

Quarter One

BRANDING FOR BUSINESS

1.

January – The buzzword battle begins (don't be blinded by the jargon)

WHAT HAVE I DONE TO DESERVE THIS? (MONDAY, JANUARY 1, 2007)

It's official: I'm stuffed. As stuffed as the gigantic Christmas turkey we finally finished at lunch. Tomorrow I start the first day of my one-year assignment as a Brand Director at Simpton's Sausages. But how can I direct a brand when I don't even understand what one is in the first place? The heavy tome that was supposed to save me has turned out to only darken my depression. My good wife Claire's heart was in the right place when she offered me *Strategic Branding* as a Christmas present, but it might as well be written in the native language of the French author. 450 pages of jargon-heavy gobbledygook, full of complicated, impenetrable diagrams and models. I gave up after page 10 and polished off the latest John Grisham bestseller instead.

And so here I am, making the first entry in my brand new blog, as the digital clock on my PC glows its way inexorably towards

midnight. The blogging software was another yuletide gift, this time from my nephew Techno Tim. On one of his rare visits out of his bedroom he drawled that I was, like, totally Victorian to be still writing a diary, as he simultaneously sent a text message from his phone, watched MTV and listened to his iPod.

Well, the big fat branding book will come in handy for one thing: smashing over the head of Marcus Evans from Human Resources. He was the one who gate-crashed my end-of-year performance review to announce that I was to become a 'CROFTer': a cross-functional transferee. In today's complex business world, it was no longer enough for me to excel in my specialist 'silo'. I had to storm the organizational barricades and familiarize myself with another functional area. So, my 14 years of slog spent as a sales rep and then battling with the buyers from Tesco were not going to pay off with me being crowned as Sales Director.

Instead, Marcus primly pronounced – like a vicar reading the Sunday sermon – that I would be spending a year in marketing, or rather 'brand management' as it is now called. When I said there was no way I was spending a year with that bunch of Oxbridge educated, over-intellectual time-wasters, Marcus' shaven head bobbed up and down inside his black polo neck jumper. Unfortunately, my boss Andy Nichols failed to back me up as expected. Seems his wife wanted a tennis court to add to the swimming pool at their villa on the Algarve, and he needed another good year at Simpton's before he could take retirement. I swear he was swallowing back a chortle as he told me that I would be in charge of launching the sausage pizza, the laughing stock of the whole sales department. But he did assure me that the Sales Director's job was mine in a year's time, as long as I didn't screw up as a CROFTer. As I drove home the immortal words of the Pet Shop Boys rang in my ears, as they

continue to do now: ‘What have I, what have I, what have I done to deserve this?’

NEW KID ON THE BLOCK (TUESDAY, JANUARY 2)

Got to the office at 7.30am to show how keen I was to start CROFTing, but found the marketing area as deserted as the Marie Celeste. Whilst I waited for my new team-mates to arrive, I read the ‘Superbrands’ supplement from last week-end’s *Sunday Times*. It seems that everyone and everything wants to be a brand these days, from pet food to political parties. However, there was no place for Simpton’s Sausages in the list of top 100 brands, as voted for by the British public. With £100 million of sales we’re bigger than many of the brands who did make it, but it seems we’re less loved than McDonald’s, KFC and Imodium.

The Simpton’s brand management team started to arrive at 9am, with punctuality seemingly inversely proportional to level of seniority. First in was Shelly, the brand ‘minder’, who was carrying a well-thumbed copy of *Hello!* in one hand and a Starbucks caramel frappuccino in the other. Next in was the brand assistant, Brian Adams, who bore no resemblance whatsoever to the singer. He was tall and gangly like a basketball player and sported black-rimmed glasses. He shyly said hello before sitting down in front of the biggest computer screen I’d ever seen. My brand manager, Jane Lovelock, came rushing in at 9.30am, sucking up files, papers and pizza boxes from her desk like a tornado, a Mont Blanc pen gripped tightly between her teeth. She violently nodded her welcome before rushing off again. And then, on the stroke of 10am, entered my new boss, Hugo Gaines. He sported the same shaven head and black polo neck as Marcus, and looked like he would be more at home in a trendy advertising agency than a sausage company. Seems he

and Marcus have known each other since studying together at Oxford. Absolutely flipping fabulous. With a furrowed brow, and not even the slightest hint of irony, Hugo welcomed me onto the 'white-knuckle ride that was the transformation of Simpton's into a truly iconic brand of the 21st century'. I thought about mentioning the fact that we were lagging behind Micky D's, KFC and Imdium in the Superbrand table, but bit my tongue. Hugo announced in his plummy voice that the key task for the day was an in-depth brand briefing lunch up in London at his club, Soho House.

