

optimism is Viagra[®] for brands

orientations to the future and its implication for brands

Ask people about how they feel about The Future and you will be met with a baffled silence or anxious laugh. We know because that is precisely what we have been doing for the last few weeks in a programme of focus groups. Our aim was to look at people's perceptions of the future and the implications for brands.

Their silence speaks volumes. Their bafflement arises because the future is not a 'thing'. The future is everything that will happen to us. How can you answer that? Stupid question.

But there is the future and 'The Future'. People think about the future a lot (Will I pass? Will I get married? Will my pension pay out?). But it is considered in bite-size nuggets that are mentally manageable. And it tends to be overwhelmingly about me and my family's short -medium term future (schools, jobs, holidays, health). The future that is here and now. The future that is scarcely considered the future.

'The Future', as in our collective future, is a more rarefied beast. It used to be the place where we all floated around in space suits popping protein pills. Now it is a place not much different from the here and now but which, with countless minor innovations, will ultimately change who and what we are. The only thing that is certain is change.

Asking people about the future seems stupid because nobody knows, do they? But anyone can give a view. And what is interesting is the differences in the views they choose to give.

There is a striking difference between men and women at different life-stages. Not a difference in terms of their knowledge of the themes (they all talk about pollution, transport, crime, communications, ethics, terrorism) but a difference in their perspective on probable outcomes. For example, everybody sees the environment as an issue, but younger women are far more likely to see hope in the new consciousness evidenced by the movement towards recycling, anti-globalisation demos and organic food, whereas older men are more likely to point to the failure of Kyoto.

As one ages, the balance of optimism and pessimism is more like a bell curve than a linear progression. Children are neither coherently optimists nor pessimists, evincing both in a clear testament to their uncertainty about life. People in their early twenties, and particularly women, are by far the most optimistic segment. This optimism turns to pessimism as people age. So in a sense there are 'three ages of Man'...uncertainty, hope, and increasingly dismal certainty.

This stands to reason. Getting old is no fun. Being a kid is hugely overrated. And young women now have a range of opportunities for defining themselves; whereas for young men, life is more likely to be regarded as straightforward economic sink or swim in ever rougher waters.

All this has implications for brand identity. Our contention is that brands that encapsulate 'optimism' offer a younger and more attractive persona. Just contrast easyJet, Orange and Nike with BA, Cellnet and Clark's. This is to compare young and old, but it is also to contrast optimist and pessimist, hope and disappointment.

But before you dismiss this correlation of success and optimism simply as the inevitable march of time (i.e. brands age, get sad and die), just take a look at BP. This brand has been reinvented by immersion in visual (Helios), verbal (beyond petroleum) and intellectual (we're working on the alternative) optimism.

In the groups we did there was uncynical acclaim for this shift. And if anyone doubts the brand-life enhancing properties of optimism, remember that Nike is 43 years old (i.e. older than BA and Cellnet). So optimism is a kind of Viagra® for brands, which if taken regularly, allows them to retain poignancy and pertinence, well past the first blush of chronological youth.

BP teaches us another hugely important lesson. While faith in church and government is clearly ebbing away (emptying pews and ballot boxes), there is still an ethical urge amongst consumers. Brands can draw renewed vigour from this, by giving themselves an ethical dimension – and bathing in the reflected optimism of the young.

So ethics are a short cut to optimism. In fact we would go further and argue that an ethical component is increasingly essential for any optimistic brand. 'Just do it' might start to sound like an order in the mouth of a brand that is accused of using cheap, young labour from 'emerging markets'.

Amongst technology brands the case for optimism becomes unanswerable. Not only because of the value of youth and attraction, but because technology is synonymous with the future. So technology brands carry an inherent prompt for our hopes and fears about the future. So it makes obvious sense to offer optimistic brand visions.

Most tech brands do pay lip service to this e.g. Lets make things better (Philips) Where do you want to go today? (Microsoft) Go Create (Sony) Connecting People (Nokia) Everyone's invited (Samsung) Be inspired (Siemens) Committed to the future (Toshiba) Inspiring the Next (Hitachi).

In talking to people about the future, one is quickly reminded of the truth of the old cliché about science as the new god. It can be an explanation for everything (quantum and relativity), a language of its own (binary), the offer of redemption (medicine...C02 sinks), the threat of damnation (anthrax), working of miracles (video phones), and its very own priesthood (technologists). Scarcely surprising that there is such widespread faith in its power.