

Brand Purpose: What's the point of you?

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Brand purpose has been one of the most hotly debated marketing topics of the last ten years, celebrated as a business model for growth and debunked as cod strategy in equal measure. The arguments for brand purpose are often fuelled by and intertwined with assumptions that one, millennials are immune to advertising and dislike large institutions, and two, that the rate at which the world is moving online is directly proportional to the size of opportunities for brands, and this connectivity has improved business accountability to a point that demands a re-write of the brand marketing playbook.

Both of these assumptions are being methodically unpicked¹ and increasingly found to be lacking in

substance. It is therefore a good time to also examine the concept of brand purpose with a level head and from the perspective of what really drives brand growth – people.

Behaviourally, people are more inclined to punish than praise. This year has seen its fair share of global brands undermined online by content faux pas. And because what goes on the internet, stays on the internet, these pieces of wayward content are likely to be dredged up repeatedly and shared in ad fail compilations. Sony has had a politically incorrect billboard ad from 10+ years ago re-emerge in such a compilation, alongside more recent examples.

What is brand purpose?

The broad understanding is it guides a brand to act in a way that is beneficial to society in some way, by positive actions taken in their chain of operation.

Businesses should absolutely be encouraged and conditioned to be better citizens. Managing an organisation's environmental and societal impact should be a fundamental cost of doing business, without the expectation of reward from consumers for doing so. Sadly, the truth is that changes to business models are more explicitly driven by regulation and/or lobbying (e.g. sugar tax), supply chain concerns (e.g. purity of ocean ingredients) and consumer behaviour trends (e.g. plant-based diets on the rise) rather than activism from your average consumer.



Figure 1

The reason this is an important point to digest, is because books like Jim Stengel's 'Grow'² have presented brand purpose as a key driver of commercial success. While it is a nice concept, the evidence on which the book is based uses the success of holding companies rather than individual brands, and therefore does not provide real proof that 'brand purpose' delivers growth. This is well examined in an article called 'Debunking brand purpose'³ by Richard Shotton and Aidan O'Callaghan. Every brand study in my research career has pointed to purpose being

a weak driver of equity. Consumers would like companies to be ethical on their behalf, but will not go out of their way to choose differently if a product has an important function in their lives.

Therefore, a humbler and more commercially oriented view would be to play a purposeful part in people's real lives. Which is traditionally good positioning practice. Without good positioning, a stratospheric cause can amount to very little brand impact.

The last ten or so years of testing and learning with brand purpose gives us cause to stop, reflect and focus on the three things that matter:

1. **People will choose a good product over a good cause.** This is a pretty basic lesson, but it is sometimes forgotten in the rush to get a message out. Brand purpose can create an interesting focal point for communication, but in the end the product needs to deliver. Nothing kills a bad product faster than good advertising! Category disruptors innovate and gain by improving people's lives by being yummier, faster, more convenient, etc. With this in mind, the implication for being purposeful is to connect to the brand's best self. KitKat recently chose to make their product better by increasing the amount of milk and cocoa versus sugar - a purposeful action that is relevant to the people who eat it.



Figure 2

Brand purpose is baked into the DNA of some brands. Ethical sourcing has been a great communication vehicle for Ben & Jerry's, but they also continue to make really exciting, indulgent flavours of ice cream and non-dairy alternatives.



Figure 3

2. **Purpose can take many forms.** There are many roads into health, happiness and longevity. A clear brand identity, goals and creativity are the best ways to forge the path to purpose. But that path should be one that your brand has the right to walk on, and benefits your customers the most.

McDonald's has been in growth for years taking a classical route, by purposefully doing what matters most to their customers - improving the sourcing, quality and provenance of their food and then communicating that in an interesting way. On the flip side, releasing tension and guilt in a high-pressure society can also be thought of as a purposeful act. Almost the 'anti-purpose' campaign, KFC's⁴ creation and then subsequent destruction of clean eating social 'guru' Figgy Poppleton-Rice and her cauliflower ice cube burger helped launch and sell out their Dirty Louisiana burger in weeks. Bringing a little stress relief and on-brand humour to an increasingly joyless chore of monitoring what one eats worked well for this brand.

3. **Think positioning and big idea.** It is important to always come back to the brand, the people it serves and what they specifically like about it. Having your positioning and creative big idea nailed down provides guardrails for communication. These guardrails should help limit the gaffes that have become more common as brands make more content to fill (mainly) digital space.

Paddy Power has true dedication to the creation of content, and the brand thrives on bloke jokes like sending Dennis Rodman to the Vatican. Not all brands can (or should) be this dedicated to online content generation as it may not be the most effective model for maximum reach in their category.

However, brands are certainly feeling the pressure to be visible in more places with media fragmentation. What drives these placements should always be the business strategy, delivered though the big idea which has the brand at its heart. In short, invest in research to crystallise how your brand fits into people's lives, refine your message and then invest in creativity to communicate this in clearest and most arresting way possible.

I'd like to leave you with the dictionary definition of purpose – "the reason for which something is done or created or for which something exists". The opportunity for brands to grow always comes from serving people well. And good corporate citizenship should be inherent, not about conversion.

References:

¹ Millennial Myths and Realities: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/millennials-are-most-derided-generation>, Digital Ad Fraud: <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/03/15/businesses-could-lose-164-billion-to-online-advert-fraud-in-2017.html>

² <https://www.amazon.com/Grow-Ideals-Growth-Greatest-Companies/dp/0307720357>

³ Debunking brand purpose: Richard Shotton and Aidan O'Callaghan, Admap Magazine, July/August 2015

⁴ KFC Dirty Louisiana – Don't make dirty good, make clean bad: WARC Awards, Grand Prix, Effective Social Strategy, 2017

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Figure 1. <https://marketoonist.com/2017/07/brandlove.html>

Figure 2. <https://www.confectionerynews.com/Article/2017/03/28/KitKat-cocoa-content-upped-13-in-sugar-reduction-push>

Figure 3. <http://www.benjerry.co.uk/flavours/non-dairy>