
What is a Brand?

1.1. The brand: a concept built from relationships

A brand is a construct, invented by a company or an organization, to establish a strong and productive relationship with the individuals who will allow it to grow.

We are aware that this definition given here is hardly the first definition of a Brand, but it is useful in that it highlights the essential purpose of Brands, which is to create and maintain a social contract based on a relationship with individuals.

Another virtue of this definition is that it leads us to a discussion on whether it is necessary to create Brands as complicated as they currently are.

Not so long ago, we were content with the fact that companies design, manufacture and sell good products, in the right places, at the right prices and that organizations (parties, unions, federations, associations) should correctly structure their ideas and implement the actions for which they were created.

Today, we demand that Brands behave as a kind of superhuman entity, equipped with a lavish personality, cultivating a look and a style that distinguishes them; speaking with a unique voice; setting themselves apart with coherent, constant and, if possible, admirable behaviors; pursuing a great mission; nourishing a vision of the world; ambitions and convictions grounded in clear and superb values; emphasizing their good qualities with owning up to their faults and maintaining friends and enemies.

This change that has taken place over the last 30 years is staggering, to say the least. Brands have become focal points of society, and their survival depends on the judgment of the people who consume their products, regardless of the form this consumption takes.

There are a number of reasons why this staggering form of tyranny is inflicted on them:

- the level of competition that only continues to grow, and, at the same time, the power held by the consumer that brands compulsively seek to place at the center of everything (where was this power before?) are the simplest reasons, and perhaps the most simplistic;

- the pandemic of defiance and distrust that has spread to all aspects of social life is another, more complex reason, and a more worrying one as well. We will make sure to return to this point in our analysis;

- the abandonment of the major authorities is an argument which, although it is frequently challenged as being conservative and perhaps a bit reactionary, is nonetheless difficult to question.

The philosopher Chantal Delsol describes this phenomenon well: we, the active members of this society, have been trying for 50 years, and particularly during the social upheavals of the late 1960s (such as the revolution of 1968 in France), to progressively stifle our main authority figures: parents, teachers, bosses, the army, churches, political parties, trade unions, etc. In getting rid of them, we have also lost the moral commitments that come along with them, that have allowed us to make sense of life. But giving meaning to life requires finding something that we value more than our own selves as individuals.

One example from politics can help us to understand: at one time, communism was spreading aggressively. People could be for it or against it, but they were practically required to at least have an opinion, take sides or even fight. As the philosophers observed, this fighting spirit disappeared when communism disappeared.

Individuals, when they are no longer experiencing suppression, find themselves like boxers without an opponent in the middle of the ring. And a boxer alone is ridiculous: no longer able to put on a show, he is worthless and his audience flees in dismay (or “disenchantment”, to use the current lexicon). His presence in the ring no longer makes sense to him.

This experience of suppression has left an opening that consumption is uniquely suited to fill. But the fact remains that consumption is an activity that is personal, individual (or nearly) and it is an act of “I”, not “we”. And thus many of our contemporaries are turning toward consumption to give meaning to their lives. This is much like considering that “the one thing that I value more than myself is me”. This is impossible, terrifying, mortifying; this moral dead end would lead to the conclusion that consumers are expecting Brands to fill the void left by the major authorities that have now been toppled.

GAP: we can't even dress the way we want!

On October 4, 2010, the brand Gap presented its new logo, which sparked significant pushback on its Facebook page. Consumers rejected this change. The most vehement of them resorted to outright ridicule of Gap's new idea. Some even saw it as an attempt at diversion, to conceal the accusations made against their highly objectionable methods for producing clothes. Seven days later, Gap announced the return of its original logo, thus avoiding a conflict that could have caused significant damage. This example illustrates the extent to which consumers are able to build a strong relationship with a Brand, to the point where they make it part of their “personal life”.

Volkswagen: not too many apparent wounds

The brand is one of the leaders in society. It has its own set of values that the community of consumers adheres to. On the basis of this, in a scandal such as the events of Volkswagen's “Dieselgate”, we see that the conflict that has emerged goes beyond the mere disappointment felt from being deceived. The Brand had patiently built its image as the embodiment of reliability, to the point where it could lay claim to being at the very forefront of this area. When the news broke of the company's falsification, it did not simply tarnish the image of the company, but it affected its many claims to reliability, honesty and the trust that customers could have in its oversight measures. Commercially, Volkswagen is doing well, but this will remain in the consciousness of consumers – not the falsification itself, but the company's ability to deceive. This resentment may give way to resignation, which is even worse.

1.2. The brand is anthropomimetic

Glorified in this way, Brands find themselves with responsibilities that go far beyond the organizational functions used to create them.

In describing these phenomena, we constantly attribute human characteristics to these Brands. The Brand is a contact point for consumers.

