

THE BRAND STRATEGIST'S GUIDE TO DESIRE

*How to give consumers
what they actually want*

Anna Simpson

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How to give consumers what they
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*To my sister Ruth, who loves to help others find
what they are looking for.*

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Foreword

“Brands are the problem!” “Brands are the solution!” So goes a common debate.

The problem with brands, say many, is that they have fuelled an era of over-consumption, which has led to a society groaning at the seams with social inequalities, and a world running perilously low on natural resources.

And the solution camp?

The starting premise for brands as a possible solution to some urgent social, environmental and economic challenges, both locally and globally, requires an evolution of the traditional notion of a brand. They shift from an exclusive focus on transactions. They are no longer just the conduit between a business and the end consumer. They become agents of change.

A new role for brands could be described as naïve optimism. But while trust in government and business is probably at an all-time low, there is at least some trust in brands. In this light, a new role for them becomes easier to envisage.

Brands are more than iconic images splashed across the world’s bill boards. They are the window to the business model. In the past, the distance between the business model and the brand was quite a long and often complicated one: the business model was the mechanism to generate maximum growth and profitability, the brand(s) the route to market.

Today, increasing numbers of businesses understand that their ability to create shareholder value, as described by the age-old metrics of growth and profitability, is inextricably linked to how well they can secure access to dwindling resources, how well they treat their staff, how well they

know where and how their stuff is made, and how well they can articulate their role in society. In other words, the ability to be commercially successful increasingly depends on the response of a business to an array of macro-environmental and social trends.

And so emerges a new business model. One that is commercially successful, but perhaps not measured purely in terms of growth. One that delivers goods and services that have a social value. And one that operates within one planet's worth of resources. Within this construct of a sustainable business model, the brand shifts from being an adjunct to being the delivery mechanism for the business's purpose. It is the showcase through which the world can see what the business exists to do and how.

Let's think about purpose for a minute. The sustainable brand operates through conversation, collaboration and co-creation. These are the three cornerstones – the 3Cs – of a service-based mechanism. They enable the brand to consider and deliver what we need, rather than making and marketing products regardless.

Our current model of consumerism is flawed. Once basic needs such as hunger and wellness have been met, buying more and more doesn't make us any happier.

Brands with purpose can fuel a transition to sustainable business models. They could indeed be part of the solution to all sorts of problems: social, environmental and economic.

Key to unlocking their purpose is desire. What do the people who are prepared to place trust in them really want from them? Which aspects of their lives will they trust brands with? What is it they really want?

This guide explores that connection, and offers desire as a route to create change.

All brand managers should read and take note.

Sally Uren,
Chief Executive, Forum for the Future

Preface

Desire moves us. It moves us towards each other and towards our goals. It causes us to reach out for things that stimulate our senses and engage our minds.

We walk up a hill to let our eyes dance on the horizon. We cross a street to let our skin feel the sun. We read, converse and travel to entertain our imagination and expand our knowledge.

The energy we all have to enhance our lives can, like any other form of energy, be harnessed – and its value can turn a profit. This profit can be made without compromising the goal, which is quality of life.

People will find value in products and services that bring them closer to the things they really want, and will readily pay for them. Not just once, but again and again.

Which is why a better understanding of desire is an economic opportunity, and one from which brands, in particular, could benefit. People get to know brands, and develop trust in them, just as they do in their peers. If a brand helps them to connect with something they feel enhances their lives, they will recognize its potential to do so again.

As Sally Uren, Chief Executive of the global non-profit Forum for the Future, says, “Brands can do anything that you want them to do: they’re astonishing. They can make you want to buy something you never knew you needed. They can make you feel much better about yourself. And, in a world where people don’t trust governments and business, and trust their family and peers above all, brands sit somewhere in the middle. They have enormous potential.”

It follows that the first step for a brand is to understand what the people they want to bond with desire. If they can help them to find it, they will become trusted allies.

A.S.

