

# Universal *Truths*

SOUTH AFRICA-BASED JAN HOFMEYR IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S LEADING BRAND COMMITMENT EXPERTS. IN FEBRUARY HE PRESENTED A SEMINAR ENTITLED "HOW HUMAN UNIVERSALS CREATE A FOUNDATION FOR GLOBAL BRANDING" TO AN INVITED AUDIENCE OF 70 GUESTS IN THE OWEN GLENN BUILDING AT AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY BUSINESS SCHOOL. THIS IS AN ABRIDGED VERSION OF WHAT HE HAD TO SAY.



Apple iPod advertising.

**W**hat is life about? In his book *How the Mind Works*, Steven Pinker, a neurologist and neuroscientist at Harvard University, says there are five things that characterise everything we need to know about people and their motivations: food, shelter, meaningful work, a mating partner, and family and friends. To these, I would add social esteem.

These are life's universal themes. These are the truths we rely on when we want to connect our brands to the things that are really important to people.

The second foundation for our common humanity is what's happening with urbanisation - the world going through what is probably the last mass migration, particularly in places like China, Africa and Latin America. It is a completely unstoppable process, because it is easier to be successful and wealthy in cities. It is easier to deliver services to people when they are all concentrated in cities. It's easier to educate them, and send electricity and water to them. It is part of the universal search for opportunity and wealth.

There could not be a better ecology for global branding than the style of the modern urban environment.

Take the example of Apple iPod advertising. The only difference it recognises is the difference between men and women. The culture has gone, to be replaced by a modern urban culture. There is no recognisable ethnic or cultural identity, but rather a very recognisable youthful urban identity.

This 'universalisation' is the second theme that has been driving brand connections. The third theme is covered in our study of how the mind works.

The mind is essentially a 200,000-year-old instrument. It doesn't change very fast. So let's have a look at some of the simple facts about how the mind works.

The best definition of intelligence that I've ever come across also comes from Steven Pinker: "The successful pursuit of goals in the face of obstacles."

There are only really two things our brains do, apart from the essentials, like keeping the heart beating and the lungs breathing. The first is giving us a decent map of the world, because we have to navigate our way through the world in order to achieve our goals. The second is to let others know what we want.

The great religious geniuses have always

known this. If we're going to successfully pursue goals, we need to have goals that actually make us happy when we arrive there. This means there are two kinds of knowledge in which we consistently believe. The first is the formation of beliefs, imagery about things, and an understanding of what things are like and how they behave - especially an understanding of how human beings will behave, because other humans are the single biggest obstacle to our successful pursuit of goals.

Secondly, we have got to figure out our desires. We've got to sift through all of the different motivations and work out what we want.

What has this got to do with branding? Well it is because branding is a characteristic or belief that builds up over time. The point about beliefs (the way we form imagery of things) is that they are accumulative. We take new information in and we layer on top of the information that's already there. What that means is that over time it becomes very inert. It is difficult to change. The more experience we have of something, the more we develop our opinions about it. We try to get to a particular understanding that this is what it is, and this is how it behaves - a reliable understanding.

Whereas, desires, as we all know (again look at the religious traditions), are unstable. They are adherent, they are conflicting.

We want mutually compatible things. We want to settle down and have a family with somebody, and then we constantly get attracted to other people - this is not the way things should be. Men get to 40, and then some of them go through this weird crisis. And I think it's because they know it is that point in life when they can see to the point where they are going to die. And they look back and say, "I haven't achieved very much, time is running out."

So we have these two things. One is the development of imagery and belief, and the other is desire. How does this relate to branding?

If we want to shape attitudes so that people have a preference for our brand, then it may be easier to change what people think they want than to change what they believe, especially if we have a well-established, old brand.



Jan Hofmeyr - enjoying life.

One of the great advertising campaigns of all time was a 1956 ad for Dodge. It was voted one of the best advertising campaigns in the 20th century by American marketers. This ad took advantage of the instability of desire. In the context of motorcars in the 1950s, this was the kind of car that you had to build if you wanted to be successful. It was when Americans were thinking about shooting guys up into space. So cars had to look like rocket ships.

And then as we have always done, and we still do, the creators of the ad placed a beautiful woman next to the car. The concept was, "If you own a car like this, a beautiful woman will get into it." Unbelievable! We are such simple creatures, yet we think that we are so complex. Our hot buttons are actually very obvious.

Into this context came the launch of the Volkswagen Beetle. I'm actually old enough to remember when we still called it a German Rollers because the suspension was really bad, and the centre of gravity was too far off the ground. If you did hit a bump it would roll. And because it was shaped like a bun, once it started rolling, it would carry on rolling.

How could you launch something like that in the era of James Dean? It wasn't fast, it didn't

accelerate quickly and it was difficult to get into. You had to take the whole engine out to change the spark plug. How would you launch this onto the market when you're up against rocket ships and beautiful women? Change what people think they really want.

