KAI D. WRIGHT

FOLLOW *the* FEELING

brand building in a noisy world

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For Deborah Jean Wright

CONTENTS

PREFACE

I started my first business in fourth grade, around age nine. I made no money by collecting phone books to recycle. I later realized that this kind of business was called a nonprofit.

The second business I started was a for-profit, for sure. At 12 years old, drenched in humidity and hot breezes, I started a grass-cutting business out of my uncle and aunt's Florida garage. I learned how to define a problem: thick St. Augustine grass that grew like clockwork every week. I learned how to frame and package a solution: my time and grit. Constraints: family, homework, and extracurricular interests. And over the course of six years, I learned customer relationship management, customer acquisition, and loyalty techniques. But mostly, I learned there were many factors in a business's success or failure.

500 Startup founder Bill Gross looked at the dozens of successful bets that his firm made on startups—Airbnb, Instagram, Uber, YouTube, and LinkedIn. What he found was startling—out of the five factors of Timing, Team, Idea, Business Model, and Funding, timing was the most important.[1] Even bellwether businesses that rule the Fortune 500 are susceptible to becoming victims of timing . . . only 50% survive.[2]

An elder millennial by birth, but self-professed digital native by tribe, there was a major shift between "business" while growing up and "business" in the present day. Today, there's *social* business, *data-driven* business, *experiential* business, *content-driven* business, and *digitally-enabled* business. And with every new platform, technology, and service, the sea of metrics surrounding the business, consumer, and market can easily entangle a seasoned executive in a web of data. And that "timing" element doesn't stand still— it seems to be accelerating us into a standoff between data and meaningfulness.

I've long had a time management issue: I could never choose between learning and doing. It was a virtuous cycle that drove all my scholastic pursuits as a child, and later drove my career path as an adult. It's to blame for the magnetism that attracted me to become a scholar-practitioner. Between teaching at Columbia University and working as a strategic advisor to C-suite executives, startup founders, and talent time is precious. The yin and the yang of the theoretical and the practical produce a system of creativity being applied strategically, though, and that is my North Star.

The third business I started during college was steeped in business plan rhetoric and pitch competitions. Problem: college students have great local awareness but can often lack national attentiveness. Solution: a national news insert that would go into college newspapers, to deliver a broader lens beyond the campus. The company: *Accent Magazine*. I learned that this is called a social enterprise.

By the time I was on the Forbes 30 under 30, I had five jobs, and all were dream jobs: advising Fortune 100 companies on brand and marketing strategy for their $100 million campaigns; working for a celebrity to launch a $100 million media startup; and working on personal brand development for C-suite executives and entertainment influencers like Meghan Trainor. And in starting things over and over again, I've observed there are only five parts of any brand that matter most—whether it's a nonprofit, for-profit, social enterprise, or person.

As a social scientist who studied economics at the University of Chicago, and a self-proclaimed science-fair geek in high school, the power of pattern recognition is the sharpest tool in the shed of any strategist. Mapping patterns through trends enables the ability to steer focus, build lanes, and reduce friction for success.

Professionally, my work in communication has always centered on a singular fascination: How do companies navigate digital to connect with audiences? And every job, no matter which one,

touched on the growing omnipresence of digital, platforms, and technology.

In studying and teaching communication, especially in an age when consumers are tethered to the Internet of Things, those "things" have made relationships feel cold. Devices. Servers. Screens. Chips. Dashboards. Mar-tech Stacks. Clicks. Endless Feeds. Is the dog chasing the tail, or vice versa?

Academically, I gravitate toward the field of behavioral economics. During multiple classes at the University of Chicago, the late Nobel laureate Gary Becker had to suffer my presence as an ambitious and eager student. Population. Demographics. People. Behavior. Incentives. Penalties. Working for a business school professor during college as a research assistant helped to sharpen my ability to pull insights from the data sets of company financial performance.

Fifteen hundred companies . . . that's the total number of companies whose performance data I analyzed to determine the five parts of a brand that matter most. From there, 100 anomaly companies emerged; companies profiled within this book as case studies.

