

Customer first thinking.



Brand Experience

An Interview with Allen Adamson, Co-Founder of Metaforce

Allen Adamson:

Allen Adamson is a leading authority on branding and the author of the book "Seeing the How".



At this year's Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity NYU's marketing superstar and provocateur Scott Galloway asked the audience at his packed session to take a red pill.

"I think the era of brand is over" he bluntly declared, knowing it would rattle everyone in the crowd whose livelihoods depend on brand messaging.

This is the same guy who once said, "A brand is the face of a business strategy". Has he suddenly become an apostate? Not exactly. He was simply acknowledging what everyone in the room is reluctant to say out loud (especially if they work for an ad agency or media company): traditional brand building through advertising is dead. "People aren't watching ads anymore", he emphatically said, adding that "many ads are a tax on the people who are unable to avoid them".

Marketers have always had a tough time distinguishing between ads that generate sales and branding. Or they choose to do one at the expense of the other. They take it as an article of blind faith that consistent brand advertising will eventually lead to revenue growth

because they've been repeatedly told that mind-share is crucial to converting shoppers into buyers.

The problem facing most marketers, of course, is that saying your brand is better or best does not make it so, no matter how large a share-of-voice you may have. And getting an ad noticed, never mind remembered, has never been harder in this age of media fragmentation and clutter. Yet advertising remains the main crutch marketers use to promote their brands, notwithstanding evidence to suggest that it is becoming less and less effective, as Galloway noted.

Marketing's job is to build brand equity but that is not to be confused with brand image. Brand equity has to do with how important the brand is in the lives of people. As the legendary brand expert David Aaker once wrote, "The really strong brands have gone a step beyond achieving visibility and differentiation to develop deep relationships with a customer group – that is, the brand becomes a meaningful part of the customer's life".

Brands that are on the periphery of people's lives – that are me-too products – that lack a clear and distinctive identity – that are perceived to be substitutable – are doomed to compete forever on price. Whereas the most successful brands today offer a winning combination of product superiority and an enriching experience. The quality of that experience – the extent to which it becomes a "sharable" story, not just a credible one – is what earns a brand a loyal base of "fans" and keeps customers buying again and again.

The challenge, of course, is gaining the confidence of customers that the brand deserves to be a part of their lives. To do so, marketers have to set their sights on changing those lives for the better, argues the noted brand consultant Allen Adamson, whose latest book "Seeing the How" chronicles how various innovative brands were

able to do so. The trick, he says, is to deeply examine how people go about their day-to-day lives and the obstacles they face. He says the differences between products are so slight today that the only thing that can differentiate one from the other is the novelty and utility of the experience.

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Stephen Shaw (SS): Your career has spanned four decades now. You're one of the foremost branding experts in the world. What would you say has been the biggest shift in brand strategy over that time?

AA

Allen Adamson (AA): There's no such thing as a unique selling proposition anymore. Today if you have a new product there's going to be five more just like it in no time. When I worked at Unilever they made Dove soap which had unique properties for your skin. That advantage lasted 15, 20 years where all they had to say is Dove doesn't dry your skin like ordinary soap. Dove's only task was to keep that message fresh and relevant and believable. I also spent a big chunk of my career working with P&G. They'd show a plate washed in Dawn and a plate washed in something else and say, "Look how much cleaner this is". Or they'd say, "This shirt's been washed in Tide, see how much whiter it is". But those days are gone. Try to define the difference between one laptop and another, one car and another. I rent a lot of cars when I travel, and it's really hard to tell the difference between a Mercedes and a Hyundai.

SS

So product parity is forcing brands to move away from an emphasis on functional superiority in their messaging?

AA

Right. You don't have to be a marketing expert to know when you go down the aisle at Target and try to buy almost any product, it's really hard to tell the difference between one shampoo and another. It's a sea of sameness. The challenge of marketing is exponentially more difficult. That's one change. And, of course, the other big change is that there's so much more media now. So two things have happened to the consumer. One, they don't pay attention to anything anymore. And two, the average consumer has attention deficit disorder. They're not going to listen to a long story as to why this product is better than that product.

SS

Are there brand orthodoxies that persist today which you'd like to see retired?

AA

I think a lot of the basics still apply. I'll tell you a story. I was working at Ogilvy and was just out of business school. Very

excited. I was assigned to Maxwell House, and the Creative Director said, "We've got a new campaign. Give me a brief." I went back to my office and put together a two-page email: where the beans were from, where it was roasted and the taste. I was really excited. I brought it to her, she looked at it, and said, "This is really fabulous - you've got incredible depth here." And then she took a corner of the page, ripped it off, waved it at me and said, "Alan, when you can put what you want to communicate about the client's coffee in this little scrap of paper, come back and see me." The lesson: when you want breakthrough creative, you better figure out the one thing you've got to communicate.