Human beings can only enter into a relationship and maintain this relationship with a living being – a being like themselves. The brand is anthropomimetic.

Over a brand's existence, it takes on human characteristics that will be worked on, chosen and specified in the processes of brand construction, to the point of establishing strong, admirable personalities that encourage consumers to discover, recommend, follow and defend them.

This anthropomimeticism does not imply anthropomorphism, which would instead be the incarnation of the brand in the form of a mascot or a human being (in some cases, the founder). The link between an individual and a brand is therefore very similar to an interpersonal relationship. As a result, this relationship is not balanced. As we have seen, the individual demands a great deal of Brands, and our purpose here is to study the conflicting consequences of the actual or perceived shortcomings of brands with regard to the demands imposed upon them. Why allow individuals to exercise this tyranny? Why accept it, let alone work to maintain it? Because the link between the individual and the Brand is a connection that is essentially commercial in nature. The brand sells, while the individual chooses to buy or not to buy. The transaction can apply to anything that can be subject to a commercial exchange: a product, a service, a commitment, a membership, a boycott, even a vote.

The brand is a merchant, and thus it takes on the characteristics of one. We discuss here three of these characteristics due to their indispensable nature for the purpose of optimizing trade and for their major contributions to the processes of conflict: exaggeration, fame and fallibility.

1.3. The brand as merchant

1.3.1. Exaggeration

Merchants are required to exaggerate. In order to increase product advantage, they therefore need to do a better job of selling them, for an increasingly longer period of time. This exaggeration forms part of an extended gradient that ranges from paying close attention to the presentation of its commercial offering, to outright lies. The choice of the level of exaggeration done by merchants is regulated by their own morality, by the

awareness of the acceptability of its potential buyer and by the risk that this exaggeration would backslide into abuse.

Exaggeration reaches its limit when it is rejected by customers, and every merchant knows how to walk the line between the effectiveness of exaggeration and the risk of doing so excessively. This balancing act allows for a delicate regulation of commercial activities.

This phenomenon had already been analyzed as early as the 18th Century. During that time, the kind of economic liberalism that was beginning to take hold promoted the idea that the market regulates itself better than if state-imposed regulations are imposed on it. It was an innovative idea to consider that a natural equilibrium point would be more effective than the artificial balance set by laws. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Scottish philosopher Adam Smith (1723–1790) wrote:

“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages”.

Furthermore, exaggeration is a natural part of a process of seduction – a complex social phenomenon that takes many forms, whose purpose is to arouse the desire of others and the preference that will allow for commerce to take place, understood both in the sense of transactions and of relationships.

The phenomenon of seduction continues to mobilize researchers, some of whom claim that it is indeed a sexual concept. Men tend to favor action, initiative and demonstration, and women tend to prefer appearance, attitude and behavior.

We will not take the risk of judging this overly brief description of sexualization here, but we must note that Brands often take advantage of both of these tones. This seductive exaggeration is expressed in the appearance of the things being sold (the design of the products and their environment) as well as in the actions of the seller and in its communications, including advertising, marketing campaigns, civic actions, etc.

The difficulty of this practice of attraction and seduction is that it never really achieves total success, and that the temptation of emphasis, for the purpose of efficiency, can damage it.

1.3.2. *Celebrity*

Celebrity is a special level of recognition given by an audience for acts that are out of the ordinary: remarkable achievements, originality, uniqueness or preponderance of social position and performance.

Celebrity is framed by fame, which is of a lower degree, and glory that is heaped upon an exceptional success. These different social positions differ in their consistency and durability. Fame is not very sensitive to variations over the short term, just as glory that, due to the lingering nature of memory, is easily embellished. Neither of these two disappears abruptly, but they can fade.

On the other hand, fame has a fragile, precarious status, difficult to maintain over time. Fame is a public exhibition. The general public, considered as a whole, is not particularly generous. Far from it, in fact: it is quick to be admiring, but equally quick to be jealous or envious; it is passionate, and thus versatile; it is curious, in both the healthy and unhealthy uses of the term; it is forgetful, leading it to pounce shamelessly and at the slightest provocation from one emotion to another, as its whims dictate.

The merchant – and therefore the Brand – can in some cases be showered in glory. More frequently, brands want to be able to count on a certain fame that opens the doors of celebrity to them, but that also exposes them. Fame is also a legitimate quest for the brand that sees it as a condition for its success. Naturally, it invests and invests to climb higher on this ladder of success.

It is easy, and yet rational, to consider that climbing the ladder remains a dangerous action and that the fall is all the more severe once greater heights are reached. Celebrity is easily broken down into notoriety and image, and understanding the progressions of fame means following the evolution of both notoriety and image, which have long been studied by communication professionals in the form of a matrix.

