



The Three Word Brief. And why it is fame.

I rarely read an article on marketing that impresses me with great clarity and profound realism. Enter Bob Hoffman, the former American agency head who is one of the most successful bloggers in marketing. He quite aptly calls himself The Ad Contrarian. He promotes the 'three word brief'. A must-read essay. I've selected a few of his challenging statements here. Here is the [link](#) to the full text. And yes, Bob chooses very drastic words in parts, which I won't take away from him here. A BrainCandy with PG Rating

Bob asks the key question: *What is the one capability of advertising that has the greatest likelihood of resulting in success? Is it differentiation? Is it positioning? Is it creativity? Is it precision targeting? Is it empathy? Is it brand purpose? Is it salience (whatever that means.) Or is it something else?*

The correct answer is, it's something else.

We are very fond of the concept of "brand meaning."

This is driven by the belief that consumers impute specific attributes to brands and exercise their buying prerogatives based on the meaning they assign to the brand, and how well that meaning aligns with their personal needs or values.

Marketers also believe that consumers want to have "relationships" with brands, and be part of a brand's "tribe" or "community" and "co-create" with brands and, of course, respect and trust their "brand purpose."

I think this is largely horseshit.

Brands are not nearly as important or meaningful as we marketers would like them to be.

Are there some brands we're attached to? Sure. We each have a handful. But consumers are faced with thousands of brands. The likelihood of yours being one of the handful they are strongly attached to is absurdly small.

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Consumers are annoyingly impervious to understanding the finer points of product positioning, differentiation, and brand meaning.

Don't agree? Stop someone on the street today and ask them what the difference is between BMW and Mercedes-Benz? Ask them for the difference between Coke and Pepsi? Ask them how Nike is different from Adidas? I will bet you very large sums of money that their responses will have little to no correlation to the strategic documents floating around those brands' headquarters. And these are some of the most successful brands in the world.

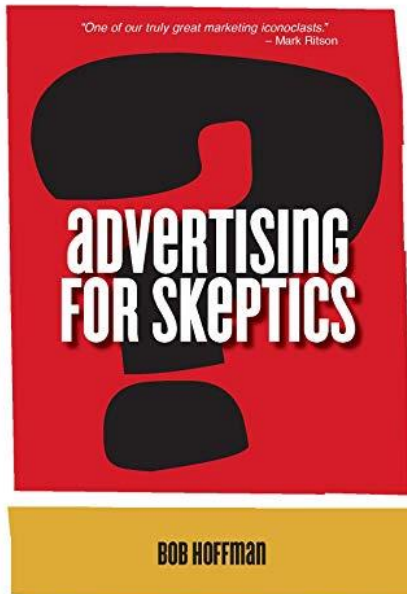
Each of these brands has spent tens of millions of dollars over the years concocting delusions of "differentiation." They believe their brands are





successful because of their unique “brand meaning.” They're wrong.

The main advertising influence on their success is fame. As you'll see, I believe the most probable driver of brand success -- and the central principle of communication that we advertisers can control -- is fame. Not brand meaning, or relationship building, or brand purpose or any of the other fantasies that the advertising and marketing industry has concocted.



Bob Hoffmans newest bestseller

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- Why do some actors get million dollar fees for appearing in movies while other equally good actors get nothing?
- Why do some people get the best tables at fancy restaurants while nicer people can't even get in?

- Why do some people become President of the United States while there are millions who are smarter and more decent?

Right, because they're famous. Fame is a massive advantage in business and in life.

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Simple ideas like “fame” are anathema to the marketing industry.

We advertising and marketing professionals make our living by convincing business people that marketing communication is a deeply specialized practice that requires particular knowledge and acumen. So we do our best to complicate the shit out of it.

Try this. Read the documents that your researchers, strategists, and planners have written about the meaning of your brand. Then get out in the street and ask a few people what comes to mind about your brand. I promise, you'll be appalled.

A brief interjection from myself: This insight is my daily bread.

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While most brands do not have deep meaning to most of us, and while our discernment of brand positioning and differentiation may not be all it's cracked up to be, at some point when we're buying we do have to make a decision.

Nonetheless, when we are creating advertising, it has to be about something. Positioning and differentiation are better than non-positioning and non-differentiation. So, go ahead and position and differentiate away. Just don't fool yourself into believing that they are advertising's central goal. Oh yeah, and don't ever let some half-assed marketer's idea of purpose, empathy, empowerment -- or whatever happens to be the brand babler



cliché of the month -- get in the way of a great idea. In an environment like advertising, where strategic insight is usually a cruel joke, a great creative idea is usually the best advertising strategy.

