for Social Research.

Nathan's devotion and Method's response to it are becoming more typical. Some might attribute this trend — the increasing use of community engagement by marketers — to the rise of online social media: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, fan sites, and social marketing websites (also known as private-label media) created by companies themselves. (See "Scaling Up Social Media," by Christopher Vollmer and Karen Premo, *s+b*, Autumn 2012.) But the trend represents a more fundamental change in marketing practice, linked to insights from social psychology, behavioral economics, and neuroscience and brain research. Every form of interaction between companies and consumers — taking place online and offline, in stores and over mobile devices, in branded content and by word of mouth, and indeed through all direct consumer experience — is now understood to be shaped by the social nature of brands.

As marketers put this insight into practice in sophisticated ways, a one-way message or image can no longer compete. The value of a brand is linked to the relationships it fosters: the social connections among people who buy the product or service. Managing these connections at every scale, from an individual contact to a message that reaches millions of people, is the fundamental task of marketing today.

With the right conditions in place, a brand can move beyond a purely transaction-based relationship to become a platform for an experience that feels to consumers like friendship. Great marketers have known how to do this for decades, of course, but it is now possible to make authentic connections more consistently. Tapping into the social nature of a brand this way means thinking differently about the expectations that consumers have for the product or service, their view

of the company that produces it, and the values they share about it. Some marketers, like Whole Foods, Ikea, and eBay, are consciously evoking a shift in attitude that grew more prominent in the Great Recession: a desire for less acquisition of goods (or even experiences), and for more meaningful, lasting forms of fulfillment. Companies that promise simplicity, connection, and sustainable benefits can gain the most from this shift — but only if they deliver.

**Two Systems of Thought**

Marketers who want to build a strong social life for their brands can start by better understanding the social nature of thought and action: the interpersonal, cognitive, and emotional triggers that link human interaction with emotional experience.

People essentially have two ways of thinking. Through several decades of research, cognitive scientists have come to recognize them as deeply ingrained, complementary systems; psychologist and Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman made them the central theme of his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011). Social cognitive neuroscientists such as Matthew Lieberman have also identified brain regions that map to these two systems, with each playing a role in social interactions.

The first system — often referred to as System One, "reflexive thinking," or the Thinking Fast system — manages habitual thought. When people take mental shortcuts, have a gut reaction, or form a rapid first impression, they are using this system. Thinking Fast seems to operate effortlessly, often generating first impressions within a tenth of a second. These impressions are shaped by other ingrained and automatic thoughts

— current emotional states, prior experiences, habitual attitudes, and social norms — any of which may be related to products or brands in some contexts. The snap judgments of Thinking Fast don't necessarily register as conscious impressions or decisions, but they can be powerful and self-reinforcing; every time a person acts automatically, a neural pathway is invoked and the thought is made a little stronger and more accessible.

However, the quick impressions of Thinking Fast are not sufficient on their own to meet the challenges of even a relatively uneventful day. People therefore rely on the second cognitive system — known as System Two, “reflective thinking,” or the Thinking Slow system — to process their thoughts, reactions, beliefs, and expectations more deliberately. The Thinking Slow system is not exclusively rational; it is also influenced by emotions. But it comes to the forefront in a more conscious way when people are sufficiently motivated or attentive. The Thinking Slow system takes place in parts of the brain (for example, the prefrontal cortex) where thought processing can feel relatively demanding or draining. The brain has a limited capacity for reflective thinking at any one time.

Although they occur in different parts of the brain, the reflexive (Thinking Fast) and reflective (Thinking Slow) systems operate together. Each influences the other. Social psychologists studying persuasion — such as Richard Petty, John Cacioppo, Robert Cialdini, Alice Eagly, and Shelly Chaiken — have long observed this phenomenon in experiments; when people are distracted or don't care much about the issue in question, they revert to reflexive thinking. But when the stakes are high or there is less distraction, people tend to engage in more reflective thought. Social neuroscientist William Cunningham has suggested that these two systems work together iteratively; the brain balances their relative influence according to a number of factors, including how motivated the person is to think hard and how much experience he or she has in a given situation.

How does this apply to marketing? Because people are rapid meaning makers through Thinking Fast, and deliberate meaning adjusters through Thinking Slow, the development of brand loyalty is a complex and shifting process. Both thinking systems are involved in processing each impression, and every impression matters. Initial decisions to select or change a product or service may involve the Thinking Slow system. But over time, as people integrate that product or service into their routines, the decision to purchase or use it migrates to

Thinking Fast. As habits develop, consumers reach for that brand with less conscious thought. Their perceptions of themselves using the brand, and of others who use the brand, may also change.