1.3.3. A matrix for modeling celebrity?

The image/notoriety matrix is therefore nothing new. It is remarkably easy to understand, and is thus taught very early in some courses that focus on companies. Its drama was quickly forgotten in favor of more sophisticated modeling which was thus more rewarding for users.

This is a pity, because its power of evocation and power to project the future are eminently useful to anyone who has ever sat at the helm of a Brand. This matrix involves a vertical spectrum of notoriety ranging from “I don’t know it at all” to “I know it very well” perpendicularly crossing a horizontal spectrum of the image that ranges from “I hate it” to “I love it”.

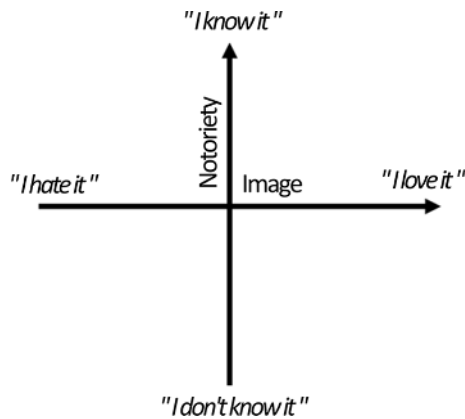


Figure 1.1. Notoriety/image matrix

Thus, this matrix is a great asset for evaluating and modifying the position of an individual within the minds of its audience, the place of a brand or a product within the hearts of its consumers or its observers, or an idea in the minds of people who interact with it.

The four quadrants, managed in this way, lead to situations that contrast one another, to say the least. The lower left quadrant is certainly the worst.

“I don’t know it, but I still hate it”.

Ever hear of the Swedish cannery Høga Kusten (“High Coast”)? Ever hear about one of their most famous specialties, *surströmming*? Even

without knowing anything further, the mere mention of “canning” and “Swedish” brings to mind a rather positive mental image.

But once you find out that *surströmming* is a dish made from rotting herring, inedible even by most Swedes, which releases a stench so vile that the cans can only be opened outdoors and quickly (because there is a real risk these cans might explode), swarming with countless colonies of frightening bacteria, you are a lot more likely to place *surströmming* and its unusual manufacturer in the lower left quadrant.

The next quadrant, directly above this one, is hardly more enviable. In many cases it is even more disastrous.

“I know it, and I hate it”.

The ones that are here cannot go back down, of course, and they will have a hard time sliding over to the right, because this movement, as advantageous as it is, would imply the destruction/restructuring of the existing image in a similar way to a conversion.

Together, these two quadrants are often considered to be “the valley of despair”. We can understand why. Let us move to a happier area, on the lower right.

“I don’t know it, but I already like it”. It’s a dream come true!

Brands – and more specifically, product brands – occupy this quadrant, where products that are still unknown (whose release date has been announced) thus benefit from an idealized image of the brand under which they will be created.

Examples could include – with no bias intended, but merely for illustrative purposes – the next Spielberg movie or the new version of the iPhone from Apple. This is a paradise for brands, and not yet overcrowded.

Now let us move upward, to the far corner of the top-right quadrant, where all brands dream of being.

“I know it well and I love it”.

This is, without a doubt, an excellent place to be. The peak, the summit, the promised land – to be reached by sustained efforts aimed at optimum performance.

As you may already be able to tell from this description, the summit is not often a place that can be maintained over the long term. Consensus holds that after reaching the summit, the only thing that can follow is a fall. Indeed, being able to stay in this little corner is unlikely; just remaining in the quadrant in itself is no small feat. We mentioned previously that the notoriety/image matrix is a management tool.

At a given time t , a Brand may be placed more or less objectively on the matrix, and its movement to a better area at a given point is decided by its manager(s). The matrix is a tool for visualizing brand kinetics.

Recently, we have become accustomed to establishing as many Notoriety-Image Matrices (NIMs) for a single brand as the brand has particular types of audience: customers, non-customers, suppliers, employees, partners, shareholders, future hires, detractors, etc. The tool, when put to use to identify actions that will optimize/improve the placement of the Brand on the diagram, is a veritable gold mine.

During a conflict, objectively situating a Brand on the NIMs of its various audience members is a difficult task. It requires approximations, but also makes it possible to design actions that will facilitate turning the tables.

1.3.4. Fallibility

This word is practical, since it touches on both the idea of an innocent mistake and actively committing an error. Streams of ink have been poured out on this topic, in writings on the obvious fragility of man and his great capacity for failure, which keeps him so far away from his gods.

So then, why make this an important feature of the merchant if this natural peculiarity is inherent to every human being?

Because merchants are inevitably tempted to fail. Curiously, trade is a practice that succeeds in constantly brushing up against truly reprehensible things.