I was surprised to see that Hugo signed in at Soho House as Creative Director of the Hugbrands agency. Seems you can't become a member if you're in charge of marketing sausages. Lunch only served to darken my already gloomy mood, and when the waiter came to take my order I felt like asking for a translator. Hugo had obviously digested all of *Strategic Branding* and many other management books, as he spewed out sentence after sentence of unintelligible brand-speak.

In a nutshell, I think Hugo's strategy boils down to two things, or 'strategic thrusts' as he called them. First, we're going to 'leverage and stretch the brand' by launching a range of new sausage pizzas. The pizzas will use Italian sausages such as salami and chorizo, rather than traditional British ones. Second, we're going to 're-brand' Simpton's with a new 'identity' developed by one of London's trendiest design agencies, which I think means a new logo. This would be announced with a fanfare by a mould-breaking new advertising campaign being created by one of London's trendiest communication agencies. When I asked if this wasn't a bit radical for a brand built on being the best British banger, Hugo almost choked on his third glass of Chilean Chardonnay. He explained that we had to 'jettison this brand baggage so we could take the brand into the 21st century'.

After lunch Hugo left for an important meeting at the agency, so I took the train back to the office by myself and thought about Hugo's strategy. I found it strange that it made no mention at all of the basic product itself. Indeed, the post of Brand Director on the core sausage business was vacant. The other thing missing from my briefing was any mention of the business itself. I knew from my work in sales that the brand was on the rocks, but had expected an in-depth analysis of where the problem areas were. Made a mental note to email Brian for some data on sales and profitability.

DROWNING IN MY BRAND IMMERSION (FRIDAY, JANUARY 5)

Just back from two gruelling days spent in a brand immersion workshop at Babbington House, the country outpost of Hugo's club. There were all five of us from marketing there, although Shelly seemed to spend all her time in the Cowshed Spa. There were also four people from ETC, the communication agency, and another four from INK, the brand identity shop. The workshop was pure hell, with the only good news being that it's the last one I am likely to attend, after the career-limiting comments I made. My behaviour reminded me of my uncle Geoff, who would always embarrass himself by getting completely drunk at family get-togethers and then alternate between cracking rude jokes and noisily breaking wind.

My gaffe came on the first morning, during the scaling of the 'brand pyramid' that was led by Kitty Johansen, the strategic planner from ETC. She was a pencil-thin New Yorker dressed in black from head to toe. Her presentation confirmed my worst fears about branding being one big competition to create the most complicated jargon-heavy diagram possible (Figure 1.1). Kitty started by warning us in hushed tones about how everything was getting faster, smaller and more personal