Imagine setting out to buy a relatively complex product, like a mobile telephone. You might walk into a retail electronics store with an expectation based on years of experience and perceptions, ingrained in the reflexive (Thinking Fast) networks of your brain, about “geeky” technology, manipulative service contracts, and unhelpful salespeople. This pattern of thought arises instantaneously when you enter, making you skeptical of sales arguments.

But if friends have told you ahead of time that they had a positive experience at that store location, you may slow down your thinking a bit. Then suppose the salesperson you encounter is skilled and knowledgeable enough to describe other uses for the phone that resonate with your needs — for example, as a navigation system that can help you find restaurants in unfamiliar neighborhoods. The reflective, Thinking Slow parts of your brain might come to the forefront. Repeated experiences with a salesperson who is honest and knowledgeable might lead you to develop a feeling of trust toward that retail store. If you keep returning, you might sooner or later revert to Thinking Fast, but now with a higher degree of brand loyalty embedded in your day-to-day behavior. Within the brain, loyalty can become a habit.

The flip side of the coin also holds; for example, if you can't easily return a garment or resolve a frustrating banking problem, your brain might register the same type of conflict and negative emotion that it would if a friend betrayed you. Distaste for that company's brand would then color the starting point of your future interactions with the brand via the Thinking Fast system. In either case, when the brain is motivated to expend energy on the Thinking Slow system, and there is good reason to change basic attitudes about the company and its products, the consumer is more likely to feel that change.

### **The Social Nature of the Brand**

Brand loyalty, when ingrained this way, also makes an individual more likely to talk about the brand with others — which, in turn, reinforces the loyalty. Thinking is social or at least deeply affected by human interaction. Some brands, such as BMW, Burberry, Coca-Cola, Heineken, Lego, Nike, Starbucks, Virgin, and Volks-

wagen, have tapped into consumers' hearts and minds at various times because they are associated with a sense of community.

Since Aristotle, philosophers have identified social relationships (in addition to reason and emotion) as important factors in persuasion and influence. Starting in the 1930s, social psychologists verified experimentally the importance of social relationships in influencing attitudes and behavior; beginning in the 1970s, behavioral economists confirmed that market interactions also have a strong emotional and cognitive component.

Now, a growing number of social psychologists and marketing researchers use social media to study the link between social norms and purchasing decisions. They are finding that the context of a community influences how people interpret their experiences, and may shape their willingness to have an authentic relationship with a brand, rather than just engage in a transaction. For example, when people expect others they know to react with approval to a product or service, they are more likely to react positively themselves.

Neuroscience research also suggests that social cues shape the way the brain responds to information. Social cognitive neuroscientists and neuroeconomists, including Greg Berns, Daniel Campbell-Meiklejohn, Vasily Klucharev, Malia Mason, Michael Norton, Hilke Plassmann, and Jamil Zaki, have shown that preferences — and the neural responses involved in computing those preferences — tend to change depending on whether people have been told what other people think.

The brain doesn't process all people equally. It has long been known by social psychologists that human beings cognitively favor some people over others. William Cunningham and Jay Van Bavel (director of the social perception and evaluation lab at New York University) have found that the systems in the brain that signal motivational relevance are more active when people see other people who are members of their team or group, in comparison to outsiders.

The social nature of thought, combined with the neuroscience of brand loyalty, should be a major factor in marketing priorities. Every touch point in a consumer's life should be treated as a pivotal moment, an opportunity to reinforce the connection between the consumer and the brand. Touch points that encourage the sharing of social sentiment may be especially powerful reinforcers. Thus, the more often that people like Nathan Aaron post their recommendations online through ratings, reviews, tweets, and commentary, the more

broadly emotional associations related to that product or service will proliferate. When Aaron perceives that others value his information, he is more likely to continue sharing it, and to attract others to jump on board. This social sentiment about brands need not be limited to a fan site like [methodlust.com](http://methodlust.com); it can appear in any context, facilitated directly by brands and retailers across both digital and physical touch points.

How, then, can your company shift to a relationship-driven approach to marketing — anchored in authenticity, trust, and multifaceted connections? There are four tenets, which form a convenient acronym: Reframe, Understand, Listen, and Engage (RULE).