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Contemporary advertising thinking would also have us believe that a clear path to brand success is built on personalization and precision targeting (thanks in large part to the influence of the online media industry and its supplicants.)

I would like to suggest the opposite. I would like to suggest that the main power of advertising is not in precision targeting, it is in mass targeting. The real power in advertising is in having large numbers of people familiar with and comfortable with your brand. A realistic view of the world's most successful brands gives us a very clear and unambiguous picture — spreading the word is far more likely to create success than concentrating it.

Most marketers are famously inept at creating a consequential differentiation for their brand. That's why god created advertising. A poorly differentiated brand that everybody has heard of has a lot better chance of success than a well-differentiated brand that nobody's heard of. In the long run, getting a lot of people familiar with your brand and comfortable with it has a much higher probability of building your business than any other theory of marketing communication.

Familiarity and comfort with a brand come in a variety of ways, including...

- ...the brand my mom used*
- ...the brand my neighbor uses and likes*
- ...the brand that works satisfactorily for me*

...the brand I see everywhere

The questionable brand "differentiators" dreamed up in conference rooms and codified in briefing documents are largely lost on consumers and play secondary roles in most actual purchasing behavior. And yet developing these so-called brand differentiators — through research, ethnography, strategy and planning exercises — occupy an enormous amount of time, energy, and money.

Is this always the case? No. Is it the most probable case? Yes.

Nothing in marketing is absolute, all we have are likelihoods and probabilities.

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Most consumer choices are done without deep thought. People don't have the time, energy, or inclination to assess the ramifications of every brand decision before they buy. The fact that people are not as sensitive to brand variance as we think makes strong brands more powerful, not less.

Ironically, the less energy people spend analyzing brand meaning, the more important top-of-mind awareness (or as Prof. Sharp might call it, "mental availability") becomes.

One more time...the less patience and appetite people have for analyzing brand variables, the more important brand familiarity and comfort become.

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But let's get back on track. What we are talking about today is not the value of a strong brand, it is the most probable way of creating a strong brand.

Any scientific, non-ideological interpretation of consumer behavior can lead to only one



conclusion: Most people buy most brands in most categories because they are familiar and comfortable with them.

Not because they are the most deeply understood or the most personally meaningful. The leading brands in virtually every category tend to be the most familiar, regardless of what the brand babblers say about their meaning.

Let's make this even simpler. People are mostly too busy, too lazy, or too indifferent to give 2/5ths of a flying shit about the "meaning" of the stuff they buy. Mostly, they buy on auto-pilot from familiar brands they feel comfortable with.

The easier you make it for people to choose your brand the more likely you are to be successful. From the standpoint of advertising, the best way to make the choice easier is to be famous and let probability do its work.

Does this mean that positioning, differentiation et al are not at all important? No. As previously stated, when you create advertising it has to be about something. So you might as well make it about something useful like positioning and differentiation. But these elements of advertising are not the central goal. The central goal is to achieve fame. A brand that is famous has enormous advantages over its rival brands that are not famous.

This does not mean that fame is a guarantee of success. Fame cannot save a stupid idea or a stupid product. Fame is strong. But stupid is stronger.

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There are several ways for brands to achieve fame. Some do it by being clearly superior and generating exceptional word of mouth. This is obviously the best way to become famous.

There are many ways to achieve fame, and they're all good.

The most expensive way to become famous is through advertising. It is the most expensive, but also the most reliable. It is the only avenue to fame that you can buy your way into.

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Go ahead and read his original essay, where Bob explains in more detail how he came to his conclusions. Like me, he has experienced the wildest new marketing theories over the decades, always the 'next big thing' that was soon killed by the next hype. But time and again, the way people actually decide has been and continues to be overlooked.

In my experience, Bob Hoffman has neglected one important point. It's not about fame per se, it's about the fame that has a contextual effect. It's not about which sparkling wine is the most famous, but which sparkling wine comes to the customer's mind when it comes to an evening with the girl, and which one when it comes to a special celebration. Fame in one context is often experienced as inappropriate in another context. In this respect, fame should be linked to contexts. But fame is an ingenious goal.



Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour To [order](#)



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