It is a bit like in sport, where champions inevitably are faced with the temptation to dope, or in gaming where, in a frenzy to win, some people consider resorting to cheating. Good merchants are those who do a better job at selling. That is, selling more to more buyers, and buying, manufacturing or producing more cheaply, or selling at a higher price.

In each of these cases of maximization of commerce, deviations, excesses and abuse can follow close behind excellence. Selling more or selling at a higher price can be subjected to advertising pressure that can spin out of control, turning into manipulation. Selling to more buyers may include selling to buyers who do not need what is being sold to them, or even those who should not even be customers in the first place. Buying cheaper is often done at the expense of the producer; suppliers who cannot give up a market that is unfavorable for them. Producing or transforming at a cheaper rate can devolve into the exploitation of the manufacturers or producers.

Therefore, the merchant and the brand, in their progression and success, are subject to numerous reprehensible temptations to which they may yield in part or outright, in specific instances or throughout their existence, consciously or unconsciously.

When one is fallible, failure is then not a surprise. It is a given.

The problem is that brands, as we have said, are a social reference point – and that as a model, we imagine them to be perfect, or at least in line with the level of morality that we imagine they should have. Their indiscretions, whether small or large, are thus magnets for controversy. Though the Brand is a single, indivisible entity, those working for the company behind it are numerous, and individual. An error or breach committed by the company's workers is always held against the brand above all else. The brand's image is therefore dependent on human failings within the company, and the justice system or investigative media must identify the guilty persons so that the Brand can extricate itself from the responsibility (or even guilt) that has been assigned to it.

Rana Plaza: whose fault was it?

On April 24, 2013, the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh left 1,130 dead and nearly 2,000 wounded. The day before, an alert had been given regarding disturbing cracks that had appeared on the building. This alert was suppressed, since it would have resulted in a prolonged shutdown of the five garment shops, which employed 5,000 people in hellish working conditions. The five workshops in Rana Plaza produced clothing for major brands: Mango, Benetton, Primark, Camaïeu, Auchan and Carrefour, among others.

Were these brands guilty? Responsible? Is it impossible to consider that they may not have known? But who within these companies knew? Does the fault lie with just one person, a few people or is it the fault of the organization that they work for? Is the rule that says you have to buy at the lowest price a common sense rule, or a criminal one?

The drama of Rana Plaza made for an instant scandal, and of course this scandal has set off many conflicts that have still not died down.

Many brands, whether they were involved or not, contributed to aid funds for the victims, which washed the Rana Plaza blood stains from their hands. But it did not erase them.

After the drama of Rana Plaza, British designer Carry Somers, active in ethical fashion, founded Fashion Revolution Day. Every April 24th, Internet users are invited to take a photo with a garment whose label is clearly visible and to post it on social networks with the hashtag #whomademyclothes.

The movement for solidarity was admirable, of course, but while it originated from genuinely humanistic impulses, it also serves a sector that has found in this tragedy a new opportunity to instill lasting suspicions that may fan the flames of conflict during a subsequent scandal.

1.3.5. Exaggeration, fame and fallibility: the trio from hell

Exaggeration does not inspire confidence; fame arouses admiration that can turn to envy in the blink of an eye, then jealousy, then hatred; errors are not always forgivable, and negligence much less so.

The merchant and the Brand are spoiled for distinguishing characteristics. Yet these entities are rarely the subjects of studies within organizations. This only occurs when conflicts arise. That is a shame, because, as

always, reactions are more complicated, more costly and more random than prevention. Brand managers would have every incentive to consider these three characteristics of the merchant in greater depth, in order to make them the subject of regular debates within the company, seeking to find their complete relevance in the work drawn in this way from the social responsibility of the company.

For instance, it would be interesting for executives, previously presented with the three characteristics of the merchant – exaggeration, fame and fallibility – to work once a year on situating their organization in relation to each of these three themes, starting with a few simple questions:

- where do we place our communication and our messages, on a scale from enthusiasm to falsehood?

- have we changed in one direction or another, and what is the position that we should adopt (more or less exaggeration)?

- who perceives us as annoying or arrogant?

- is this potentially a risk? A risk we are willing to accept? A risk that we are prepared for?

- do we know who in our organization is taking risks that could lead to a conflict?

- how do we situate ourselves on the scales of notoriety and image when we consider each of our internal or external audiences?

To deal with these topics, it must be established that this is not an act of paranoia, and that this exercise will be productive if it is undertaken, if not within a relaxed atmosphere, then at least with a bit of a playful spirit.

1.4. The Brand exposed

As we have pointed out, the Brand is a public figure, and like any public figure, it voluntarily puts itself forward in order to promote its actions and initiatives, to defend its ideas, or to test and launch its projects. It exposes itself to communities that are extraordinarily mixed in nature, and pays the costs of public opinions that are not particularly subtle. Plato was among the first to complain about the superficiality and rudeness of public opinion, which had been manipulated by the Sophists.

