



# Tom Asacker

## Branding is a Dangerous Concept. The marketplace has moved on, but most organizations have refused to go along for the ride

MOST PEOPLE POINT TO THE EARLY MARKING OF livestock as the genesis of the modern day concept of branding. If only that were the case. During those more self-reliant times, attaching a mark or family name to a product was a highly symbolic gesture, ascribing one's reputation—and assuring personal commitment—to a product's value.

Today's modus operandi referred to as "branding" is a corporate, cosmetic undertaking detached from people's personal character. It took hold in the 20th century with the advent of mass-produced products and broadcast media. And its image-driven, message-obsessed mindset persists despite the radical changes in the prevailing context and conditions of today's marketplace.

Prior to the industrial age, the marketplace was much like an open-air farmers' market. Consumers and producers gathered to exchange value directly. Customers were distrustful and discerning, so they often looked to others in the community for information and guidance. Value and trust were the chief determinants of ongoing, successful relationships; of marketplace success. And as such, producers were obsessed with the value of their offerings and their resulting standing in the community. Caring and creativity ruled.

During the industrial age, the nature of the marketplace changed. Consumers relocated from small communities to jobs in industrial towns, where they relied on retailers for food, clothing and household products. This coincided with the advent of mass production and mass consumption and ushered in an arms length, transactional mindset and orientation. Marketers became more concerned with sales and promotion of goods, and less with providing distinctive value as a means to building ongoing relationships.

Marketers of the time weren't trying to match customers' dispositions and desires with distinctive value. Their focus

was on driving down unit costs through economies of scale, and using distribution and mass marketing techniques to find customers for their excess production of goods and services. Branding was their chief means of differentiating and controlling the distribution of those homogenous offerings. Influence and persuasion ruled.

Well, it's déjà vu all over again. Rapid technological advancements have brought us back to the future. Today's post-industrial age, like pre-industrial times, is a fragmented marketplace of communities of like-minded people looking for distinctive value. It's overflowing with an abundance of products, along with skeptical people who increasingly rely on others in their "communities" for information and guidance. Value and trust are, once again, the principal determinants of success.

Despite this fact, marketers persist in the folly of branding. The pernicious cognitive pull of this powerful industrial-age concept, along with the ecosystem that evolved to perpetuate it, is holding back marketing thought and organizational action. Make no mistake: marketers are wasting a lot of time and money because of branding. Once great organizations, like GM, Hertz and Sprint, are close to collapse due to the psychological weight of branding. And, like fish with water, most people are completely unaware of it.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote, "Concepts, like individuals, have their histories and are just as incapable of withstanding the ravages of time as are individuals." The industrial-age concept of branding will ultimately die its timely death. But I wouldn't wait. It's a dangerous organizational concept. For the sake of your people and your future, wrestle it to the ground and kill it before it kills you.