

## A Life In Full: Welcome to a brand new future

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by Thomas Sutcliffe

He's a prime mover behind capitalism's seismic shift from mere products to heavily marketed brands, writes THOMAS SUTCLIFFE, but Wally Olins has already moved beyond consumer goods to nation states. America's problem, he argues, is merely a branding issue. Are we ready for this?

Here comes a sign of the times - a young man moving down the street with a hip-hop lope, a walking billboard for consumer capitalism. He is a congregation of badges. Everything he wears and much that he carries is instantly identifiable by his peers, who can read him like a book - a monosyllabic autobiography of his own tastes. And high up on his arm he bears the finishing touch - a symbol which is readily recognisable all over the globe and which confirms to everyone who sees it just how serious his lifestyle allegiances are. There, permanently inscribed on his body, is the Nike Swoosh. In such a scene - and it isn't that uncommon - etymology appears to have come full circle and bitten itself. The word "brand" has its origins in the application of hot iron to flesh, in the sizzle of burnt hair with which a mark of ownership was stamped on living possessions. Now it seems we've reached a kind of apotheosis. Not only do the cattle not struggle against the rope any longer. They actually pay to brand themselves.

A pop-culture anthropologist would probably find such a sight deeply intriguing - fascinating proof of the self-assembly tribalism of urban consumers. An anti globalism protestor would almost certainly find it depressing - painful evidence that multi-million dollar advertising campaigns can literally get under the consumer's skin. But what I'm interested to find out is what Wally Olins thinks of it. Olins - an expert on branding and still the world's leading apologist for its virtues - has just published a new book, *On Brand* - the starting point of which is that "brands ... have become a social and cultural phenomenon with the most extraordinary power."

So, halfway through a lunch to discuss the arguments it puts in defence of branding, I raise the issue of *Homo logo*. What does he feel emotionally when he sees such a thing, rather than analytically. Olins, a tall, dapper man with an architect's dress sense (bow tie and those Corbusier glasses which are themselves a branding device) pauses briefly, fully aware that this is a kind of man-trap. "I think that we live in an age where there is some kind of a spiritual vacuum," he begins cautiously, "which I regard as in some ways unfortunate and in some ways as not unfortunate because religious enthusiasms don't always necessarily lead to nice things. In the absence of a spiritual mentor the idea of what the brand stands for - 'Just Do It' or whatever it is - is a substitute." He pauses briefly again, before making a limited concession: "I find it a bit sad ... but very interesting. But I'm certain it won't last because there is no epoch that you can think of where purely commercial interests dominate to the extent that they do today. This purely commercial dominance that currently exists is a temporary phenomenon."

If branding is a kind of contemporary religion, however temporary, then Wally Olins has a pretty good claim to be its John the Baptist. He began his career in advertising at a time when the working assumption was that what you sold were things and the way that companies sold them was to persuade customers that their things were better than other people's things. He works now in a culture where such an approach would be regarded as positively Neanderthal - and he did much to change the culture himself. Olins first worked in India, diverted from an initial ambition to work with David Ogilvy in New York by a boss who promoted him to run the Indian branch of the agency. There was nothing particularly revelatory about the way Indian business worked, he says, but his rapid promotion meant that he came into contact with many different companies, often producing the same product. And that experience brought home a truth (a debatable truth) which sounds throughout *On Brand* - essentially that one company's things are likely to be much the same as another company's things.

"I particularly noticed in India", Olins says, "because I was working with different airlines from different countries and it was quite clear that what was different about them was not the airplanes, because they were the same - but the way that they behaved internally. And there were three steel plants in India - a Russian one, an American one and a British one. They all put up steel plants but the way they behaved, their cultures were entirely separate."

WALLY OLINS.  
ON BRAND.

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Returning to England Olins teamed up with Michael Wolff to found a company that would take packaging far beyond soap wrappers and cereal boxes – that would find a way to sell a corporate culture. Wolff Olins was to become the market leader in its field, but it was not easy going at first. "I remember going to see Jack Cohen at Tesco - Michael Wolff and I went, and he said 'well boys, what can you do for me?' And so we said, 'we can design your packaging.' 'Yes.' 'And we can lay out your shops.' 'Yes.' And we can design the fascias.' And he said, 'you boys must be very clever if you can do all that,' and that was the last we heard from him. It was incomprehension. People did not believe that an organisation could do that." And, in the case of Jack Cohen, whose business motto was "pile it high, sell it cheap," he almost certainly didn't believe that there was any point in doing that.

Forty years on, though, Tesco will sell you a mortgage, an internet connection or a mobile phone - and its brand has developed into one of its most valuable assets. It's as good an example as any of a seismic shift in commerce from tangible values to intangible ones. Or as Olins puts it – in sentences that have been honed in a thousand pitches - "A brand consists of two elements that have to be in balance. The first is the rational element and that is price, quality and service. If you do not offer a product that is competitive in terms of price, quality and service then forget it, you won't get anywhere at all. But a good brand also offers emotional qualities - and these are to do with what I see in the brand, what it does for me."