### **Reframe: Focus on the Whole Person**

Many companies are still learning how to design every touch point to generate a greater level of social interaction and participation. The new forms of marketing, grounded in building relationships, are to conventional marketing what interactive games are to television drama. Instead of a single, point-to-point narrative, presented the same way to every audience member, the campaign is an immersive experience, in which the play is unpredictable and both players — the consumer and the marketer — may respond quickly. It is less scripted, and consumers have an active hand in shaping the outcome of the game. The authenticity of connection is critical; a brand that is not trusted cannot survive in this milieu.

To develop this level of authenticity, marketers must learn to connect with the consumer as a whole person, including those drives and motivations that were formerly considered irrelevant to product consumption. One useful body of work for this is the four-drive motivational theory developed by two organizational science professors at Harvard Business School, Paul R. Lawrence (who died in 2011) and Nitin Nohria (currently dean of the business school). In their book *Driven: How Human Nature Shapes Our Choices* (Jossey-Bass, 2002), they proposed that people are motivated and make choices as a result of four innate drives: the drive to acquire possessions and status; the drive to bond and relate with others; the drive to learn and understand the world; and the drive to defend what they consider important. Marketing has long attempted to address these drives, but different campaigns have focused on different ones. The more drives that are taken into consideration by marketers — not just the drives to acquire and defend, but also the drives to bond and learn — the more loyal consumers become. With

Brands that grew the most were explicitly connected in people's minds to fundamental human values such as joy, pride, and the desire to improve society.

socially oriented marketing, it's particularly important to balance all four drives, rather than emphasizing only one or two.

For example, Kimberly-Clark's marketers engaged all four motivational drives in their Potty Project campaign created for Huggies Pull-Ups training pants. They considered all the stressful dynamics of potty training: the drive to acquire (gaining status as a good parent by successfully training your children); the drive to bond (by having a better relationship with your kids); the drive to defend (by avoiding conflict in the home); and the drive to learn (by mastering parenting skills). The Pull-Ups team created a website ([pull-ups.com/na/](http://pull-ups.com/na/)) with instructional videos, featuring a community of parents learning together. It showed ways to make potty training a cooperative, relatively fun-filled task for parent and child. In just three months, the Potty Project became a top destination for potty-training parents, garnering 857,000 visits, which totaled 45,387 hours, and 1.9 million video views. Even better, parents shared the experience; the amount of material sent on from the site to visitors' friends exceeded the project's target by 400 percent.

#### **Understand: Align to Consumers' Values**

In a study of 50,000 brands, former Procter & Gamble global marketing officer Jim Stengel found that those that grew the most over a 10-year period (on average, three times faster than the overall group, from 2000 through 2010) had one thing in common. They were explicitly connected in people's minds to fundamental human values such as joy, connection with other people, adventurousness, pride, and the desire to improve society. (See "The Case for the Brand Ideal," by Jim Stengel,

page 7.) The reason, from a neuroscience perspective, may have to do with the reflexive nature of deeply held values. When these values are called to mind, the associated emotions and memories may transfer (through Fast Thinking) to other concepts, including some brand references. Indeed, when information about brand attributes tied to values (such as protecting the environment or honoring tradition) is manipulated in experiments, people for whom the value is personally relevant are significantly more likely to make decisions focusing on that attribute. In short, there appears to be a rapid connection in many people's minds between the relevance of a brand and the fundamental things they care about.

Different values are important to different individuals, but values themselves tend to be broad motivational constructs, adopted by people the world over. One of the most comprehensive studies of values was conducted by Shalom H. Schwartz, a social psychologist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Schwartz classified human values into 10 types: power, achievement, pleasure (hedonism), stimulation, self-direction, universalism (which includes values like social justice and world peace), benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security. He concluded that group cultures influence the priorities people place on these values; higher-priority values are powerful motivators because they are central to people's concepts of themselves, and are bound to deep emotions.

Thus, when people engage in brand experiences that activate their high-priority values, they may be more likely to identify with the brand and develop an emotional connection with it. A recent Starbucks campaign on behalf of social consciousness may work this way, by connecting perceptions of the chain with the

# The Case for the Brand Ideal

by Jim Stengel

The pivotal assignment during my early career at Procter & Gamble (P&G) was Jif peanut butter. Jif was a US\$250 million business when I joined its brand management team in 1984. Before consumer engagement became the vogue in marketing, we conducted an unusual number of in-home visits and “shop-alongs” with moms. These occasions sharpened my team’s sense of Jif’s core customers. They weren’t simply women between the ages of 18 and 34; they were highly engaged moms with young children.