This book takes the lessons from those fast-growing companies, and puts them into a back-of-the-napkin simple system—LAVEC— to offer busy marketers, strategists, employees, and entrepreneurs a quick guide to branding practices that lead to resonance in a digital age: (1) lexicon triggers, (2) audio cues, (3) visual stimuli, (4) experience, and (5) cultural connections. This book is about finding and expressing your brand's true North Star, and gives practical tips on how to hack and hijack culture to win the hearts and minds of tribes.

Having two military parents, my family's journey included several years in Germany. Infusing a sense of global citizenship in my DNA, I've trekked to over 20 countries. Branding has the power to and must transcend physical geographies, and a truly electrifying

brand will light up the world stage. Regardless of what language you speak, the geography where you live, or what origins you have, these five areas of "brand" are universal igniters that enable your startup or 100-year-old company to join the fast-moving mavens who are mastering brand building.

Notes

1. Bill Gross, "The Single Biggest Reason Why Startups Succeed." TED, March 2015. https://www.ted.com/talks/bill_gross_the_single_biggest_reason_why_startups_succeed.
2. Capgemini, "When Digital Disruption Strikes: How Can Incumbents Respond?" LinkedIn SlideShare, February 20, 2015. https://www.slideshare.net/capgemini/digital-disruption-44929928.

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Michael Wasilewski

Paul English

Peter Fasano

Que Gaskins

Rebecca Heino

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KAI D. WRIGHT is a strategy advisor to C-suite executives, founders, and talent. He advises on subjects including digital, technology, and marketing. He has been recognized as a leader by *Forbes*, *Adweek*, *CSQ*, *Cablefax*, and the Advertising Research Foundation. A frequent speaker at major conferences and Fortune 500 companies, Wright is a lecturer at Columbia University and global consulting partner at Ogilvy. His clients have included Bank of America, HP, McDonald's, Bacardi, Ford, Walgreens, Merck, and L'Oréal, in addition to startups and music talent. Wright graduated from Columbia University and the University of Chicago. An avid traveler, he lived in Germany during his childhood, and has visited over 20 countries. He lives in New York City.

INTRODUCTION

For the past decade, I've roamed the halls of Columbia University—first as a graduate student studying communication and then as a lecturer. Before, I studied economics at the University of Chicago. After graduating, I worked as an advisor to Fortune 100 clients and startups. Through high-profile projects across advertising, PR, and media, I've navigated the landscape of hacking, hijacking, and steering hearts and minds. Influence . . . ish. In academic speak: applying principles of persuasion.

My journey as an intellectual misfit started abroad in my youth. My father and mother met in the military, and eventually, our family ended up in Germany. Coming back to the United States, strangely, I was a foreigner. Caught between languages and customs, every interaction with the world spawned a dozen questions. Identified as gifted, I was taught to untangle physical and mental puzzles through observation and question asking.

While a love of science may not be the coolest thing to talk about among friends more interested in playing sports, it nonetheless still teaches a lifelong lesson on how to apply research methods, interpret data, and extract meaning from disjointed variables. When your entrepreneurial spirit pushes you to do things others consider "too risky" for their liking, then you learn to live peacefully in a reality of change that others find daunting and uncomfortable. And when your military parents raise you in Germany and you've hit 20 countries by the time you're on the *Forbes* list of 30 under 30, then your worldview tilts to a new spectrum of gravitating toward what's next and new.

In many regards, all of this made me an intellectual misfit—a chaser of anomalies. A trend-eating, culture junkie disciplined in

social sciences from an early age, accustomed to problem solving. Someone comfortable being uncomfortable. But, I've come to find a quiet power in being a "misfit"—although it took me some time to learn that. Over that time, an asset became manifest—a worldview informed by standing at intersections, namely a meeting of the roads of media, technology, and culture.