And not much has improved since Plato's time. Public opinion is less nuanced than the individuals who voice it. The judgments, opinions and beliefs that rise to the top are those that are the most imposing, the loudest, the most intense and the most excessive. The ease with which messages are spread digitally has largely enabled the amplification of this phenomenon, which combines violence with immediacy.

Those within the Brand who are involved in the conflict must be aware of it in order not to overreact. In the heat of the moment, it is not always easy to keep in mind that public opinion is not the opinion of the majority, and that the attacks suffered may not have been intended by a large number of people involved. Though it is difficult to do so in practice, it is crucial so as not to blow events out of proportion.

1.5. All Brands are controversial

You read that right. All Brands are controversial. They are all prone to generating or provoking conflicts of various scales and levels of destruction and permanence.

Of course, a scandal that leads to the loss of a company hated by 99% of the population is not in the same basket as an informal community of 10 customers outraged by lengthening delivery times.

Is that reassuring? Unfortunately, conflicts, regardless of their nature, can always escalate. Small conflicts only seek to become larger.

Obviously, when dealing with a Brand beset by attacks, there is a great temptation to see potential conflicts everywhere and to consider that, all in all, all brands are potentially in conflict. Consequently, our subject is propelled to the top, as it is of extreme interest and is an absolute and universal emergency for all brands.

Our observations of many conflicts involving brands allow us to candidly assess the nuances of the subject. It is undeniable that any brand may come to experience an episode of conflict sooner or later, but it is worth distinguishing mere bouts of criticism or an isolated denigration from "guerrillas" that plot over the long term to destroy the entity that they are attacking.

There are two main reasons why conflict is a permanent threat. The first is that collective consciousness has progressed with an unprecedented level of speed and intensity. Junk food, resource depletion, global warming, health scandals, cynicism about the financial sector, indifference to inequalities, etc. We could cite many such “problems” that were only known to well-versed insiders yesterday that have become widespread concerns today.

The second reason (is it the chicken or the egg?) is the extraordinary deployment and democratization of means of communication, and above all their capacity to provide a platform for everyone, while at the same time uniting people. This issue has been analyzed extensively by many experts, and we will not add anything further except to note that digital networks have become gigantic and powerful machines for denigration, denouncement and sometimes even metaphorical lynching, creating hellish maelstroms of collective, fleeting emotions.

Any brand can find itself in the middle of a conflict. But not all brands start from the same position. No one is perfect. If this aphorism is true for humans, it is just as true for Brands. What this implies is that imperfection comes in many degrees.

Brands may be heavily at fault, to blame for severe acts of negligence, failures, larceny, slip-ups or misjudgments. The way in which the conflict plays out will bring to light the severity of the misdeed.

Common sense (even though this common sense is not as sensible as might be said) will certainly recall that brands should not be shocked to see conflict. However, a terrible crime does not necessarily have to have been committed for a brand to come under attack.

An irresponsible purchase of raw materials, considered by the managers of the Brand to be a minor detail but loudly decried on the Internet which receives neither an answer nor excuse, is a situation that some might consider as benign, but it has a high potential to generate controversy.

We will look more closely at the case of Michel et Augustin, which illustrates the way in which a very moderate error can be furtively stoked into a blazing crisis.

This is far from the villainy that companies like Monsanto or Nestlé are involved in on a daily basis, but in many cases all it takes is a single spark to start a fire. In any case, detractors may appear and take action. They claim for themselves the weight of morality, honesty, virtue and fairness, and put themselves forward as the correctors of wrongdoing, which gives them a further advantage in addition to the fact that they “strike first”.

On the other hand, there are cases where a Brand that generates a conflict is not necessarily in the wrong.

If the Brand is perceived as hegemonic, this can give rise to jealousy and resentment. We have described this before.

The case of Mars

After the discovery of a piece of plastic in a chocolate bar, the Mars group undertook a massive recall of all its products, all brands included. This decision seemed somewhat disproportionate, given the fact that the danger appeared to be low, and the risk was very limited (it would appear that this piece of plastic was an isolated case). In this case, it was not a scandal that was revealed, but a simple accident. Consumers know that despite taking all possible precautions, accidents are always possible. What they look for is the brand not to have committed any acts of negligence, and to take responsibility for the reality of the problem. And that was in fact what happened here. So, where did this intensity come from in this communications crisis, with a recall on this scale? Was it just a PR overreach? In reality, we need to take a step back and analyze the environment where the crisis took place.

A crisis in itself is not conflict. The discovery of a piece of plastic is a crisis. It is a specific instance. But this is only a partial analysis. Indeed, identifying the crisis is only a small part of the problem. This is where the analysis grid comes into play in terms of conflict: it makes it possible to visualize the broader situation.

