



"The 10 biggest marketing follies of all time!" No, not a click bait. It's serious. But entertaining, even if you're in the middle of it.

Mark Ritson is one of the best-known marketing experts in the world. This is partly due to the former marketing professor's clear 'no bullshit' marketing expertise and his very figurative language with purposefully crude, Australian humour. A few months ago he published his Top 10 list of the greatest marketing bullshit achievements of all time and I had been on the verge of showing it to you here. How fortunate that I had just been working on another topic, because his list sparked an exciting discussion among Marketing Week readers. To my surprise, Ritson listened carefully and did something he is not actually known for and changed his mind. He made room in his list for even sillier marketing models. So effectively a crowd-sourced **top bullshit list**¹. Fittingly published on 1 April this year.



It's a lot of fun for me, and hopefully for you too. If anyone finds themselves in this list, please don't hold it against me. Actually, it's almost impossible not to have been there; I too have tried out one or the other approach, at least from time to time.

Of course, his list is highly scientifically based. For this, he has created a specific, point-based rating system. In each case, he determines the extent of the nonsense according to a point system and multiplies that with the damage done to brands. The latter is a good correction factor because, as experienced marketers know, not every brand nonsense leads to the target group noticing it and changing their brand perception.

Let's start with the list right away and then I will explain the most important arguments for each 'winner'. Unfortunately, I cannot show pictures of the brands and actors here, copyright is not on my side and since one or the other award winner is said to be not amused, I do not want to tread on the thin legal ice.

The Definitive Marketing Bullshit Index

Platz	Bullshit Ursprung	Blödsinn Faktor	Schadensgröße	Marketing BS Index
1	Rosser Reeves and the USP	7	10	70
2	Brand archetypes	9	7	63
3	Maslow's hierarchy of needs	6	10	60
4	Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook's ad revolution	7	8	56
5	Peter Arnell and Tropicana	10	5	50
6	Sinek's 'Golden Circle'	7	7	49
7	McKinsey and brand loyalty	6	8	48
8	John Wanamaker and ad waste	5	9	45
9	Gary Vee	7	6	42
10	WeWork and profitability	8	5	40

Ritson explains the list in more detail in his film, see sources at the end. I have the condensate. As with any mediocre RTL show, we start from the back, of course, to increase the tension immeasurably.



10th place goes to WeWork. A coworking space provider founded in 2010 that grew extremely fast and was valued at over \$40 billion just nine years later! The IPO was cancelled after massive irregularities became known. Neumann, the company's founder, is known for self-accusations that he had run three out of four companies into the ground before WeWork and that the fourth was also mediocre. Followed by his groundbreaking insight that one could choose when a company would make a profit. Somehow he failed to do that with WeWork. The very experienced main investor, Softbank, had to write off huge amounts.

9th place goes to Gary Vaynerchuk, have you heard of him? He is an American multi-entrepreneur, author, influencer, speaker and internationally recognised internet personality. His YouTube channel has over 2.6 million subscribers. He is definitely super successful at marketing: himself. He is known for many completely nonsensical statements, whoever follows him has got himself a career-threatening coach in his life. Here are a few of his sayings, I have deliberately not translated them, because illogic is difficult to translate:

- Social media is not a fad, because it's human
- You are alive take advantage of it
 - There no longer has to be a difference between who you are and what you do
 - Remember I started with zero followers too
- You are not lost you are just early in the process

He also once said that in marketing it would be a particular advantage to have no experience, as he did, because then you could work particularly creatively. I cannot confirm this thesis in practice. This naïve kind of 'creativity' in some marketing papers regularly triggers a state between laughter coma and palpitations in me. Of course, thanks to his wide reach, Gary V also does some real damage.

8th place goes posthumously to the American merchant John Wanamaker, 1838 - 1922, who probably coined one of the most famous sayings in marketing: "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted. The trouble is I don't know which half." While advertising is certainly not a 100% science, with some experience a level is achievable that is far beyond pure chance. The damage of the saying becomes clear to every marketer at the latest when it is gleefully held up as a known truth by non-marketing colleagues.

7th place goes to the consulting firm McKinsey for a strategic recommendation that it is five times cheaper to focus on existing, loyal customers instead of acquiring new ones. If you try to find the origin of this 'law', it seemed to run through many consulting firms in the 1980s. It's bullshit, of course. Because it can clearly make a lot of sense to spend a lot of money on targeted new client acquisition if the potential in the category is particularly high. The famous British market researcher Ehrenberg and his successors, such as marketing professor Byran Sharp, have proven, especially in the case of branded goods, that you have to continuously acquire new users because loyal customers are constantly dropping out, for example when their circumstances change. Advertising is a key tool to continuously compensate for the loss of existing buyers.

6th place goes to Golden Circle by Simon Sinek. One or two readers will probably have to swallow now. You have to hand it to Sinek that he has ingeniously named a simple tool. The Golden Circle! What else can there be after that? What most people don't realise is that the idea that people don't buy the product (What) but the philosophy (Why) of the manufacturer does not serve the wishes of the buyer but the desire for self-aggrandisement of us marketers.



After all, we don't want to tell our friends that we sell the 35th yoghurt, invisible incontinence products or a mundane detergent. No, we want to make the world a better place. That's sexy. And it's even possible that it works sometimes. Most of the time it doesn't. Even though people like to pretend in surveys, they are generally not willing to pay the price for world-improving offers. At K&A, we use the Golden Circle in some consulting projects anyway. It is primarily a tool to see whether an identity-creating driving force can actually be identified in the respective client. As a rule, this is not the case. And then please don't invent one. There are more meaningful positioning opportunities.

