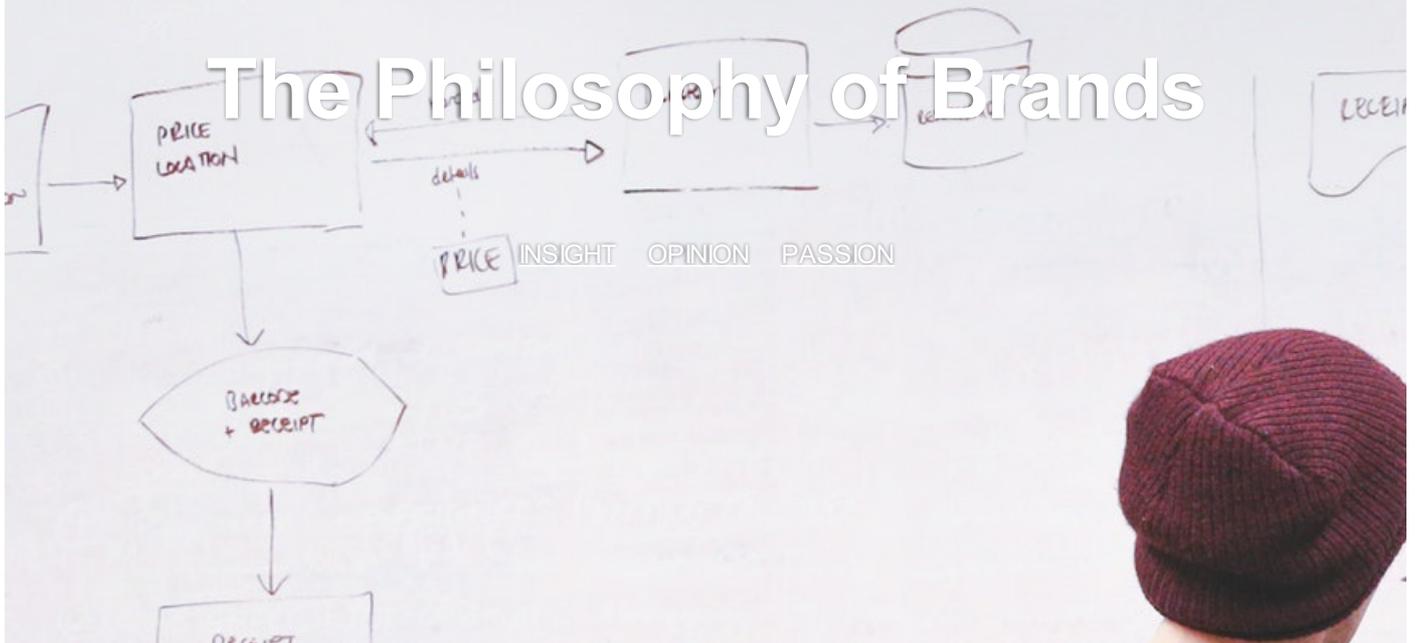


The Philosophy of Brands



MATTHEW MEE, STRATEGY DIRECTOR MEDIACOM EMEA 30 DEC 2012

How would a philosopher deal with the brand challenges that marketers face every day? Matt Mee, European Strategy Director at MediaCom asks Vincent F. Hendricks, Professor of Formal Philosophy at the University of Copenhagen, about brand ambition and the need for a broader agenda.

Matt Mee: What does a brand mean to a philosopher?

Vincent Hendricks: To me, brands are signal exchanges between a company and a designated part of the public.

Basically, branding is a signaling game; if you use a Mac, you are creative, successful and a free thinker; if you drive a luxury auto, you are successful in business and perhaps in your personal life, and so on.

These signals can be very strong. What Apple is also selling is a lifestyle, or the impression of a particular kind of lifestyle. And that goes for many other well-established brands, as well.

No brand wants to come across as being unattractive. So you tell a story, establish a narrative and frame a message in such a way that you hope has public appeal.

Matt: So while social media lets us pretend that we're all individuals, the role of brands as social currency undermines that?

Vincent: People seem more narcissistic now than they ever were, and social media plays a crucial role here. Everybody wants to present themselves as being original, unique, fulfilling their own individually defined goals, being attractive and interesting, etc., and social media comes in handy for boosting these kind of signals.

But at the same time, everybody is subscribing to or converging on the same values. We have never been so alike in our actions and decisions. Everybody wants a Burberry, Mac or a Gaggenau kitchen. But why?

It all comes back to the signaling game. If success is presumed to be expressed by buying a new car, then in order for me to show everyone that I am successful, I have to acquire the signal itself. It's like with currency: I only accept the currency that everyone else has agreed upon and accepts. It's unequivocally demonstrating my success, so everybody feels uniquely successful, and yet everybody is the same because that's how the signaling game works. Brands are in the business of signaling success.

Matt: So a successful brand is one that attempts to emulate or deliver those signals, to the point where it becomes a kind of societal norm?

Vincent: That's right, but many brands don't quite get that far. For the ones who do, the signal value is massive.

Matt: At the crux of what you're saying is that brands need to create signaling effects. How do they do that?

Vincent: The majority of firms are in the business of making money. That's fine, but I would like companies to be more ambitious than that. They need to support things that are important to society, like properly formatted and presented information: information that could be used for decision-making.

The financial crisis has shown us that when people get the wrong kind of information, they may make terrible decisions, get caught in bubbles, lemming effects, echo-chambers and so forth.

Brands need more ambitious agendas that we value in this world. Wouldn't it be something to see a fragrance brand sponsor peacekeeping missions in the Middle East? A global societal ambition for an otherwise vanity-driven business: now that's novel and innovative!

Long-term Commitment Needed

MATT: How can this happen in a world in which corporations are becoming increasingly short-term in terms of their outlook?

Vincent: Substantial ideologies are never implemented overnight. You have to change people's mindsets, you probably have to change some of their value set, outlook, perception, incentives and so on. There are many preconditions to making such a change work, but it's not impossible. Most branding needs to be short-term: you want to get people right here and right now, but that need mustn't preclude longer-term ambitions.

There's a sort of prisoner's dilemma with these things: if everybody is out to maximise utility for themselves, then everyone may experience a suboptimal outcome. No country in the world is going to be able to solve the climate crisis alone. No country in the world is

going to be able to solve the financial crisis alone. No company can make a global social difference alone. These fundamental problems can only be solved if we all move and work together.

Obviously, there has been a lot of conversation about the duties of commercial organisations to pursue an agenda of positive social consequence, and the need for their foundations to be moral or ethically correct. But corporate social responsibility should not merely be a point on the company agenda – it has to be an ambitious societal agenda.

Matt: Ultimately, what you're saying is that too many brands have been pushing the status quo in the short-term, without really looking at what's coming around the corner or acknowledging problems that require long-term collective action.

Vincent: Each behaves as if it's the maintenance guy, which is fine. But maintenance does not mean progression for the better: maintenance means maintenance. If your brand wants to be more influential, you need to have an ambition worth something. That's innovative. Ambitious brands produce what consumers don't expect, not just more of what they do.

Vincent F. Hendricks

Vincent F. Hendricks is Professor of Formal Philosophy at the university of Copenhagen, Denmark, Elite researcher of the Danish state. He is the author of many books, among them *Mainstream and Formal Epistemology* (Cambridge university Press 2007), *Thought2Talk* (automatic Press/ViP 2007) and *The Convergence of Scientific knowledge* (springer 2001). He is also the author and editor of numerous other papers and books, and is Editor-in-Chief of *synthese* and *synthese library*.

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