Through research, observation, and experience from a fast-moving career that has taken me from the boardroom to the classroom, from Harlem to Hollywood, and from advising celebrities to C-suite executives, I've seen one principle of influence ring true: *the most important "expression" of your brand—whether a person, company, or nonprofit—is simply how you make others feel*. This book is an ode to that principle, an argument for why we are ruled by feelings, and most important, how to leverage feelings as a competitive advantage through five core parts of your brand. We'll discuss over a hundred examples of how brands are both nailing the right message for their customers or failing to deliver on a central feeling, and what consequences it all has in a world that is rewiring our behavior with every new digital device, service, or platform. We'll dive into the broken rules of brand planning, and offer a new "back-of-the-napkin simple" system for mindfully designing a brand built for the digital age. This will include behavioral science principles from Nobel laureates and practical wisdom from today's most inspiring leaders. Your brand should've rebooted yesterday, so this will be a quick read. #LetsGetToWork!

FORMING A WORLDVIEW

I made a career promise to myself—to be selfish. Yes, I volunteer. A lot. And yes, I've even started a charity for youth to have a pipeline into technology. I'm not talking about *Grinch* selfish . . . I mean *soul* selfish. Fulfillment selfish. True-to-my-roots selfish. From childhood onward, my curious mind turned into curious

hands; and those hands built science fair projects on Mondays, wrote Latin on Tuesdays, buzzed answers during brain brawl on Wednesdays, worked as a photography assistant on Thursdays, waited for the family phone line to free up for AOL dial-up on Fridays, cut grass for my startup on Saturdays, and flipped through the Bible on Sundays.

Because even from an early age, my mother encouraging me to live outside of my comfort zone taught me the value of being able to navigate intersections. So, I set an ambitious goal: to manage my early career by having jobs for only 12- to 24-month periods. Like science experiments, answers continue to arise with continued experimentation; I was determined to learn as much as possible from each role before moving to the next. Getting paid to learn—the convergence of my two favorite interests.

My first job out of college at global advertising agency Ogilvy, which happened to be a rotational program, set my feet on the marketing path. Before long, one job period turned into the next, and within 10 years, I successfully maneuvered through five dream roles. Each job in a different place, with a different culture to adjust to, to rebel against, and to try to disrupt. Every opportunity was a new challenge, from contributing to the growth of $100 million advertising campaigns to helping launch a $100 million media startup. Some situations I found to be more beneficial for my career trajectory than others—but each role gave a piece necessary to fill-in the puzzle of brand building for both companies and people. I'll share those puzzle pieces with you in this book.

Whether teaching graduate students at Columbia University, speaking to leaders at Fortune 100 companies, or advising startup founders, people who were interested in my fast-moving career would bring me the most intriguing questions to untangle:

- What can my large company learn from startups, and how can my startup grow so fast that large companies can't catch up?

- How do we achieve brand relevance and resonance in a fleeting world of attention where there's an oversaturation of opinion, reviews, user-generated content, and direct peer-to-peer transactions?
- How do we prime our brand to survive this digital revolution of an always-on consumer tethered to the Web yet hidden behind firewalls?
- What are the new rules of brand building for today's culture?

A CASE FOR CHANGE

As a strategist, I've built an armory of secret weapons—and now I want you to arm yourself with them, too. Back in 2015, Emilie Wapnick gave three tips for disruptors during an inspiring TED talk that will serve you well: learn to be adaptable, possess the ability to synthesize reams of data quickly, and recognize patterns.[1] It's her three signature traits of misfits destined to have a nomadic existence of quickly solving problem after problem, in place after place, rather than staying in one job. Mostly, it all comes down to the ability to make sense of data, trends, and patterns observed across fields. To see blind spots. Every team needs to consider how they're covering their blind spots; working with diverse leaders who know how to navigate intersections is one key solution.

For anyone considering starting a company, most seasoned executives will tell you that building loyalty and driving new consumer behavior is difficult in this world of digital abundance, regardless of the category in which you do business. And activating interest in the sea of disruptive competitors ready to assume a fast-follower strategy can take a culturally heroic feat to keep alive a 50- or 100-year-old brand. The technology chasm needs to be jumped faster than ever, from early adopter to mainstream pragmatists, in order for brands to thrive.