As a result, my guiding thought was to make Jif the most loved peanut butter by exemplifying and supporting what these moms valued. We had to have the highest quality and make sure there were no traces of carcinogenic aflatoxins, which are toxins produced by mold, in the peanuts we used. We had to address concerns about health and nutrition. We had to have great taste that young kids loved.

Jif had abandoned its famous “Choosy mothers choose Jif” slogan for “Taste the ‘Jifference’ in Jif.” But our deeper understanding helped me realize that the older slogan better ex-

pressed what we stood for. I brought it back, which was then an unheard-of move at P&G. We also created a full-page newspaper ad campaign headlined “The Answer Is No,” which explained that our peanut butter had no cholesterol, no preservatives, and no artificial colors or flavors. It was based on the top 10 questions moms asked us about Jif. In tune with our overall effort to support their values, we held national promotions in which we donated 10 cents per jar to local parent-teacher associations.

These efforts transformed Jif from a sleepy business to an explosive growth story. We achieved record market share, gaining two full share points in a market in which fractions of a share point had been all but impossible to win without eroding margin. We also attained record profitability, with increases in total profit and profit margin of 143 percent and 110 percent, respectively, in the first year, and even more the following year. These results became a highlight of my career and the careers of key members of our small management team.

Looking back on these decisions, which seemed largely intuitive at the time, I now recognize that they exemplify a critical, but often overlooked, principle of marketing: the power of ideals. By aligning the business with moms’ values, we implicitly — and

subconsciously — aligned it with the concept of human growth. We became more than a maker of peanut butter. We were a partner with moms in their young children’s development.

Any brand is simply the collective intent of the people behind it. To everyone your business touches, from employees to consumers, the brand defines who you are and what you stand for as a business. If you want great business results, you and your brand have to stand for something compelling. And that’s where brand ideals enter the equation.

A brand ideal is a shared intent by everyone in a business to improve people’s lives. The ability to leverage this ideal is what separates great business leaders from good, bad, or indifferent ones. A brand ideal is a business’s essential reason for being, the higher-order benefit it brings to the world.

Does a shared goal of improving people’s lives sound too idealistic for the rough-and-tumble of business? What about practical, hard-nosed goals such as making the quarterly numbers, increasing market share, and cutting costs? All of these practical goals are crucial. It’s also necessary to want to be the best-performing enterprise around, with the highest standards, the strongest people, and the most satisfied customers. But the best businesses aim higher.

values of universalism and benevolence, reinforced through visible actions, including the company’s own employee benefit practices. Starbucks chief executive officer Howard Schultz started the campaign himself, basing it on the idea that authenticity must be present in any cause-based marketing effort or its influence will be limited.

It kicked off in 2008, soon after Schultz was brought back to the company as CEO to turn around

its performance. He held a leadership meeting in New Orleans that included a day of community service; 11,000 store managers worked together in neighborhoods that had been damaged by Hurricane Katrina. Since then, Starbucks has created a series of campaigns that tie its corporate identity to voting, recycling, rain-forest preservation, economic revival, and other social causes.

In his own writing, Schultz asserts that Starbucks



They don't get there through vision and mission statements. When you strip away the platitudes from those documents, what's left typically boils down to: "We want our current business model to make or keep us the leader of our current pack of competitors in current and immediately foreseeable market conditions." This is a formula for mediocrity. It aims too low, locking an enterprise into a business model based on the agenda of the business, not that of the customer. If such a statement mentions the customer at all, it's the customer as seen from the company's point of view and in terms of the company's agenda.

Truly sustainable business models are linked to fundamental human values — an ideal of improving people's lives. This clarifies the business's true reason for being, which in turn supports open-ended processes that can drive many different business models in succession. The model will have to change with market conditions, and the only sure basis for creating viable business models over the long term is when a business and its customers share an agenda. To hit higher targets and stay in front of the competition requires an ideal.

Procter & Gamble had a remarkable run in the first decade of the 21st century. But in 2000, it was in big trouble, having recently lost \$85 billion in market capitalization in

only six months. Its core businesses were stagnating, and its people were demoralized.