5th place goes to Tropicana - the American OJ icon. The brand had a well-known brand signal. An orange with a straw in it. The brand parent PepsiCo wanted a younger, more modern pack design. The result was a design with an image of a generically delicious glass of orange juice on the pack with a new knobby orange cap. After only a few months, PepsiCo rowed back. Cost: \$1m for the design agency, \$40m for advertising and \$30m in lost sales. Peter Arnell, the agency head, explains before the launch what emotions the new pack design was meant to evoke. It's incredibly funny and sad. Bullshit at it's best. Definitely watch it. Minute 27 in Ritson's film.

Fourth place goes to Mark Zuckerberg's Advertising Revolution. In 2007, Zuckerberg told the major advertising agencies that the advertising revolution was coming: "For the last hundred years media has been pushed out to people, but now marketers are going to be a part of the conversation. And they're going to do this by using the social graph in the same way our users do." Ritson rightly thinks this is very damaging because marketers have been trying to have 'conversations' with their customers on Facebook for many years. Some of my readers will reluctantly recall these failed efforts. For Facebook, it didn't matter. They made money from it anyway and today advertising on Facebook looks like advertising has always looked. Ritson recognises a core problem that for every new communication platform it is argued that old rules would no longer apply and everything must be done differently. Right now, TikTok is saying that you shouldn't do advertising, you should do TikToks. Aha. Let's wait and see.



Third place goes to Maslow's famous utility pyramid. The nonsense factor is not even extremely high here, but the damage done gets full marks. Everyone, but also everyone in marketing knows the pyramid. At the bottom are the physiological needs and at the top self-fulfilment. Only when all the lower levels are fulfilled are the upper benefits sought. However, there is only very weak evidence for this assumed hierarchy. Ritson, as always, chooses a clear image: When you have to pee urgently (physiologically) the top (Want to come across as cool) supposedly does not come into play. Ok. So we're surrounded by male stand-up pee-ers in public? It really helps our social peace that the hierarchy of needs, not just in this example, is strikingly wrong.

Maslow developed his model over 70 years ago on the basis of a mini-sample, and the sample, the Blackfoot Indians of Canada, themselves rejected 'their' hierarchy as too simplistic. When the model gained notoriety in the 1960s, there was someone who said, "I'm a bit worried that this stuff, which I myself think is provisional, is being swallowed whole by all sorts of enthusiastic people." It was someone who needed to know, Maslow himself. He could no longer prevent the triumph of his model. If the hierarchy is so wrong, what is the meaning for marketing? Ritson: "It's total bullshit. It's totally simple to understand and has a foreign intellectual sounding name. That's all there is to it".

Second place goes to the brands Archetypes. High nonsense and above-average damage. The archetypes go back to Carl Jung's (1875-1961) idea that people have universally existing soul structures, independent of culture and history. According to Jung, there are 12 types, for example the lover, the heroine or the inventor (all male and female, I'm still too lazy to gender). Consultants hijacked the model decades ago and claim that brand personalities can be reduced to these universal personality dimensions in the same way. At K&A, we also tried to see if we could actually situate brands in this way and came away from it. It is too simple a model and ultimately contradicts the idea of positioning, that successful brands cannot or should not be assigned to generic positions. Ritson says as clearly as ever: "Brand Archetypes makes us (marketing) look like tits to the rest of the company". (We at K&A do not see archetypes as a positioning tool, but as an interesting stimulus for creative processes. What would a creative communication idea look like if the brand appeared as a heroine, as a mother or dominantly as a ruler)? Brand archetypes are one of the many examples where brand consultancy continues to rely on psychological models that have been shelved in psychological science for decades. Marketing as a graveyard in which psycho-zombies can continue to work happily?



1st place and thus the absolute nonsense victory goes to: Rosser Reeves. You don't know who that is? The inventor of the USP, or unique selling proposition. It's not the biggest nonsense, but the damage is immense. Rosser Reeves was an American advertising pioneer who advanced television advertising. In the 1940s he postulated that brands had to offer something that the competition either couldn't offer or simply didn't offer. So differentiate or die. At the latest, in today's over-diversity and extremely fast product cycles, it is almost impossible for a brand to occupy a unique sales advantage and defend it in the long term. Even with patent protection, there are imitators very quickly in the medical field that use a similar mechanism of action. Think of mRNA vaccines. No brand possesses an attribute, even if BMW seemingly occupies 'joy of driving', unique is not that or do Porsche, Audi TT or Tesla not give their drivers joy of driving? Why does it have to be a unique advantage to be successful, why can't it be a relative advantage? Why shouldn't it be enough to be bigger, faster, more agile? We are also learning more and more that distinctiveness, i.e. a 'unique' brand identity, is much more important in the buying process. The brand we think of first has a much better chance of being bought.

Many poor brand managers are still forced to find and ultimately invent USPs. And when I read their tortured USP quibbles, I can really sympathise. Let's finally be honest and not try to be something we can't be. Less but more is more here.

And, in your opinion, what should not have been missing from this list? Or which place made you smile the most?

Sources:

<https://www.marketingweek.com/ritson-ultimate-marketing-bs-top-10/>

Alternative: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nw9hMJK6ns>



Book recommendations

By Ralph Ohnemus:

Brand experience. The strategy in hypercompetition and information tsunami [> order here](#)

Brand amazement. Winning in the information tsunami [> order here](#)



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