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Introduction

A guide to desire

This is a guide to help brand strategists consider what people really want in order to enhance their lives, and to think about the role of their brand in responding to these desires. It offers a new framework for understanding desire, based on some of the things that are really important to us: our family, friends and community; the desire to explore, learn and grow; how we experience the world through our senses; our appetite to live life to the full; and what we set out to achieve.

Why is this guide aimed at brand strategists in particular? Because they are the link between a commercial proposition and the lives it means to touch. They can talk to the people the company wants to reach and – more importantly – listen to them. They can start conversations that lead to new ideas for research and development. And they nurture a space for collaboration between the company’s operations and its wider context.

Why do brand strategists need a smarter approach to desire? Because consumerism in its current “shop until you drop” form rarely offers real satisfaction, and is facing a crisis: witness the failure of high-street chains such as music retailer HMV in the UK and clothing company American Apparel in the US.¹ At the same time, collaborative consumption is moving from the niche to the mainstream, facilitated by online rental platforms from Airbnb to Zipcar. This creates an opportunity, and an incentive, to do things differently. Other pressures are also pushing companies to innovate – from constraints on key resources, such as water, commodities and land, to the disruption of established markets from innovative entrepreneurs. Think of the challenge to the music industry presented by the likes of YouTube and Spotify. The best way to avoid getting caught out is a clear understanding of what your audience wants, and how your company can offer it.

This guide will help brands get closer to what people desire, and rethink how it can help them to find it. A brand that both enhances people's lives and nurtures the resources on which they depend will prove more resilient, win trust and achieve better results.

A brief note on need and desire

It is impossible to talk about desire without touching on Abraham Maslow, whose theory of a hierarchy of needs (beginning with physiological needs such as food and shelter, and moving 'up' through the needs for security and society towards self-actualization) has influenced many sociologists, economists, marketers and philosophers.² Personally, I find such a hierarchy unconvincing in a maze of contrasting motivations – from social expectations, culture and politics, to the availability of resources and simply personal preference. "Need" is a word with gravitas: it seems to imply a compulsion related to survival. "Desire" could be taken to imply indulgence, but also suggests greater agency through the strength of mind to identify and pursue a goal. But both words mask a more complex truth. The apparent need to eat can be overridden by the desire to make a strong statement – to oneself or to others – through starvation. The impression of hunger can be awakened by the sensory pleasure of the scent of bread or bacon. Sleep can be overridden by the desire to stay up late with loved ones or finish watching a film. Similarly, the need to exercise can lose out to the desire to have a nap. As Oscar Wilde quipped, "Whenever I feel like exercise, I lie down until the feeling passes."³

My interest is in the distance between where people are and where they would like to be, and the resulting impulse to go and find something that lessens the gap. I talk about desire, rather than need, and use this word to encapsulate the momentum to change ourselves or our circumstances.

Desire for what?

The verb "to desire" comes from the Latin phrase "*de sidere*", which means "from the stars". If you've ever tipped your head back, looked to the skies and wished, you won't find this etymology surprising.

But few people today, including many of faith, expect their desires to be satisfied through celestial good will. We don't just sit back and say, come what may. Instead, we go looking for ways to enhance our lives – whether we set off on the high seas or down the high street.

However, the feeling of desire rarely comes with an answer. People can feel compelled to move, but not know where to go, or what they are looking for. This can leave them highly suggestible. They might sit down in a restaurant feeling hungry, but happy to let their choice be prompted by the menu. They might spend hours browsing shops in the hope of finding the right outfit for a particular occasion. Perhaps what they actually desire, more than a new suit or accessory, is to knock at the door and be greeted by smiles.

The shops are full of objects that seem to promise satisfaction. Many disappoint. What began with the efficiency gains of mass manufacture has become a culture in which we pay little attention to whether what we buy meets the need. Companies market food that's not nutritious, clothes that don't last, birthday cards that replace personal greetings, and travel packages that insulate tourists from foreign culture. It's rare that one size fits all, but millions of labels will try to convince you that it should.

The Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef discusses the extent to which we find satisfaction in objects and experiences. Some things promise more satisfaction than they actually give, and Max-Neef offers a scale to demonstrate the various ways in which our expectations are either disappointed or exceeded. At the bottom of his scale there are "pseudo-satisfiers": things that don't meet the need, and can even get in the way of satisfaction. For instance, if the need is social status, there's the fancy watch or car that may seem to represent it but won't bring you the genuine respect earned through positive contributions to society. Higher up Max-Neef's scale there are things that do satisfy a need, in the way that food satisfies hunger. At the top are things that satisfy multiple needs – for instance, food that doesn't just abate hunger but enables someone to eat in a way that enhances many aspects of their life. A tasty, nutritious meal enjoyed with family and friends, for example, brings sensory pleasure, health, a sense of community and even cultural rituals – from a clink of glasses and a toast, to blessings, songs and tea ceremonies.⁴

Is satisfaction all it's cracked up to be?

Desire is a renewable source of human energy. A desire met once is by no means a desire fulfilled. As the behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman observes, while the memory of satisfaction may be long-lived, the experience of it is momentary.⁵ One response to this is to try and ignore our feelings of desire, to rise above them: this is what Buddhists seek to do, and what the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer advocated, seeing desire, or the human will, as the root of all suffering. This is rather an extreme stance, considering the many beautiful things people achieve through will and desire, from preparing a delicious dessert to producing a work of art. The fact that they risk disappointment if it doesn't turn out how they wish, or that they may feel the urge to bake another cake that will be even better, seems little reason to give up. As another philosopher, Adam Phillips, observes, we are always going to want something else, and so perhaps we need simply to recognize that "satisfaction is not the answer to life, so to speak. Partly because there isn't an answer to life, but partly because satisfaction isn't always the point."⁶

Phillips proposes that we should value frustration above satisfaction. This may not sound much good as a brand strategy: you don't want to annoy people by keeping the object of temptation beyond their reach. But there is a useful tip here for brands. If the search for satisfaction can be just as valuable to the individual as the goods or service they find, then brands can provide value simply by accompanying them on the quest. Usually, brands focus on products and services that offer satisfaction (to varying extents); they may forget to ask what it is their audience really wants. They miss out on the thrill of the chase.

Another advocate of the quest to better understand what drives people, and what it is that attracts them to certain things, is the change strategist Tom Crompton at WWF-UK. Crompton is interested in what people value, and he distinguishes between intrinsic values, including "the value placed on a sense of community, affiliation to friends and family, and self-development", and extrinsic values: ones that "are contingent upon the perceptions of others [and] relate to envy of 'higher' social strata, admiration of material wealth, or power." Crompton sees these as opposed, and makes the case for civil organizations to activate and strengthen our intrinsic values, "for example, by encouraging people to think about the importance of particular things".⁷

Our values can shape what we desire. When people reflect on what they value, they can find it easier to identify the things they would really like to play a greater role in their lives. For instance, if you value equality, you are likely to desire a fairer society. If you value community, you are likely to desire more time to spend with your family and friends. Crompton talks about the importance of identifying and responding to our intrinsic values, and says that influential peers, the media, education, culture and public policy can all play a role in this. He doesn't mention brands, however.

Brands can awaken both our values and our desires. An opportunity awaits them, in shifting their emphasis away from the products they offer, towards their ability to engage with their audience. They have a positive social role to play in helping people identify their desires and guiding them on their journey to realizing them.