SS

Well, I think that's always been a challenge for the industry: creating concise Creative Briefs that cut to the heart of why the brand should matter to people.

AA

Yeah, and it's hard. But what hasn't changed, I think, is that we're still in a world of non-linear problem-solving. You just can't put all the facts on a piece of paper, add them up, divide them in two and say, there's the answer. The catalyst for breaking through is being able to look at all the facts and come up with a completely fresh way to communicate that's relevant and different. Because in today's marketplace, there's so much noise that if you just say, I want to tell you about our coffee and three reasons to buy it, you don't even get to reason number one before somebody swipes and you're forgotten.

SS

In the analog days, you at least had some breathing room to tell your story.

AA

To tell your story – right! Now you have a TikTok second. Every year I watch the Super Bowl for the ads. You've got maybe 30 brands, each spending however much. And of those 30 brands I probably don't remember 15. The remaining 15, you sort of remember. And only three or four might break through – tell you something about the product that you will actually remember. That just shows you how difficult it is to do today.

SS

In the book, you make the point that points of differentiation alone are not enough to sustain a brand. You also get a little bit into this idea of distinctiveness versus differentiation which is always an ongoing industry debate. What will sustain a brand if it's not being seen somehow as bigger or better or best than the competing alternatives?

AA

That ties to the first point we talked about at the start, which is that even if you have something distinctive, you have a limited advantage before other competitors begin offering the same thing. Ultimately, a brand needs to solve somebody's problem. And you have to constantly be looking at that problem and asking, "Am I solving it in the best way possible, and better than our competition?". Think of cell phones: try to differentiate between the 10 leading smartphones. They all have the same apps, they have the same camera. Maybe Google's phone takes better pictures or Samsung has a larger screen, but ultimately they're just showing off their features. Apple is staying ahead because of customer service. You call AppleCare, and somebody will spend 20 minutes, 40 minutes, an hour with you. You don't have to line up at a Genius Bar. That's all about the experience.

SS

Today the line has blurred between product and service, hasn't it?

AA

I tell this story often. We were working for a pizza chain in the US., a big one, I won't name it. And they were saying, "Look, we've just done this research and 78% of our consumers like the taste of our pizza, they like the restaurant, but our sales are down so the advertising can't be right or something has to change." And then a smart moderator from the research firm said, "Well, let's ask another question. Let's ask, if this company went out of business, what would you do?". And we heard them say, "Oh, I'd go to Papa John's." So you have to be careful when you ask, "How am I doing?". Because no one wants to tell you how they really feel. Finding out what it will take to get people to go, "Wow!", that's an entirely different challenge.

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The answer "You're about the same as the other guy" is pretty scary to any brand.

AA

Exactly. If you can't see the difference, why pay the difference?

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Another contentious topic these days is striking the right balance between traditional long-term brand building and sales activation, or performance marketing as they call it.

AA

In most cases, it's not one or the other, it's both. And if you don't have the brand differentiation figured out, you're going to spend a lot more money on demand generation because it's going to be a lot less effective. A lot of brands don't have a clear

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story. Lots of marketers get instantly enamored with brand activation, and don't focus enough on telling the right story. Explain the difference between brand and branding.

AA

A brand is your story. When someone hears your product or company name, what story pops into their head? Once you get the brand story right, then branding is how you get it from PowerPoint into somebody's head. And it could be through advertising, it could be owned media, it could be customer experience, it could be influencers - there are 50 ways to get a brand story into someone's head. But there's usually not enough pressure testing. Is it the right story? Is it clear? Is anyone going to care? But you get people who say, "Oh, our sales are down, we must need a new ad, or we must need a new identity".

SS

Or they're gloating about the number of likes and followers.

AA

Yeah, exactly. If you get lots of likes, that's seen as success. I ask my students often "What's Gap's problem? Is it a brand or branding problem?". And students will usually say, "Their advertising is boring, or the stores are generic, or the jeans are not that nice". I argue that if you go into a Gap store and ask a sales associate for something typically "Gap" to wear, they will have no clue what "typical Gap" is. And so, yes, the Gap has lots of issues on the branding side. But if no one on the floor can tell you, "This sweater is really Gap", if it's just "Come to the Gap because we've got lots of great stuff on the floor or online at a decent price", that's not a good story.

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How important is purpose to building strong brands?

AA

I think it can be important, but my take on it is it's really hard to do and it has to extend well beyond what the marketing department does. Because to truly deliver a brand purpose, it needs to be a commitment of the entire company. But often today marketers say we have this purpose, they do an ad campaign and, one, it's hard to believe, and two, they're not convincing people that they really stand for something. So while everyone gets excited about it, I think for every 10 purpose brands, only 2 are successful because it's hard to execute.