A.G. Lafley, then the CEO, asked me to take on the role of global marketing officer to help transform the culture of the company to one where in "the consumer is boss." I jumped at the challenge, and proposed building the best marketing organization in the world — attracting the best talent; focusing on growing the market share of the majority of our businesses; and making our marketing known, recognized, and admired by all the people important to P&G's future.

To hit these big targets, we needed an even bigger goal: identifying and activating a distinctive ideal (or purpose, as P&G dubbed it). We would improve people's lives; that would be the explicit goal of every business in the P&G portfolio. We could then establish each business's true reason for being as the basis for new growth, and we could link them all into a strong foundation for P&G's recovery by building each business's culture around its ideal.

Every P&G business had to communicate its ideal internally and externally. Lafley and I and the rest of the senior management team expected all the business leaders to articulate how each brand's individual identity furthered P&G's overarching mantra of improving people's lives.

We also had to model the ideal ourselves. And we had to measure all our activities and people in terms of the ideals of our brands and the company as a whole. The success of that effort brought P&G's extraordinary growth from 2001 on.

The business case for brand ideals is not altruism or corporate social responsibility. It concerns connecting what happens inside a business with what happens outside it, especially in the "black box" of consumers' minds and the way they make decisions. If you're willing to align your business with a fundamental human ideal, you too can achieve extraordinary growth. Imagine the possibilities that creates for you, your people, and your community.

#### Jim Stengel

[www.jimstengel.com](http://www.jimstengel.com)

is the former global marketing officer of Procter & Gamble and is a consultant to senior management and an adjunct professor at the UCLA Anderson School of Management. This essay is excerpted from his book, *Grow: How Ideals Power Growth and Profit at the World's Greatest Companies* (Crown Business, 2011).

had foundered in the mid-2000s because in pursuing rapid growth it became disconnected from its own values. The perception of Starbucks as a yuppie-style gentrifying force, for example, built up negative associations and cost the company the loyalty of some consumers. One result of his new approach is a significant leap in appeal to both consumers and employees; they see the company, and its CEO, as making a sincere, sustained commitment.

#### Listen: Deepen Consumer Insight

One hallmark of effective marketing has always been collecting signals and feedback from purchasers; now, marketers have richer opportunities for listening to consumers and learning what they want, need, and value. Digital media enable this capability; a staggering amount of data about products, brands, and companies can be gathered by tracking and analyzing what people say and do online. But the most significant aspect of

Enterprise Rent-A-Car monitors tweets and comments posted on social media sites each day. Whenever a negative comment is posted, the customer care team immediately reaches out.

listening is not the technology; it's the way companies use what they learn.

Consider, for example, the services provided by an online software company called Bazaarvoice. Founded in 2005, Bazaarvoice compiles ratings and reviews of products and services posted on hundreds of brand and retailer websites, allowing companies to use those insights to strengthen their capabilities for reaching customers. (Its business partners include Salesforce.com, SAP, and Booz & Company, the publisher of this magazine.)

Global manufacturer 3M also gathers Bazaarvoice data and uses it in both marketing and R&D. It has collected thousands of reviews and comments from more than a dozen retail sites and mobile apps, as well as Facebook postings, using them to improve marketing campaigns or create new ones. In one case, the company's Precision Ultra Edge nonstick scissors were selling below expectations. 3M changed its product copy, quoting the language consumers used online ("they're great for cutting fabric and photos, with a comfortable grip"). Among the results was an increase in the click-through rate for banner ads. Customer feedback gathered online also led to the redesign of other products.

Listening to customers, both through social media and with more traditional research methods, requires going beyond what customers say to better understanding their emotional experience with the brand. For example, Maritz Research conducts some of its customer-experience research with a "make or break satisfaction" methodology, surveying customers to understand the key encounters that either made a brand experience great (like finding unexpected treats in a hotel room) or broke the connection (like finding bugs in a hotel bed).

Insights like these can help marketers better understand the implicit and emotionally charged elements that the consumer took from the experience, elements that can significantly shape future interactions with or perceptions of the brand.

Companies need keen customer-insight capabilities to make sense of customer feedback and respond effectively. They need to integrate consumer perceptions gathered from multiple touch points. One company that is building its listening capabilities this way is Enterprise Holdings, the parent company of Enterprise Rent-A-Car, National Car Rental, Alamo Rent A Car, and WeCar. Enterprise uses surveys and social media to track customer experience. Information on factors such as perceived wait time is gathered, analyzed, and reported from all the branches and representatives. This drives clear frontline accountability for delivering an exceptional customer experience. Enterprise's commitment to listening led it to create a customer care team that monitors tweets and comments posted on social media sites from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. each day. Whenever a negative comment from a distressed customer is posted, the team immediately reaches out to the customer to resolve the issue. Enterprise's leaders also consider the customer perception information when they redesign the company's services.