The practice of "branding" as defined by the emergence of the "planning department" in agencies during the 1960s brought with it a set of methodologies, including brand archetypes, "think, feel, do" shortcuts, and "look and feel" rules. The first agency planning department, contested to be at J. Walter Thompson (but formally developed into an agency function at Ogilvy), focused on understanding consumers, market conditions, and in-market communications.[2] Eventually, planning departments and adjacent marketing professionals were tasked with "brand stewardship."

Brand was interpreted as the external manifestation through creative assets—logo, font, shapes, colors, copy, and sometimes sounds such as jingles. As the years passed, more ephemeral elements of "brand" were added, such as experience, corporate culture, CSR, and purpose. And more "brand" elements will be added in the future—all with separate metrics that get thrown into a growing, entangled web of numbers.

Managing a brand today is like competing in a Tough Mudder. There are ebbs and flows of cultural ups and financial downs, calculated risks and unexpected obstacles, competition insight and foresight. And there's no company that goes up forever. At inflection points in a brand's life, there will need to be strategic decisions on how to progress through the mud and anticipate the next obstacle. The countless list of metrics tracked by brands— that's the mud. And digital is the next obstacle. I've long understood that the role of a strategist is to create viable pathways; so, this book will guide you down the pathways of branding that will get you past the next obstacle.

As communicators—and everyone is a communicator—we need to and must change the way we think about branding as the world moves into a new wave of computing, AI, and experience. We must adopt a new playbook built for now, rather than a playbook built for the 1960s dream of succeeding through reach and

repetition. A playbook that recognizes that the speed of digital and innovation and disruption will force every iconic brand into a soft reboot and every startup into a tailspin if they don't nail their branding in an age where often the best story wins (rather than the best product or service).

So, in a nutshell, here's the central argument made in this book:

Reaching consumers tethered to the Internet of Things (IoT) has forced marketers, strategists, analysts, entrepreneurs, and decision-makers to analyze what seems like an endless firehouse of new metrics that accompanies the arrival of every digital platform and emerging technology. Pulling yourself out of that tangled web of numbers—and finding the value of your brand in all of it—isn't easy.

Brands can't sell to consumers the way they used to—through strong-armed push, push, push and repeat methods. *Head-on, apply directly to the forehead* . . . Nowadays, it is very much about lifestyle—how you make both consumers (nonbuyers) and customers (buyers) feel. And what today's consumer cares about is actually the same thing they've always cared about—empathy. It's not only empathy through direct dialogue on calls or in stores, but also as manifest in business practices, operations, and communication. The new brand-consumer relationship is: relate to me and creatively solve my problems, Brand X; that's how I invest in you by buying your product and/or service.

The frozen-in-time brands selling products during *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Jeffersons* don't understand today's struggle; likely to continue to slowly disappear due to their fatigued business models. Consumers control brand visibility more than you do nowadays. How do you become one less reason for someone to throw shade on Twitter, and one more reason for that person's tribe to subscribe to your updates?

The answer to a lot of these questions comes at the junction of design and psychology. Think of it as a way to hack and hijack twenty-first-century hearts and minds mired in the digital quicksand of connectivity. Wading in the pond of behavioral science is this revolutionary and new idea (gasp!) that humans are just "feeling machines that think," and that the majority of times, rational thought is secondary. Again, rational thought is secondary . . .

At your brand's best, it's reduced to a feeling. Not a singular branded element like the logo, color palette, service tagline, or product shape. "Brand" is now how the consumer remembers you; and, we remember feelings all the way back to childhood. You might be surprised to know that researchers believe we remember feelings more when they're negative than when they're positive. And we are more apt to discuss only the negative ones. So how, as a brand, do you let consumers express themselves openly, listen, and help amplify positive feelings?

In a brutal world of continual change, we all look and are naturally attracted to things that give us a positive and consistent feeling. And a startup that ignites a central feeling—from SoulCycle to Airbnb to TaskRabbit to 23andMe—often benefits from the accelerant factor of emotions.