SS

A core theme in your book is that a brand has to be entrenched in people's lives to be successful. And it only really works if the brand is truly perceived as a North Star in the minds of all stakeholders, not just consumers.

AA

Right, because otherwise, if it's just marketing communications, it's perceived as spin. And the one thing we know about today's consumer is they're more skeptical than ever.

SS

I want to reference one of your colleagues at NYU Stern School of Business, Scott Galloway. He was at Cannes recently, being his usual provocative self, where he declared the era of the brand is over. What's your perspective on that?

AA

The reason Scott was able to go to Cannes and be on his yacht is because he started and later sold a pretty big brand firm called Prophet. And even though he says brands are dead, he's built a personal brand that's better than most.

SS

You state in the book that the most important thing a brand can do today is help people experience the world differently.

AA

Going back to our conversation at the start, there's not that much meaningful product differentiation anymore. So if you're only saying, "Buy this brand because it's better than some other brand", tough to do. So you have to look at how your brand is going to make people's lives better in a way that goes beyond its immediate value.

SS

I particularly liked your comment in the book that average is over, average doesn't win you many sales anymore. So is the objective here to create distinctive experiences?

AA

The objective is to figure out how the product is going to fit into someone's life, and then determine how to make the overall experience better. A brand has to make the product really easy or fun or different to use, make it shareable, do something that surprises people, or solve a problem in a slightly different way.

SS

In many of the examples you cite in the book, the companies have actually rethought the entire category by enhancing the experience in some novel way.

AA

This story isn't in the book, but I took my new car to be serviced a couple of years ago and it's always a challenging experience going to a dealer and trusting their recommendations. This time I got a text from the dealer with a video from the mechanic working on my car and he says, "We're under your car now, and I want to show you your brake pads. You see this shiny thing, that means they've already worn through. Now, I don't think we need to replace that right now, but I want to show you that when you come

in next." That's a great example of rethinking the experience: how can I make your service experience better?

SS

Most brands, I would argue, live on the periphery of people's lives. But the word entrenched would suggest being central to those lives. Does the brand have to become indispensable, something they can't live without?

AA

I'm a big fan of Delta. You get to the airport and their app tells you not only that you're at Gate 42 and your flight's at 10:05, but it will also tell you how long it's going to take you to get through security, to get to the gate, to get to Starbucks. That's something I can't live without now – Delta is entrenched in my life.

SS

You state in the book that customer-centricity is a concept most marketers don't fully understand. Why do you think that is?

AA

Customer-centric is probably one of the most overused words in business. Most marketers are so busy in meetings and reading emails that they lose their observational skills; they miss out seeing things firsthand. Most executives glance at a top-line customer satisfaction metric on a dashboard which tells you how you're doing at a macro level; but by the time those indicators move, it's usually game over and too late to respond. And so part of it, I think, is the need for marketers to realize that they should be the ones inside the company closest to the customer. They need to take a bigger role in innovation and be the ones to suggest to the service department, "Why don't we share videos with our customers?". Customer-centricity means that they have some sense whether their customers are happy.

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You state in the book that identifying opportunity means seeing things other people don't see. Is that an argument for first principles thinking? For divergent thinking?

AA

It goes back to something we just touched on, always keeping fresh eyes. I remember a conversation I had with HBO about eight years ago - they were doing something really interesting. They would hire interns from universities but instead of putting them to work in a cubicle they used these 20-something kids to keep their Executives informed on what's going on with millennials and Gen Z because the higher up at HBO you went, the more out of touch you became.

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But how do you facilitate the shift to divergent thinking?

AA

If it was one simple answer like, “Take two aspirins and call me in the morning”, everyone would do it. But the problem is, it’s a complex challenge. Part of the answer is diversity in hiring – bringing in people with different backgrounds, from different parts of the country, with different experiences. Otherwise, everyone tends to think the same. The other thing that’s bad in companies, and the bigger the company, the worse it is, there is tremendous pressure to never disagree with the boss. And then, you have to learn to fail quickly – in other words, don’t spend a year polishing things and then fail. It’s better to put it out there, try it, iterate. And execution matters. Lots of companies fail, not because they have the wrong idea, but because they only executed it 80%.

I like the Calendly story from the book. Calendly looked at the calendaring market – Outlook, Google and so on - and saw that the problem was not creating the calendar entry, it was finding a time when someone was free to meet. It just took somebody who was outside the category to make a better calendar system who saw the real problem.

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What will it take for organizations to look forward instead of backward and rattle the chains of complacency if they have to?

AA

No one really gets serious about changing anything until the sky starts falling. So that’s why the more successful a company is, the more vulnerable it is to being disrupted because they’ve already moved to the cost optimization phase. They just want to play it safe and stick with what they hope is a winning card hand, when what they should be doing is taking a gamble and asking for a new hand.



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