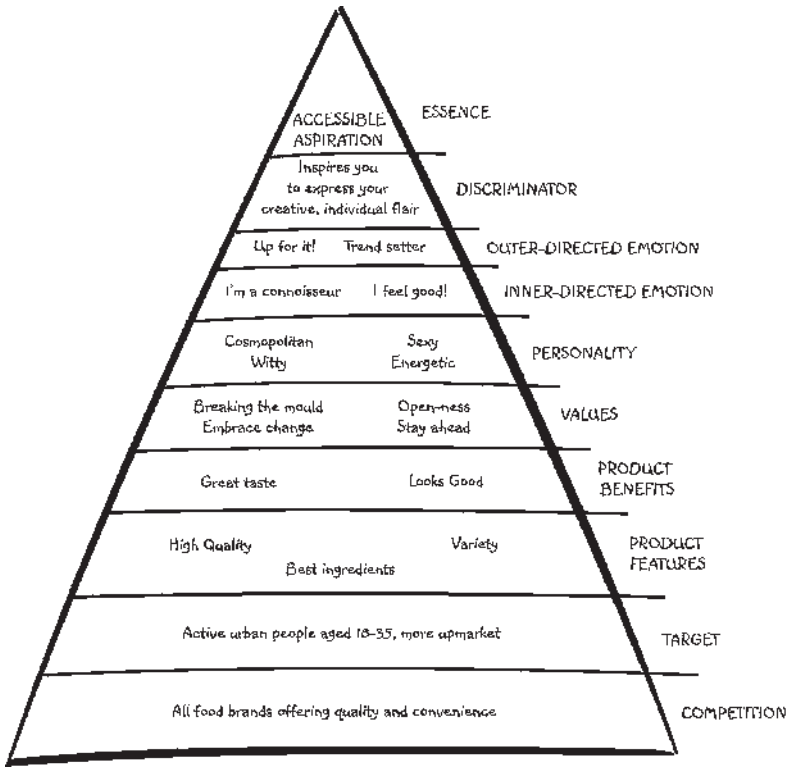


Figure 1.1: Scaling the brand pyramid

(everything apart from her presentation, that is). She then went on to help us climb up each of the ten levels of branding. She was clearly very proud of the pyramid, giving the impression that ETC had toiled over it for as long as Tutankhamen's team did over his.

I squinted at the pyramid as she talked, trying my best to understand it. Our target consumer would be young, upmarket, urban and active people. This seemed strange, given that our current users were mainly families. Moving up, our products would use top quality ingredients to deliver great taste, which sounded vague. There were a lot more words in the next four

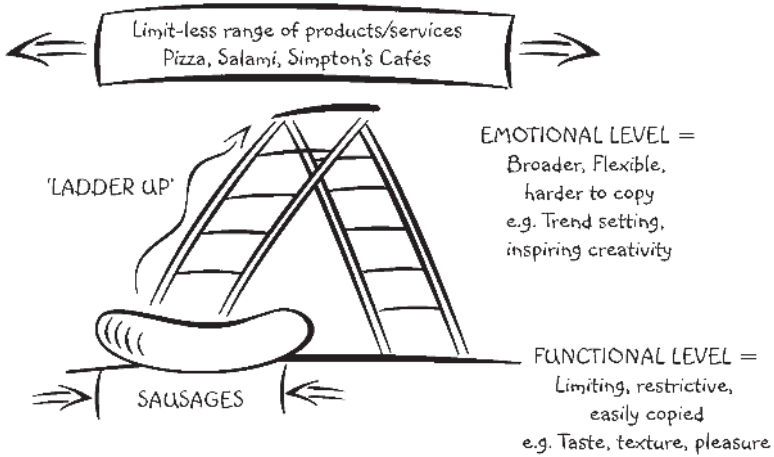


Figure 1.2: Climbing the brand ladder

layers, which captured the emotional side of the brand. The idea was to forget the boring product bit at the bottom of the pyramid, and 'climb a ladder' up to this emotional level (Figure 1.2), selling a lifestyle, not sausages. We would champion breaking the mould and embracing change, and our 'personality' would be an intoxicating potion of modernity, innovativeness and cosmopolitan flair. According to Kitty, the great thing about working up in this rarefied emotional atmosphere was that we were no longer trapped in sausage-land; we were free to come up with all sorts of sexy new products. Young urbanites would be seduced by our salami pizzas, and then come back to buy stand-alone Simpton's salami. In the future we could open a chain of Simpton's Cafés and sell culinary vacations to Tuscany.

As the presentation reached its climax I became convinced I was on some sort of prankster TV show, with an ex-Big Brother contestant turned presenter about to jump out from behind a potted plant and shout 'You've been had!', ending my misery. Unfortunately, no such respite was at hand, and I

watched as Kitty reached brand nirvana right at the top of the pyramid with the 'brand essence'. These two words were supposed to be the distillation of what we wanted the brand to stand for. In hushed tones she announced that our two words were... 'Accessible aspiration!' With a flourish she revealed a huge poster of Kate Moss taking a big bite out of a Simpton's pizza, with what looked like a crowd of scantily clad male strippers from Chippendales hanging at her ankles, begging for a slice. Along the bottom was our new slogan: 'Be Simpsational!'

