

The New Normal died shortly after the birth. It takes longer for the Purpose faith community. Somewhat.

Reading time 10 minutes

Good marketing is actually not that difficult. Most of the laws of good marketing survive almost all the proclaimed changes of the times. And yet, time and again, the proverbial new sows are driven through the marketing village by consultants with chutzpah. And if the marketing community again hasn't found paradise? Exactly, then there's already a loud squealing around the corner and the disaster starts all over again.

Do you remember when buyers would really want to have a close dialogue with their brands on social media? Today, ads dominate the social web, not dialogue. Or the funny NFTs that customers would want to buy for a lot of money from their favourite brands? So Nike would one day make just as much revenue with digital sneaker images as it does with its analogue sneaks? In fact, Nike sold the pictured NFT at the height of the wave for \$120,000, a miserable investment for the buyer.



I wrote about many of these pretty little pigs early on and was proved right. In mid-2020, for example, I also stated in specialist articles that there would never be a New Normal. And argued many years ago (BrainCandy 44) that sticking purpose on brands was often purpose porn.

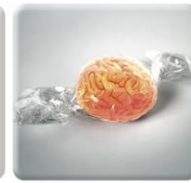
I am by no means an opponent of purpose, but I am an opponent of constantly spreading new myths about buyer behaviour and driving marketers down blind alleys.

FMCG giant Unilever, where the author spent perhaps 10 years learning the art of marketing, announced in 2019 that brand purpose would become one of five growth drivers of the future. The year before, it had already been announced that Unilever brands with purpose would grow 70% faster. On closer inspection, this was more of a sleight of hand, as purpose was attributed to the fast-growing brands, so to speak. A popular approach among Purpose aficionados.

Hein Schumacher, Unilever's new CEO since July, now says: "I believe that a social and environmental purpose is not something we should impose on every brand." His predecessor, Alan Jope, promised in 2019 to get rid of brands that "are not able to stand for something more important than just making your hair shinier, your skin softer, your clothes whiter or your food tastier". Someone wanted to persuade buyers that the benefits for which they usually buy products are too simple. This attitude triggered a backlash in the City, i.e. the financial centre of London.

Terry Smith, one of the UK's best-known investors, criticised Unilever for "virtue signalling" rather than focusing on financial performance.

He said in January last year: **"A company that thinks it has to define the purpose of Hellmann's mayonnaise, in our opinion, has clearly lost the plot."**



When looking at the arguments of Purpose fans, surveys of consumers are often cited, which clearly confirm that Purpose issues such as the social behaviour of companies and sustainability are particularly important to them when making purchasing decisions. Most recently, Barclays Bank published that 70% of buyers consider the purpose of companies to be a decisive factor in their purchasing decisions.

Spoiler: When surveys deliver such high results, mistakes have certainly been made. From my point of view, this is usually deliberate in order to achieve a particularly good result that corresponds to one's own attitude. Even the unusual wording of the question awakens the respondents from the energy-saving stupor of everyday life and demands their full cerebral attention. After all, people rarely think about such abstract purchasing factors. Sustainability? Of course, it's important, you read about it everywhere. And of course, it's also important in my purchasing decision.

This is called social intelligence. We all know what would be socially beneficial behaviour and respond accordingly. That's why it is of course also very, very important that companies treat their suppliers and employees well and, with great honour, this also plays a role in my purchasing decision.

Now guess what happens if you don't ask these specific questions?

Instead, simply ask the buyer openly what was important for the selection of products during the last purchase? Now you may be quite surprised. Because most of the purpose factors will almost certainly not appear at all.

As luck would have it, while writing this BrainCandy, an article by Mark Ritson appeared in which the outspoken prophet of good marketing explains why bad surveys are a disservice to sustainability. The [article](#) is a little longer, but is also comprehensible for market research laymen.

It is certainly not only the wrong formulation of questions that is to blame. In most cases, there is also an absurd idea of how thoughtfully and consistently people should behave, because we are all supposed to have a powerful persona that guides our behaviour. A mystical, deep inner voice. An omnipresent social conscience. A personality that only needs to be addressed with the right marketing to create a better world. Not with glue on the street, no, using our awakened analytical skills on the shelf.

