

# The Brand Reality Show

Have you ever noticed the way you head straight for your usual brand on the supermarket shelf, without even considering the others? It's almost like default behaviour. In fact, you might even know that a change in brand might for one reason or another be even better, but have dismissed it with a what-the-heck sort of shrug and decided to deal with it next time...

I would claim that a lot of brand loyalty is due to laziness and a why-bother attitude. This then becomes a brand's greatest ally. The lack of solid and trustworthy inspiration at the moment the purchase decision is made, still keeps last-minute brand changes to a minimum – well that's until now.

For one reason or another we sometimes just change our minds and pick a peculiar brand out of the blue. We don't give it much thought. It may seem to be a coincidence, but a new trend is emerging that may explain this sudden brand change. There is a new marketing strategy designed to lure people into changing their minds.

It happened to me. Much to my own surprise I found myself suddenly changing my mind about two different brands. It happened instantaneously, and twice within the same month!

I was standing in the supermarket aisle looking for my usual toothpaste brand, when I was joined by a young woman who was presumably stocking up on her own toothpaste brand. She casually asked me if I'd ever tried the new mint Aquafresh brand. I had to answer "No". She confided that like her, I probably had been using the same toothpaste for years, but how recently a friend had recommended this new brand, and

she loved it. What with her coffee habit, much to her surprise Aquafresh had really solved her coffee-breath problem.

Surprising as this conversation might sound, the encounter seemed completely genuine. Her advice seemed as honest as any conversation two strangers may have. There was nothing suspicious about it. It was from one human being to another. We tend to trust these encounters.

Without giving this another thought, I went home with my Aquafresh. Then about three weeks later I pulled into the gas station to fill up, and a young guy approached me. He commented on the similarities of our car, asked about its performance, and the exchange took on the characteristics of strangers in the same boat. He then began telling me that this new version of Optimax was amazing, and how it had improved the drive and consumed less fuel. To be honest, I don't have any gasoline preferences, so any advice would strike a chord and so, I went with Optimax.

And for a moment each day my teeth seemed whiter, and my car performed better. The advice left my mind, but I continued using Aquafresh and Optimax.

But on examining my behaviour, I've never changed my mind about two brands in such a short time frame. But this past December seemed to be different. December? Was there a link? I realized that the reason for this sudden friendly wave of consumers who willingly shared their brand experiences with me was not coincidental. This was a strategy, and "consumers" were paid to be brand ambassadors. To spread their

cheer for the brands with the wider population they would receive a discount. If I had known, and asked them, they would more than likely have revealed their true relationship with the brand – and of course their bonus too.

The over-satisfied customer concept is just the next facet of "reality branding" – branding which is placed in a real context – blending in with the real world. Product placement has been around for years, recently overtaken by Situation Placement which I explored a couple of articles ago. Situation placement even moved into the world of computer games, and Hollywood learned from it – designing their promotions along the same lines.

Visit any chat room and you'll realize that several of the messages seems to be overly friendly towards you – squeezing in some sort of brand recommendation down the track. Check fashion and gardening magazines in the U.S. and you'll realize how many articles are in fact advertorials. The blend between branding and the real world is in fifth gear – and whether we like it or not, it is bound to continue until our filtering systems naturally block yet another friendly real-life message.

Yet until we reach this level, the trend is interesting, fascinating and scary too. I don't advocate it, yet I believe it will be hard to avoid. It may be very appealing for some, but before you consider taking this path, evaluate the



consequences. In the same way you will be playing with your consumers, you will be playing with your brand too.

## About Martin Lindstrom

Martin Lindstrom is recognized by the Chartered Institute of Marketing as one of the world's primary branding gurus. He's an adviser to several Fortune 500 brands including Disney, Mars, Pepsi, LEGO, American Express, Mercedes-Benz, Reuters, Visa, Pepsi, McDonald's, Kellogg's, Ericsson, Yellow Pages and Microsoft. Lindstrom has authored four bestselling books on branding – BRAND sense is his latest in the series.

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