

# WALLY OLINS. ON BRAND.

## Marqued up copy

Review published in Design Week by Richard Williams

'No Logo' and 'Fast Food Nation' were two seminal books that seemed to suggest that our passion for 'brand experience' had reached its nadir. Anti-globalism, government spin and a nationalistic siege mentality seemed to have stopped us in our tracks. For some time now, experts have been forecasting the death of brands as a more informed consumer decides that they've had enough of being sold to.

So it's strange that in the past week, two books on branding have popped through my letterbox. Wally Olins, Fiona Gilmore and Serge Dumont are all experts on the subject and offer not a hint that brands are on the wane, indeed both books make the case that branding is an absolutely essential part of company and consumer life.

Fiona Gilmore and Serge Dumont's book 'Brand Warriors China' deals, as you might expect, with the emergence of branding in China and will prick up the ears of any ambitious design or ad agency. You see, in China branding is only just happening. Until the mid 1980's there were literally no brands to speak of. If you wanted a fridge, you saved up for one from some anonymous company, waited ages for it arrive and then you got one that most probably wouldn't work. Now, thanks to Haier, all that's changing and a business on the brink of bankruptcy in 1984 is now the world's no.1 white goods company, according to Forbes magazine. The cathartic moment for the brand was when the boss got serious about quality control and discovered 76 fridges that weren't up to scratch. Instead of selling them, as they normally would have done, he made the workforce smash them to pieces with a sledgehammer in front of their colleagues. Clearly, not a man to be messed with.

It's a good story, but I regret to say the rest of the book is something of a disappointment, being made up of interviews with entrepreneurs and the authors' commentaries on those interviews. The problem seems to be that while local beer, cashmere and Wall's Ice Cream might be interesting, the interviews aren't. These businessmen might be good at building brands, but they are a dull old lot and all say roughly same about quality control, meeting the needs of the public and being honest. Perhaps being interesting is the next step for Chinese entrepreneurs.

Wally Olins's rather too slickly titled 'On brand' is a different kettle of fish all together. This book is so well written that next time my brother asks me what a brand is, as he does every time I see him, I'll just pass him this book. He'll get it straight away.

Olins has managed to distil into 256 pages, the history of brands, why consumers and companies need them and what the future for them is. He is unequivocal on their role: 'In a world that is bewildering in terms of competitive clamour, in which rational choice has become almost impossible, brands represent clarity, reassurance, consistency, status, membership - everything that enables human beings to define themselves. Brands represent identity.'

I found his exploration of two themes to particularly interesting. Just when you thought 'Cool Britannia' was dead and buried, Olins reignites the subject 'Politicians everywhere in the world now realise that every nation has an identity: they can either seek to manage it or it will manage them. Let the example of the United States be a clear warning'. Charities, universities, museums, what Olins refers to as the Third Sector, come in for the treatment too, needing to cast aside forever the bedraggled incompetence that they use as a symbol of their worthiness. Mission statements and consumer research are clinically disembowelled too - making me cackle with delight.

I am lost in admiration for his easy writing style, which leaves no aspect of the subject unturned and tackles the most complex of issues with great simplicity. It is no wonder that he grew Wolff Olins into a stellar business, for busy and confused chairmen his wise counsel, delivered jargon free must have seemed like the answer to a maiden's prayer.

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Both these books make a convincing case that branding has an intrinsic role in the future of business which is pretty fortunate since it's where I make my living. 'Wally Olins On Brand' is a tremendous read for anyone with even the faintest interest in the subject. Brand Warriors China is a fascinating subject, but despite the authors' passion for the subject, I simply couldn't engage with it.