This thumbnail sketch of dogged proselytising in the wilderness and a universal conversion to the faith should be a triumphant narrative and there are places in Olins' book where it gets a straightforward fanfare. "Branding has moved so far beyond its commercial origins that its impact is virtually immeasurable in social and cultural terms. It has spread into education, sport, fashion, travel, art, theatre, literature, the region, the nation and virtually anywhere else you can think of." And Olins has the quotes to back it up. Authors in the 19th century sometimes invented brands for the purpose of satire or comedy (H G Wells' Tono-Bungay, for example - the first serious novel about marketing) but now even great novelists recognise that brands are part of our affective landscape. In Saul Bellow's Ravelstein the character tours Paris flashing his Visa Gold to purchase a Lanvin jacket, a Sulka shirt and a Lalique light fitting. The scene is about wealth - but wealth is now understood to be measured by the brands you buy.

One problem though - recusants are out there, with powerful arguments against the entire concept. A slightly startling moment comes in Olins' book when the inattentive reader might assume that Olins had seen the light himself. "Brands are amoral in their lust to outsource at the lowest cost and sell at the highest price," he writes in his penultimate chapter. "They are intent on becoming ubiquitous as they move from one country and one continent to another, ignoring or overwhelming venerable ethnic, cultural and religious traditions. Brands are increasingly disingenuous and duplicitous in their relentless pursuit of our money and they will stop at nothing in their overwhelming imperative to manipulate us." Strong talk for someone who has to leave immediately after lunch for a conference at which he will discuss ways in which Albania might rebrand itself and who is currently working on the re-branding of Poland ("Not just potatoes!" perhaps). Is this really the man who gave BT the widely reviled prancing- trumpeter logo as a means of repositioning itself in the marketplace? Well, no it isn't - it's Naomi Klein in paraphrase, and this isn't the only point at which she makes an appearance in On Brand - as the intellectual figurehead for a whole generation of branding refuseniks.

On Brand is best thought of, in fact, as a kind of conversation with Klein's No Logo, a bible for anti-corporate activists and a bestseller which, it's worth remembering, was subtitled "Taking Aim At the Brand Bullies". Olins' answer to her fierce, indignant arraignment of corporate mendacity takes two broad forms - tactical retreat and an extravagant counter-charge on new fronts. He is far too canny and candid himself to try to hold an untenable position, so anyone who expects a defiant hymn to the ethical values of corporate capitalism will be disappointed. True, he'll defend the utility of the brand as a way for consumers to recognise the products they like, but he doesn't have any illusions about the motives that drive a company to deliver what they promise. "We should remain quite clear that what marketing, branding and all the rest of it are about," he writes, "is persuading, seducing and trying to manipulate people into buying products and services. In companies that seduce, the brand is the focus of corporate life."

He points out himself that "seduction" is not a conventional word in business books, given its overtones of corruption and post-coital remorse. But, he implies, to use any other would be dishonest. What's more, in pursuing these goals companies display themselves at their most human and to suggest otherwise would border on the priggish. "People accuse brands of being manipulative and selective and seductive ... all of

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which they are," he agrees over lunch, "but that is the nature of the human condition. From the time a child is born it attempts to manipulate its parents. We are having this conversation. Of course you are being manipulative with me, of course I am being manipulative with you ... that is what we do. We make ourselves more seductive, attractive in order to capture the interest of our audience ... and there's nothing wrong with it."

Nothing? Since these interpersonal tricks can go badly wrong at the human level, it hardly seems inconceivable that betrayal and deceit might also be components of our consumer relationships. What's more, commentators like Klein argue that the increasing concentration on branding – the virtual component of any transaction – comes at the expense of the good themselves. And since advanced technology narrows the margin for competition at the level of product (who chooses a filling station because they can discriminate between different brands of petrol?) the incentive to embroider around the edges is greater than ever. Effort that perhaps might go on making a better boiler goes instead on making you feel warmer about the company that makes it. Money that might have been spent on research and development goes instead on researching the best way to get past the consumer's defences.

Olins isn't convinced. It might, he suggests, be worth trading a bit of honest transparency for the general improvement in goods which he credits brands as having ushered in. "William Hesketh Lever made a fortune out of Sunlight Soap because he understood that instead of selling soap in large grey lumps containing all kinds of substances, many of which were genuinely deleterious, you could substitute a soap wrapped up in a parchment of a standard quality for a standard price and [the customer] could complain if it went wrong. And he advertised it in the most seductive way he could, to some extent at least mendaciously. Certainly he exaggerated, even if he didn't lie. Now which is a more satisfactory social phenomenon? So I don't accept the view that brands are deeply destructive in the way you suggest. They're simply a substitute for things that were far more destructive. Before you had brands the opportunity that individuals had for adulterating everything they sold was simply unimaginable by today's standards. If you read any Victorian social histories you'll hear the outcries about brick dust in the jam, filth in the milk, disease of every kind being conveyed through food and water."