"Think small" was the headline with a tiny, ugly-looking car in a mass of full-page white space. The rest is history - the most successful new car launch ever. This campaign legitimately gets recognition as one of the greatest campaigns. It transformed what was relevant.

To change people's beliefs, to transform what people believe about the brand, is a very different neurophysiological process. Social science neuropsychologists can now use brain-scan machines to study brain reaction while asking people questions. Scientists play this game with two people, where one person is given \$100, and that person has to decide how to divide that \$100 between the two of them. Then the other person has to decide whether to accept the division. If the second person says the division is unacceptable, then neither get anything. But if the other person is willing to accept the way the money is divided, then both get to keep their share of the money.

Now if human beings were rational, one would accept \$1, and the other \$99, because at least you'd get \$1. But what actually happens when somebody divides it \$99 to \$1 is that the person lying under the machine gets so angry that they reject it. The anger can be clearly seen on the scan.

Not all decisions are rational.

What happens when those under the brain-scanning machines are given Coca Cola is even more illuminating. In blind taste-tests of various colas, not much happens, but when the subject is shown that they are drinking Coca Cola, the whole brain lights up. Stick a Coke can in front of them and the ventral striatum lights up. There's a connection through to the front of the brain, and the pre-frontal cortex lights up. That is where our higher values are, that's where we store memory of the good times that we've had. Drinking Coke creates a different experience, because the advertising has created part of the experience.

What the brain sees together, it can't help putting together. It connects the functional product to the imagery that's evolved around the product. It is a physiological process.

It takes a long time to create a brand leader. It even takes five years for a single image to resonate with an audience. So isn't it a disgrace when advertisers change a campaign every three months? Why is that? Is it because the accountants look at the numbers every three months and think "nothing has happened".

How can people be expected to form a lasting, deeply entrenched, abiding image of a brand if they are only given three months, or even a year, or even three years? It's not going to happen. Physical changes are required before we acquire the imagery advertisers want. It works by linking the physical product to the required characteristics that live in the front part of the brain, not in the lizard part. There are connections. But it only creates those connections if physiological changes have happened. And you don't achieve those changes overnight. It works by creating connections, it works through sheer repetition.

It doesn't have to be a logical argument, it doesn't even need to be true.

We used to think the way to get people to buy our brand was to position it in such a way that people thought it was all they needed. In fact most still use that basic model - what do people want, what do they need to think about the brand? "Let's make a brand like that and they'll buy it." It is assumed there is a relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. Well of course we know that's not necessarily true. People often buy things they don't really want to buy. People stay with things that make them unhappy, and they leave things that they are perfectly satisfied with.

So in the mid 1990s some dangerous American academics suggested that the issue is to 'delight'. "You've got to delight and surprise people, because nothing happens until that point. But if you surprise people then there's a huge spike in their desire to do business with you."

This is the single most dangerous doctrine in marketing. Why? Because (and here is the problem) nothing has the power to delight every human being forever. The problem is, we get used to it.

Trying to delight people all the time is like being sucked into the marketing equivalent of a steaming black hole. Because what we do is say, "Okay that's fine, what are we going to do next? I'm used to that now, what are you going to do next?"

We only learn if we get a reward for learning. Nature rewards us for doing, by identifying the signs of what's coming. Now the sad thing about that, is that it takes the reward off the outcome, and places the reward on the side that we are on. So the reward is not about having the holiday, it is about the planning that leads up to the holiday. The reward is displaced, and in that way the brand encourages us to create causal strings of the world.

So if we can get the things that we enjoy the first time they happen, then we become habituated to it, because the dopamine shifts forward and it leads us to be permanently dissatisfied. Because eventually those things

that used to reward us don't any more. Buddha called it "the problem of becoming". We are never quite content with where we are. We are in a constant state of becoming.

Humans have been constructed to be habituated. Imagine what chaos life would be if we weren't. I know for a fact that I do not delight in my wife all the time. It would be exhausting if I had to. Fortunately, I don't have to, because there's another characteristic, and it's true of all human beings. We enjoy commitment, or at least commitment to something meaningful, because if we were really on a ceaseless quest to be delighted all the time, life would be a mess. That's just fundamental. It's fundamental to all human beings, not just to a particular culture. We get into that state of mind when something matters to us. When something is important enough to transcend the day-to-day fluctuations.

If you have your KPIs set on the basis of delight, you are wasting your money. If you are measuring delight, you are wasting your money. To create loyalty is not about delight but about making the relationship important. That leads to the second universal truth of commitment. If we don't create involvement, a sense of importance, we get no commitment.

We are capable of being enthusiastic about more than one at the same time. What that means for brands is it makes it possible to create brand commitment and yet only get a fractional share of that commitment. That is because your genuinely committed customer is also committed to somebody else.

Yet we think that it is all about delighting people, because they are incapable of staying loyal and true through the ups and downs of life. We think that when somebody is thoroughly enthusiastic we will get everything, because they're incapable of forming attachments to other things. Not true. However, if you create involvement, you can make anything important.

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