The food industry has become the target of many media attacks, particularly against groups offering more pleasing, fatty or sugary foods. Although these different brands have not recently had any scandals or been accused of dishonesty, they are nonetheless prone to controversy.

“When faced with this growing suspicion, the food industry has not always adopted the right position. It has often withdrawn, or even walled itself off with silence or avoidance, out of fear of suffering even more attacks and criticism. By reacting in this way, it has unfortunately only lent credence to the image of a cynical and opaque industry among the different audiences involved. It has also sometimes generated a gap in the way it is

perceived, between the polished advertising materials for its products and the less glamorous industrial reality”¹.

Thus, in a context of conflict, the option to act decisively and with great fanfare to reassure the consumer takes on a whole other meaning.

1.6. Leader? Tough luck!

When a sector of activity is attacked, it is important for its detractors to personify it – to give it a name – and it is the market leader who naturally inherits this honor.

In fact, there are few conflicts whose primary objective is to attack a Brand itself, for the simple reason that the Brand does not really exist. It is a symbol, covered with characteristics and attributes, all of which are fictional. The brand is a fictional being – effective, but fictional nonetheless.

At the root of the conflict – and this list is not exhaustive – is a sector of activity that is quite diverse (as is the case with the fast food sector), the way in which a company treats its employees (e.g. firings, infernal rates) or an industrial accident (e.g. an oil spill). But the strength of the Brand is also its weakness.

To alert public opinion to the horrors of a given sector or to a scandalous situation (whether proven or alleged), it is easier to mobilize citizens against a Brand. Indeed, if the Brand has a strong presence in a territory, it has associated itself very strongly with the ideals it helped to create.

If a scandal breaks, then a hostile community can take shape. Anger or indignation therefore plays the extraordinary role of creating bonds between individuals who do not necessarily share a common background and do not belong to a pre-existing community. And this new community needs symbols, emblems and imagery, in order to be recognized – symbols to designate themselves, but also to designate their cause and, of course, to define their opponent. However, it is the leader of the sector who will thus crystallize the collective unconscious, even if it has not made any difference in the conflict that has just erupted. That is why it is all the more important

¹ <http://www.leblogducommunicant2-0.com/humeur/retrait-des-barres-de-chocolat-mars-un-coup-de-com-de-crise-et-ca-repart>.

for the leaders of a given sector to anticipate and prepare for the conflicts that may arise, since the leader is naturally more exposed than all the other players.

IKEA vs. Cash Investigation

On January 24, 2017, *Cash Investigation* presented its report on the wood sectors, entitled “Wood raids: promises by furniture giants”². The report did not specifically target IKEA, but rather looked at all subsets of the wood sector. The purpose of the report was to attract attention and denounce outlandish certifications and the industries producing wood illegally; the wood sector provides materials not only for furniture, but also for much of the paper, packaging and decoration industries (including wallpaper, etc.).

However, in order to organize the events into an easily relatable story that is able to stir people’s emotions, they needed to create a character. And so IKEA ended up becoming the villain of the story, because it is known worldwide. Commentators have pointed out that though the actions presented in the report were quite accurate, their level of occurrence is quite low (the area of wood burned is about 10 ha, for instance), and that the charges against IKEA are rather broad and concern the entire sector.

But still, the spectators were drawn into the story. Heightened emotions and indignation brought strangers together around a common goal, which allowed them to act as a group. The following day, petitions and calls for boycotts multiplied on the Internet.

A victim of its own notoriety, the furniture giant was targeted and held responsible for the ills of an entire industry – ills that are indeed reprehensible under the lens of current major societal concerns.

Lactalis

In 2016, a new crisis shook the news cycle involving the price of milk, which quickly became known as the “Lactalis scandal”. This is a classic example in terms of conflict, because it brings together many of the points we have identified as dynamics that are unique to conflicts.

This new episode in the milk crisis served as a tipping point, bringing up a long-standing conflict once again. Let us recall here that crisis and conflict are not synonymous. They do not share the same notion of time. A crisis – an occurrence that has been subjected to extensive study – is an initial or recurrent peak of activity within a conflict.

The news surrounding Lactalis gives us a good example of this, regularly making the front page of the papers. But trying to manage the crisis that occurred in October 2016

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJgwaDeSgN4>.

would only be treating a symptom that is part of a chronic conflict that already had prior occurrences, and where the conditions that led to this crisis had not yet been resolved.