The iconic brands that have weathered decades of culture have done so because they have a positive feeling already wired into their DNA. Lucky them. For instance, Disney is more than its superheroes and theme parks—it is a source of *happiness* for its fans. Gatorade is more than colorful drinks and nutrition supplements—it is an *enabler of endurance*. Corona is more than just an import—it is a beach in a bottle, providing *escape*. You win out as a top brand by appealing through feelings to consumers, customers, and communities. Through marketing, licensing, partnerships, operations, and beyond, you must deliver on that appeal *consistently*.

In engineering that feeling—I hope you can follow the theme here—you need to specifically calibrate five brand territories: lexicon, audio cues, visual stimuli, experience, and culture. Just remember it as LAVEC. Or, CLAVE, for magic key. Today's iconic brands have mastery in more than one area. Brands built to be future-proof for a digital age should master all five areas. And you can.

Focusing on those five areas of "brand" specifically provides a shortcut to elevate the visibility of the branding elements that incite the most triggers for behavioral outcomes. We can thank recent Nobel laureates Daniel Kahneman and Richard Thaler for their life work of unpacking them. Now, we're going to apply their principles to brand building.

Following the feeling, not ironically, is the one brand metric that's truly cross-platform. It's your North Star. LAVEC, as a "back-of-the-napkin" branding system for entrepreneurs, marketers, creative professionals, and business leaders, outlines the five areas of focus that can increase the chances of surviving a time of digital transformation.

And in the most *Black Mirror* type of way, technology is becoming an enabler to measuring cognitive emotions and feelings in real-time through facial mapping, machine learning, biometrics, and eye tracking. Whether shopping in-aisle or browsing a site through a mobile device, measurement tools are becoming astoundingly more accurate and passive, allowing for an always-on data trail to optimize and recalibrate how a consumer, client, or customer experiences a brand.

FEELINGS AREN'T THINGS TO GLOSS OVER

It's going to be a deep conversation over the next few chapters, but it won't be as painful as scrolling through 300 feet of content

on a smartphone every day. We're going to go down the rabbit hole of emotions, feelings, secrets of why we behave the way we do, and shortcuts to branding in a digital age.

Tech is doing so much for society—improving our understanding of each other and ourselves, predicting future population needs, and decoding information we couldn't unlock in the past like DNA. As our existence in this world deepens with every new device that becomes plugged into the matrix, we must fight to simplify the output of meaningfulness. As I recall from my time as a student at Columbia University, when it comes to measurement, one goal is better than two, two is better than three, and so forth. An organization must fight the good fight to simplify how data comes together to deliver one indicator for brand meaningfulness.

Not so long ago, facial recognition, machine learning, and eye tracking were all sci-fi write-offs. It was considered weak fiction between the pages of George Orwell's *1984* and a far leap on the moviescreen in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Not anymore. The age of surveillance and screen culture is here. The powerful analytics to come from tech are already paying dividends in improving customer experiences—and thus is already being cornered by Adobe, Amazon, Google, SAP, Oracle, Microsoft, and IBM. The question is no longer if the technology is going to help us conquer that final frontier of emotional understanding, but rather what that knowledge will enable us to do. How will it enable brands to grow? And which brand will win the race to that fantasy-land of decoding feelings first?

This book is an invitation into the brand, design, and psychology intersection where my work and teaching overlap. Condensing research on 1,500 fast-growing companies down to anomalies, I'll provide 60 case studies; this way, you also get to see how mentioned principles play out in real time around us. I'll also break

things down into practical tips (and fire-starters) so you can brainstorm how to reboot your brand to infuse feeling back into your DNA and ways of working.

You will get pages from my life as well, from being an early adopter of technology and platforms to working with celebrities to traveling the world as a global citizen to teaching rhetoric principles from Aristotle at Columbia University. That way, I can show you how my worldview and perspectives meld together—and give you added reason to take this journey with me.

This intellectual misfit has something to say, and it could greatly impact your brand survival.

Notes

1. Emilie Wapnick, "Why Some of Us Don't Have One True Calling." TED, April 1, 2015. https://www.ted.com/talks/emilie_wapnick_why_some_of_ us_don_t_have_one_true_calling.
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