The end of Kitty's presentation was greeted with rapturous applause, and I did my best to join in. However, a voice inside me kept repeating a phrase over and over again, bursting to explode. Eventually I could hold it in no longer and blurted out: 'Where's the sausage?!' Two by two, twelve admonishing pairs of eyes turned to bore into me. Hugo coughed to clear his throat, and then asked me to explain myself. Rather than shutting up and escaping with only minor injuries, I carried on and asked whether we weren't forgetting the product. Hugo then aimed right below the belt by asking me what sort of branding model I had been taught during *my* MBA, knowing full well I hadn't done one. I mumbled as much, and he suggested that given my lack of experience I had better leave the branding to the experts. I decided to keep my mouth shut for the rest of the day.

The second day saw INK share their latest thinking on the re-branding project, led by their dreadlock-haired hippie-ish creative director, Dave. Rather than simply come up with a new logo, Dave wanted to push the 'creative envelope to breaking point and beyond' by inviting budding young designers to create proposals for the new logo and pizza packaging. The ten best designs would be featured in an exhibition at Tate

Modern and be judged by a panel of leading lights from the music, cinema and art worlds. The ultimate winner would be the future design of Simpton's, appearing on the pizza boxes but also on all other visual materials, such as the sides of lorries and on our website. The team had slaved over a name for the competition and after many hours of deliberation, they thought they had cracked it. With a flourish, the final board was revealed with the title: 'Pizzart'.

Well, if the reaction to Kitty's presentation was rapturous, the response to this one was absolutely orgasmic. Everyone was on their feet giving a standing ovation. When the noise had finally died down Hugo placed the palms of his hands together, his elbows on the table, and rested his fingers on his lips. He rocked gently back and forwards a few times for dramatic effect before telling Dave in hushed tones that his creative proposal was absolutely, totally Simpsational.

The phrase 'Thank God it's Friday' has taken on a whole new meaning for me.

GETTING TO THE BOTTOM LINE (TUESDAY, JANUARY 9)

Today I got an email from Brian with the sales figures I'd asked for. It took him some time to come up with the data as no-one on the brand team had been very interested in detailed financials before. I suppose poring over Excel spreadsheets is not a very Simpsational thing to do.

The numbers made for sorry reading. The profitability of the core sausage business had been in decline for five years, with the brand trapped in a vicious downward cycle of increasing price promotion, leading to less funds for marketing and innovation, leading to less differentiation, more price promotion, and so on. In a way I felt partly responsible for the nightmare we were in, having been part of the sales department's push for

more promotional support to protect listings with the key supermarket chains such as Tesco, Sainsbury's and Asda-Walmart. At the same time, the supermarkets had been busy developing their 'own label' sausage ranges, such as Tesco Finest and Sainsbury's Taste the Difference.

Simpton's market share had fallen off a cliff, dropping from 35% in 1999 to 19% in 2006. We had been squashed between the competitively priced supermarket brands at one end, and premium gourmet products at the other, from brands like Duchy's Originals and Porkinsons.

Hugo had been brought in a couple of years ago to stop the rot. He sold the company on effectively giving up the core sausage business and seeking salvation in stretching into new areas, starting with the pizza project. His story was that the sausage business was now all about price, so we needed to 'milk' this bit of the business for profit and bet all our marketing money on the brand extensions. But if premium propositions such as Duchy's had been taking share at the top of the market, was it really all about price I wondered? And when I stopped at Tesco on the way home, I found that their Finest sausages were actually *more* expensive than ours! Weren't we giving up a bit too easily? Against my better judgement I sent an email to Hugo to 'bounce my ideas' off him.

BATTERED, BRUISED BUT STILL ALIVE (MONDAY, JANUARY 22)

Back from a week on a course called 'Courage to change', which involved lots of adventurous outward-bound activities. Several of the attendees ended up in tears, though we were assured this was all part of the change-embracing process. How forcing the Finance Director with a fear of heights to jump out of a plane with a parachute on her back will help her implement

a computer-based accounting system I really don't know. But then not really knowing what is going on is becoming a recurring theme this year.

Got a predictably terse reply from Hugo to my email on the brand P&L. He said my left-brain focused approach to branding was 'not fully consistent with a holistic, visionary brand transformation process'.

JANUARY'S SUMMARY

1. My worst fears about branding being full of bull and buzzwords have been confirmed.
2. It feels to me like we're neglecting our sausage business with the plans to extend into things like pizza.
3. Will changing the logo on our wrapper really make much difference when the sausages inside stay the same?
4. Everyone seems obsessed with making Simpton's a lifestyle brand. I seem alone in asking 'where's the sausage?'