#### **Engage: Humanize Touch Points**

The brand experience is no longer restricted to the traditional organizational silos of advertising and marketing. Now, the entire company takes part in strengthening relationships and brand advocacy. This might involve mobile marketing (with the smartphone acting as a connection point across the full purchase journey from

the customer's couch to the store shelf), store displays (where brands can engage shoppers with solution-oriented merchandising), the anticipation of future behavior from past customer behavior data (through vehicles such as frequent-shopper cards), and the redefinition of technical support (as in Best Buy's Geek Squad or Apple's Genius Bar). In the most farsighted companies, mobile marketing is a means of bringing the community to the shelf. When an apparel shopper photographs a garment and texts "What do you think?" to a friend, the friend's positive response may activate social emotions that solidify the brand connection.

Building a high level of customer engagement through experience can require broad-based cultural change within a company; employees must align their actions with the values of the brand. This type of corporate alignment is often perceived in the breach — when an environmental disaster, quality crisis, or ethical scandal damages the company's reputation and bottom line. By now, many consumers are looking for authenticity, and companies can only "walk the talk" by creating cultures where brand values are expressed every day. With the right kind of cultural initiatives, training programs, and incentive structures, the actions of frontline employees — who represent the part of the organization that customers usually see — can be a critical component of the brand experience.

Embassy Suites Hotels has engaged all its "team members" (as it refers to employees) in the creation of a socially rewarding brand experience. The company's culture is focused on this, and is characterized by the Embassy Suites service statement: "Gracious, engaging and caring...making a difference in the lives of others — in ways both big and small." The ongoing culture initiative, "Make a Difference," encompasses a number of programs that influence the behavior of employees, other stakeholders, and guests. For example, new team members are introduced to *The Deal* — a booklet that outlines goals, expectations, behaviors, and "secrets to success" that catalyze the distinctive Embassy Suites brand experience. A complementary program called "Make a Difference...for you" enables hotel managers to acknowledge team members for their contributions; acknowledgments include certificates of achievement and a selection of other nonmonetary rewards. The payoff for this attention has been dramatic; in 2011, for example, Embassy Suites took the top spot in the J.D. Power and Associates annual North American Hotel Guest Satisfaction Index Study in its category.

## A Better Brand Relationship

Many marketers — and some consumers — may wonder how far companies should go in pursuing enduring brand-to-consumer relationships. Conventional marketing, focused on the explicit value of products and services, is easier and more familiar.

But social engagement is not just unavoidable. It represents a far more effective use of marketing effort and resources, and at its best, it represents a more human approach to engaging consumers. By using the four RULE activities — reframing, understanding, listening, and engagement — companies can invoke the kind of social learning that leads to long-term, mutually rewarding relationships of any sort. On their side, companies will deliver products and services that are more closely tied to the values and ideals held by both employees and consumers. Of all the moments of truth along the total brand experience, the ones that make the most difference could turn out to be the repeated social connections that create bonds among the people who are part of the brand community. The social life of a brand can be an integrative force for a more holistic approach to marketing, in which companies build long-term, multifaceted, and fruitful relationships with the people who identify with their brand ideals and choose to buy and advocate on behalf of their products and services. +

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## Resources

Charles Gremillion, *Make Their Day: The Power to Make Guests Happy* (Tribe, 2011): By the director of Embassy Suites' brand culture, on the power of a great customer relationship.

Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011): Compelling guide to the two overarching systems that govern thought.

Paul R. Lawrence and Nitin Nohria, *Driven: How Human Nature Shapes Our Choices* (Jossey-Bass, 2002): How to build a business that meets the drives to acquire, bond, learn, and defend.

Jim Stengel, *Grow: How Ideals Power Growth and Profit at the World's Greatest Companies* (Crown Business, 2011): Research-driven manifesto on the link between what brands stand for and how they prosper.

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For more thought leadership on this topic, see the *s+b* website at: [strategy-business.com/marketing\\_media\\_sales](http://strategy-business.com/marketing_media_sales).

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