In a sense, all of the ingredients came together. A tightly controlled communications strategy, one that was almost silent, left more room for opponents to express themselves. A level of control (very calculated in this case) of silence. Whenever Lactalis made a statement, it generated silence for people to listen to it and echo its message. This is all the more valuable since it is so rare. This gave Lactalis the opportunity to try to reverse the trend by framing the issue so that Lactalis was no longer some capitalist monster, but instead had been singled out as a “scapegoat”. A bold strategy, but one that did not prove to be entirely successful. Indeed, as powerful it was, the metaphor was not entirely appropriate. In reality, the problem was the one we have dealt with below: being the leader is not always an enviable position. This becomes clear just looking at the name that was given to this issue. A milk crisis was turned into the “Lactalis scandal”. This is also the analysis presented by Laurent Pinatel in an interview given to *L'Express*: “It’s very reductive to only consider Lactalis, when there is a crisis of overproduction going on”. Reductive perhaps, but it is always effective to give a name and a face to an issue, especially when the situation is complex. This makes it easier to coordinate efforts. A vague, blurred premise makes it impossible to operate effectively.

Does this mean that this conflict does not concern Lactalis, the victim of its own position? This is obviously too simplistic a position, which leaves out an essential point. If the leader of the sector is most often targeted in a general crisis, this is because it is expected that the leader, due to its status, must set an example. It is no longer an issue of guilt, but of being a good role model. By pressuring the largest of the players, the impact is all the more significant and will serve as a benchmark to measure the activity of other players in the sector.

1.7. The Brand is not set up for conflict

As we have noted, no matter what it offers, the Brand acts as a merchant. Whether it is offering products, services, ideas, ideals, commitment or anger, it is a merchant. The life of a merchant is not compatible with conflict, because conflict does very direct damage to the energies that allow for relationships and cooperation, and therefore commerce.

Conflict is a situation that runs contrary to the activity of the Brand, which needs peace and enthusiasm as its conditions for growth. Let us not forget that we have created a situation in which the end purpose of commerce and commercialization is happiness. This point of view can be criticized – and is in fact increasingly criticized – but it nonetheless remains a rather dominant thought within so-called consumer societies.

Conflict and happiness do not mix. This incompatibility transforms any conflict into the Brand being put on trial. Conflict is destabilizing, time consuming and costly, and has the fearsome ability to multiply within the organisms it parasitically infests: conflicts that enter from outside create secondary conflicts inside.

However, fear of conflict must not diminish the energies at work in the Brand. It must not make it lose its positive energy. The easiest way for a brand to protect itself from this risk and not to turn any likelihood of a conflict (low or high) into a devastating obsession is to calmly prepare during periods of peace.

1.8. The Brand is not always agile (and that is an understatement)

The Brand is always in the hands of a group of men and women. And we can say without false flattery that these teams are (almost) always composed of savvy, competent professionals, with rich expertise and experience allowing them to manage the Brand and drive changes among all its different audiences, especially the most difficult among them. It is impossible for anyone to run a brand without skills, values and strengths.

Simply put, brand managers are not necessarily mythical heroes, but they are always remarkable people. They are the ones who bring the Brand to life, who make it evolve and who give it meaning and a unique appeal.

This praise is sincere, but it also belies a much less glamorous reality. Together, brand managers do very well in normal situations, the ones they signed up for in the first place. But together, there is also a great possibility that they will be dysfunctional during conflicts.

As we have said, conflict is destabilizing. The analysis of situations of conflict is seldom clear, consensual or quick; teams that work so well together when operations are running smoothly suddenly transform into an uncontrollable mob, the previously balanced relationships are eroded by suspicions, the decisions to be made are called into question at every moment and the actions taken are rarely agreed upon, widely criticized and always too late.

This is all detrimental, because conflict requires a great deal of responsiveness, complete coherence and no shortage of audacity and great

courage. The brand, which was remarkable during the peaceful periods of its history for its positive interactions, can be transformed by conflict into a clumsy oaf, acting slowly and with great reluctance.

The attackers, whom we will discuss later in greater detail, quickly find an edge in this quagmire. They can take advantage of it, and they can also be destabilized in turn (however, this last point should never become a reason to act foolishly).

Imagine you make a jab at someone you know to be quick and quite bright. You obviously expect that person to respond with cleverness and poise. But no: he looks at you, stunned, distressed and without uttering a word. You would have to be completely malicious to continue an attack instead of the joust that he was expecting. But – and this is something we will also come back to – if the attacker is a group or a mob, such malice is no longer a hindrance, and harassment can become a collective enjoyment.

What you just read is simply unbelievable. We – the same people who have always been loyal defenders and reputable servants of Brands – have just treated the Brand as something with the potential to act like a complete fool.

To redeem ourselves, the least we can do is to humbly offer a few tips to avoid this pitfall (the first three are rather obvious, but deserve to be brought up, as they worth considering as essential):

- the first is to anticipate conflict during peacetime. We repeat this often, but it is nevertheless clear to us that this precaution is rarely implemented, considered at best as superfluous and at worst as unnecessarily paranoid (once again we find ourselves mentioning this pathology that we absolutely want to avoid).

