

WALLY OLINS. ON BRAND.

Brand new for old. A product with a distinctive image is a good thing...Martin Vander Weyer doesn't buy it.

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ARE BRANDS good or bad? Do they "make life more attractive and easier", "complement and manifest our personality" and "help us to say something about ourselves"? Or are anti-capitalist campaigners such as Naomi Klein right to accuse brands (in Wally Olins's "very slight" exaggeration of the contrary case) of brainwashing people with little money into buying products they don't need and don't really want and which might harm them. In short, of generally acting like bully boys, thugs and profiteers.

Wally Olins not only thinks that brands are good for companies and for customers, but that they can also be good for charities, cities and nations. He thinks that anything with a distinctive identity and a reason to make itself appealing to others is, in effect, a brand - and could therefore benefit from his advice as the doyen of British consultants in the pseudo-science of corporate image-making.

It is apparent from the title of his book that he even thinks of himself as a brand, and a pretty successful one to boot. And he is probably right, since buying an Olins makeover has long been a favoured boardroom choice for companies bereft of other ideas as to how to differentiate themselves from competitors or from negative elements of their existing image. So no one knows more about this subject than Wally Olins. He writes about it in plain, practical terms, largely free of management psychobabble, in a book which is handsomely designed and artfully illustrated. But his answer to the question with which I began is not entirely convincing.

He may well be right that clever brand management is now the key to success in every corner of the commercial world, and could be applied just as effectively elsewhere. But in answer to the accusation that in branding, "clever" too often means "manipulative and misleading", it is not sufficient to respond that "most people who buy brands are not half-witted, they know perfectly well what they are doing".

The truth which Olins chooses not to address is that if people really did know perfectly well what product they were buying, as opposed to what characteristics are imputed by its branding, they might not buy it at all. Olins describes admiringly, for example, the way in which Volkswagen (one of his clients) has created a distinctive image for its Audi marque - "a deliberately understated, techno brand" that aims to be seen as the inheritor of the Bauhaus design tradition in which form followed function.

This is "contrived, if you like", says Olins, picking his verb carefully, because as a matter of fact Audi's flagship model, the TT sports car, is not much more than an eye-catching body on a quite ordinary VW Golf substructure. "In today's Audi, form doesn't actually follow function at all - it just looks like it does."

No matter, Olins argues: customers buy Audi, whatever is under the bonnet, just as Olins himself buys imported mineral water which is near-impossible to distinguish from tap, for the emotional satisfaction they derive from the brand image.

Well, perhaps that is true of the sophisticates who buy Audi sports cars and Evian water. But what of the marketplaces where the customers really are verging on the half-witted or, as teenagers and children, half-formed? What justification can there possibly be for selling a 13-year-old an overpriced pair of trainers or a nutritionally lethal bacon-double-cheeseburger on the strength of brand messages which claim these products, and these alone, will induct him into some mythical, street-smart tribe? As for the idea of brands as a force for good beyond commerce, test for yourself the word associations that spring to mind alongside "rebranding" in the context of politics and public services: spin, deceit, disguised failure, cosmetic change where real change is desperately needed.

Yes, branding has become an essential part of the way businesses and institutions are run - and of the way consumers and citizens make conscious or subliminal choices. Yes, many brands are reliable indicators of quality and sources of satisfaction to their adherents. But many others are, quite simply, designed to mislead, to suggest something about the product which is not really there at all. Olins concludes that it's up to us: "the role of brands in society will be exactly what we want to make it". But that sounds like a cop-out to me: actually it's up to Wally Olins, and experts like him, to turn branding into a more honest game.

Martin Vander Weyer is the author of 'Falling Eagle: The Decline of Barclays Bank' (Phoenix).