A better conversation

The way brands talk to people is changing. While TV and billboard advertising were the primary channels through which a brand could communicate with its audience, the conversation was more of a broadcast than an exchange. Brands began with an answer, saying: "This is what you desire". Smart marketers, led by the influential Harvard Business School professor and former editor of the *Harvard Business Review* Theodore Levitt, recognized that "people don't buy things but buy solutions to problems".⁸ Their role was therefore to help the consumer recognize that they had a problem, and one that could only *really* be met by the product or service on offer. In this model, the company begins with their proposition, adds an idea that helps to set it apart, and hey presto, there's the brand. As Charles Revson said of Revlon, "In the factory we make cosmetics. In the store we sell hope."⁹

Now, we're seeing a shift. The next generation of brands begins by engaging its audience in an open conversation. It asks them what they want, what makes them feel good, what they're looking for. As Philip Kotler, Distinguished Professor of International Marketing at the Kellogg School of Management, argues, "Instead of treating people simply as consumers, marketers approach them as whole human beings with minds, hearts and spirits."¹⁰ Kotler calls this trend Marketing 3.0, and describes it

as a “values-driven era”. He contrasts this new approach to the mainstream of today, which “assumes the view that consumers are passive targets of marketing campaigns”.

This turns the whole process of brand development on its head. A brand's identity is formed through the conversations it has with those people it seeks to reach. These exchanges generate the ideas and culture that shape the brand's purpose, and this in turn helps to create the proposition – whether it's a product, service, experience, or all of the above. It's a collaborative, creative journey, on which the brand and its audience set out together.

D – C – B – A

I call this new approach the D – C – B – A of brand strategy.

It begins with a better understanding of desire (D). This understanding helps the company to define its culture and character (C), which others then recognize and associate with it as a brand (B). The brand uses its conversations to co-create actions (A), which respond in meaningful ways to the desire(s) of its audience. It's the reverse of the standard practice I described earlier, the A – B – C – D approach, in which a company begins with its action – creating a product, such as shampoo – upon which it superimposes its brand, and then goes about creating a culture (“beauty is wavy hair with a particular sheen”) to incentivize desire for the product (“I must buy this particular shampoo in order to be beautiful”).

The danger in sticking with the familiar A – B – C – D formula is that your brand might get all the way to D and find that the desire has shifted. This is the story of the likes of HMV and the camera company Jessops, two brands which failed on the high street when they persistently peddled a product after consumer desire had shifted to digital models.

The problem for these brands was the assumption that people valued the product more than the purpose it served; whereas for the consumers, the most high-tech nifty 35” camera was no more than a means to an end they no longer wanted. Instead of albums thick

*Turns the whole process
of brand development
on its head*

with holiday snaps and framed prints, Jessops' audience wanted easy access to photographic memories they could share online, and digital did the trick better. Likewise, the boxed CDs on HMV's shelves proved no match for the tracks easily available on demand via iTunes, YouTube and Spotify.

The rapid scale and success of innovative business models has helped to nurture a culture in which change is expected, prompting people to think afresh about what they want. They realize they no longer need to own so much stuff. They can exchange goods and services with their peers. They can pool their resources, creating large libraries of anything from digital media to garden tools. With the potential to trade their time and skills at will, they feel richer: not only do they have greater buying power, but they have more to contribute. They have a deeper sense of connection to those around them. This sense of empowerment is no counter-force to desire. After years of tightened belts, many people feel it's time life looked up. They're ready to reach out – but towards what? What do they desire?

Companions with purpose

Research suggests that consumers value a sense of companionship with brands; they may even value it more than the product or service they buy. Meaningful interaction is the difference between a brand that people appreciate and one they care nothing about, whether or not the product itself is satisfying. A major survey by the global advertising agency Havas Media, involving over 134,000 consumers across 23 countries, found that most people worldwide would not care if more than 73 per cent of brands disappeared tomorrow.¹¹ This doesn't imply that brands can't establish relationships the people do care about or would miss. Another survey of consumers in six major international markets, conducted by BBMG, GlobeScan and SustainAbility, found that two-thirds of respondents were "interested in sharing their ideas, opinions and experiences with companies to help them develop better products or create new solutions".¹² This interest in exchange and co-creation, over the mere attraction of existing products, is no bad thing in a world undergoing rapid change. If a brand is defined by its character and the value it adds to a creative process, as opposed to by the products themselves, it will be able to shift its business in more radical ways, and yet keep the social capital which makes it successful.