- the second is to appoint a leader. Often the person with the highest position in the hierarchy holds this role. Sometimes the “number 2”, or the boss of the Brand, considered to be better placed, intervenes if this is impossible. The criteria are simple: the leader must be courageous and decisive.

- the third is to reduce the team that will advise the leader to only a small number of people (and we will not insult the reader by explaining the merits of this precaution). The many possible alternatives are inevitably transformed into impediments, or turn into disastrous manipulation contests.

– the fourth is more difficult than the first three: it consists of “connecting the leader to the ground” in an ongoing way. Removing the effects of sycophancy (our third imperative) is necessary, but not sufficient. The “street card” needs to be played, and the jester.

The street card consists of going out, mingling with “the people”, discussing and challenging opinions and gauging the real lay of the land; in short, getting one’s own picture of things. This is a good plan, but it is difficult to implement. During a time of turmoil, staying behind the wheel is an understandable reflex.

And what about the jester? Let us explain.

1.9. The irrational reactions of the Brand

A Brand can adopt absurd and damaging behaviors under the direction of its leader. Although this can occur during more relaxed times, it is more common when the Brand comes under attack. The leader has sufficiently exceptional abilities to mobilize, inspire, and give courage and stubbornness at a sufficiently exceptional level to ensure the success of the Brand.

Paradoxically, these remarkable abilities are the starting points of a pathological deviation that corresponds to a kind of cognitive confusion. The oxygen at the summits of power and success becomes scarce with the high altitude, and we will not go to the trouble of explaining to the reader the effects of oxygen deprivation. Thus, success has the unfortunate ability to intoxicate those who achieve it, and ultimately eliminates the boundaries for them between the possible and the impossible, strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and risks, truth and fiction.

This troubling cognitive confusion leads to actions and decisions whose absurdity or danger is incomprehensible to casual observers.

Many examples have been widely publicized, such as Kodak or BlackBerry, that have largely suffered from sequences of decisions that snowballed into absurdity, and that are frankly incompatible with the stature, know-how and experience of those who made them.

In the world of politics, the examples are even more numerous. The case of François Fillon is a textbook case of cognitive confusion. Fillon, a

candidate in France's 2017 presidential election, acted like a complete novice when he fell prey to a series of scandals, whose risk he could not have been unaware of. Whether or not you support Fillon's policies, it is impossible not to be stunned by the amateurism of a man who obviously knew that his actions would catch up with him. How can we explain the incredible gap between expertise and candor, if not by considering that it was a total disconnect with reality?

Manfred Kets de Vries [KET 95] has described this phenomenon perfectly. Exploring the mechanisms of the leadership of organizations enriched by an approach based on clinical psychoanalysis, he demonstrates that leaders are driven by emotions and personal affections that have a substantial influence on the organizations they direct, and even manage to contaminate the people they work with according to the psychoanalytic laws of transference. The organization is not only an economical machine, but a psychic sponge.

Kets de Vries describes how truly pathological behaviors of managers are transformed into similar pathologies within the company. He reviews paranoid, compulsive, theatrical, depressed and schizoid organizations.

Our point is not to consider that all organizations and Brands are more or less guided by influences of the psyche of their leader(s) and are thus sick with the leaders' illnesses. Nevertheless, it is important to take into account that in an episode of trouble for an organization, such as the confrontation of a conflict, these phenomena, which progress without making too much of a stir during more peaceful periods, can suddenly awaken and have a crippling impact on the reactions that could reasonably be expected from the organization.

When the organization is faced with a conflict, the risks induced are fear, withdrawal, a tendency to wait too long or, on the contrary, violence and excessive reactions. However, for the attackers, all these excessive reactions are like a gift from above. Is there a way to answer? Kets de Vries offers one: the jester.

Court jesters went beyond the role of entertainer that we know them for. Their mission was to bring the king back down to a level of humanity, balancing out their isolation, protectedness and disconnect from reality.

Where can leaders of an organization find their own “jester”? Presumably, one of their external consultants should be able to fill that role. It is still necessary for this jester to be able to count on the continued existence of his role over time, particularly in difficult situations. History is full of stories of jesters who were removed for being a bit too honest. This is true in the more recent history of organizations as well, which is a shame.

Brands are an explosive mixture. Due to their strong symbolic status, their mastery of exaggeration and attraction and their presence in our daily lives, brands are very much exposed to conflicts of all kinds. This exposure is a goal for brands, but during times of calmer weather. As soon as the climate becomes stormy, brands seem to be very clumsy in responding to accusations.

This current era is extremely conducive to conflicts of all kinds, directed against brands. In fact, new technologies have dramatically changed the techniques of conflict.