Even if these ideas of people's inner drive seem romantically beautiful and give marketers the hope that they can kindle these personas with the right, purposeful approach, one thing should be made clear: persona thinking and depth psychology no longer exist in modern psychology. These ideas are practically only found among consultants, marketing and market research.

Mr Freud (psychoanalysis) and Mr Jung (archetypes) would not get a chair today. But the two bright minds would certainly go with science today, unlike many of their fans.





Let's stop constantly bombarding the business world with over-optimistic, highly insipid nonsense about consumer thinking and behaviour. Consumers don't know what drives their behaviour. It's a stupid question to ask them! You get a plausible, socially acceptable answer. Which has nothing, absolutely nothing to do with future behaviour. Reportedly, 49% of consumers rely on influencers for product recommendations and 74% of consumers use social media to make purchasing decisions. Meanwhile, 82% of consumers believe that a brand's values must align with their own before they buy it. I hope you recognise the irony in these responses.

I quote Ritson, he exaggerates but gets to the heart of the matter: "Consumers are selfish, fucked-up creatures who only give the impression that they care about the planet, others and global equality in the surveys they occasionally take part in. As soon as the clipboard is closed, the credit cards are brought out again.

Selfish, unreflective behaviour trumps the declared, altruistic intention every time". And doubly so on Black Friday. Promise. Energy prices, inflation and recession are almost biblical tests even for avowed altruists.

But the shortage of skilled labour and the GenZ, who only want to work for companies with a purpose? There has already been a critical BrainCandy (74) on this topic, too. A recent representative survey was organised by the Wirtschaftsunioren (Organisation of business juniors). Published in the [Hauptstadtbriefing](#). For 81 per cent of young people, earning opportunities are particularly important. Expectations of a good work-life balance ranked similarly high at 74 per cent.

The question of whether one's own work should have a social purpose or benefit falls well behind this. 55 per cent still agree with this. Translated for you, this means that GenZ, like presumably most readers of BrainCandy, prioritise salary and work context 95% of the time. And the actual importance of the purpose of the company is likely to be far below the 55%.

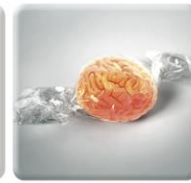
Conclusion:

Purpose-porn is dangerous. If we continue to hear false findings such as "sustainable products are important to 70% of consumers", we could - understandably, but quite wrongly - conclude that a consumer-led revolution is underway. We might start to believe that marketing and advertising can save the world. Sorry, but that's a mistake.

Solution:

We have to separate two things:

1. If purpose is really important for the brand or the company, and if you accept that this will cost margins rather than increase them, you should first of all internalise the fact that people are not intrinsically motivated in most purchasing situations. Instead, they react primarily to external stimuli. It is always very specific usage contexts that trigger automatic, experience-based behaviour. The autopilot listens to the outside, not to the mystical inside. We only think of champagne in one of the following two contexts: dinner with the family or candlelight dinner. That's called life experience. A survey about sustainability is out of the question. You have to playfully place the target group in the right context and understand what drives their selection behaviour.



And then experimentally offer new, more sustainable solutions and observe how people act now. And not how they answer questions. We call this psychodramatic thinking. If the signals are set correctly, a genuine interest in sustainability is possible. But never without also delivering the good product performance that buyers are looking for in the context of use.

Sorry Mr Jope.

2. In the fight for a better environment, we need more effective approaches than marketing. And less idealism with its under-complex truths that lead to many unintended side effects, as we are currently experiencing with energy policy and migration, for example. It is positive, for example, when companies and retailers switch to recycled plastics.

Because then soon 100% of consumers will buy sustainable packaging without giving it a second thought.

That will be the new normal. However, if normal packaging continues to be available and is nicer, more stable and even cheaper, then you only get the 70% in surveys, but not at the point of purchase.

Allow me to make one final comment. Of course, I also asked ChatGPT about purpose as a brand strategy. And that showed me again how much bias there is in these models. A summary of the PR work around purpose porn was provided. And Unilever was praised as a key example of the great success of purpose as a brand strategy. I was also rather sceptical about the other mentions regarding Purpose's actual contribution to success. Patagonia once again excluded. Patagonia by the way accepts lower margins and restricted sales opportunities due to their purpose bound business ethics.

Book recommendation

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

Context marketing

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



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