Brands, by this argument, are always a double-edged sword for a company – which identify the cheats as well as the honest dealers. What's more, Olins argues that however longstanding our affection for a company there's a strict limit to our patience: "Marks & Spencer is a classic example of that. We got fed up of what they sold ... we didn't like it. We loved M&S, nobody wanted M&S to die, and as soon as they started producing products we liked we flocked back again." The suggestion that a culture of general commercial mendacity – in which insurance companies insist they care and mobile-phone companies promise us that the future's bright – might be culturally debilitating, provokes Olins to an exasperated puff of air. Customers understand the game perfectly well, he says, and are very knowing about their part in it.

For Klein, the consumer has very limited power in the face of the branding bullies. For Olins, the saving grace is that the consumer can bully back however aggressive the marketing department and however big the advertising spend. "Anybody who thinks that they're in charge of their brand should be fired", he says, "because you're never in charge of your brand ... the consumer is. Do you think that the Dr Martens company ever dreamed that that boot would become as fashionable as it did among young folk and that it would then be dropped? They're in real trouble. There's nothing wrong with the boots."

An Economist article on Wally Olins' website underlines the fragility of the top brands – of 74 brands that figured in the top 100 in 2000 and 2001, no less than 41 dropped in value. And this susceptibility to consumer pressure means that brands will increasingly have to think about their social responsibilities too, Olins argues. He doesn't look to me like a man who would heave a dustbin through a McDonald's window but within limits he approves of consumer activism in the field and – like Klein herself – believes that the global reach of some brands makes them uniquely susceptible to pressure – though he looks startled when I suggest to his face that he has quite a lot in common with La Passionara of Seattle.

These elements of On Brand have the air of an effective parry – fending off the most penetrating thrusts of the anti-brand lobby with a kind of fatalism about the nature of the corporate world. No, it's not perfect but it would be worse without branding – and if the consumer wants it better they have the means at hand. But Olins isn't by any means always on the back foot. What Klein fails to recognise, he argues, is that branding

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isn't just about companies and the corporate world. It's about charities and political activism and international politics itself. "The Red Cross is a brand, Amnesty International is a brand!" he exclaims, and if only more charities followed their example they might be more effective. "Why are there 87 children's charities or whatever it is in this country. Potty! Five or six maybe: 87 means that none of them is going to be effective. Whereas if you had one powerful brand and it used all the techniques of branding ... so that instead of spending 95 per cent on Prada and Gucci and one per cent on something else you spend maybe 85 per cent on Prada and Gucci and 15 per cent on something else. But the something else has got to be as emotionally attractive, it's got to make you feel good."

Perhaps the most startling section in his book deals with national branding - and his suggestion that had the US "tried harder, earlier and for longer, to explain itself, would it have been so maligned and attacked?" When I ask exactly how he would set about rebranding America ("New Pax Americana Lite! Now with 50 per cent fewer cluster bombs!") he concedes that the task is probably impractical - and that the historical record of national branding isn't exactly untainted. It's only when you got a really determined CEO, like Hitler or Mussolini, that you could really get the packaging and logos on message. America would take 20 years to turn around, he suggests - but the newly liberated countries of Eastern Europe might benefit much more quickly. Think of Slovakia, left with the back half of the pantomime horse after the Czech Republic's brilliantly branded Velvet Revolution and jostling the virtually indistinguishable Slovenia for shelf space in the European consciousness. Think, more pertinently, of Poland - currently a client of Olins and looking for a way to present itself to the world after the repeated territorial relaunches of the 19th and 20th centuries.

It's around this point - both in the book and in his company - that it dawns on you that the terms "brand" and "branding" can mean pretty much anything you want them to - from a particular type of whisky to the amorphous and largely uncontrollable prejudices that swirl around a particular country and its people. "Every American recognises that he or she is an American and every non-American recognises America", Olins writes in his book, "by this gauge, if no other, America is a brand." But if that's the case, what isn't? "Brand" can be paraphrased as a trademark, prejudice, a preconception, a gut instinct or even an unfulfilled desire. Indeed, virtually anything you can think about anything might be translated into the language of brand awareness or brand dilution or brand projection. At the same time there can't be a businessman alive who doesn't believe that somewhere in the unmapped territories of Branding lies a short cut to success. In such circumstances a reputation for understanding and being able to guide this mysterious force is a very lucrative brand indeed. On Brand does nothing that might undermine it.