Chapter 12
Identity Is What We Sell

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that the most efficient advertising strategy is one that addresses the identity of the customer and recognizes his or her social construction. The most generally accepted concept of “identity” sees the “identity” of a person determined by social attributes. But identities are far more mobile these days, and we deal with identities created and reinforced by the media and by advertising. Style is the way in which we present ourselves to others, with which we say who we are or, more importantly, who we want to be or to appear. Advertising, therefore, does not emphasize, in the first place, who we are but to what we aspire. Ads sell not only commodities but also desires and aspirations. It is advertising on the one hand and the stories produced by the media on the other hand that supply this ideology of happiness. On its own, consumption always ends in a certain emptiness.

INTRODUCTION: IDENTITY

Common sense sees the “identity” of an “individual” as something unique and eminently personal, and insists that the contents of consciousness are always out of reach. It is a hidden process, ephemeral and unfathomable as a whole. But Appiah (2005, p. 65) reminds us that when we use the word “identity” we think most often of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion or sexual preferences. In this form the concept “identity” was used in the social psychology of the 1950s.

This concept of “identity” sees the “identity” of a person determined by such social attributes. They tell him or her who he or she “really” is. This idea is still widely accepted today. But identities are far more mobile these days, and we deal with identities created and reinforced by the media and by advertising. Identity can be utterly destabilized by events which put our self-conception into question. To deal with such traumatic dislocations people used to turn to religion, philosophy or a psychologist. But advertising can enter the scene and build a desirable new identity.

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AGE AND OTHER
IDENTITY MARKERS

One important identity marker, which we sometimes overlook, yet constantly use in advertising, is age: part of the identity of many is the assertion: “I am young, I am with it, I am desired”. Old people are hardly reached by Red Bull, and the advertising of Red Bull uses sponsoring of extreme sport events, to reach the younger youth group which is its target. There are large differences in the market for Internet Explorer and Deutsche Bank, not surprisingly. Mineral waters like Geroldsteiner and Apollinaris reach people older than 50 better. Younger people prefer water without bubbles like Volvic or sweet drinks like Cola, Fanta and Sprite. Or Red Bull which older people would not touch at all. It is not always possible to direct products to young and old consumers at the same time without diluting the image of age identity, which would lead to a loss of success with the intended age group (cf. Geißler, p. 2014). Social Media speak to one age group but not necessarily to another. But they allow to contact consumers directly and to create a group of consumers specific to a particular brand, which can be used for campaigns and product tests.

The myth of consciousness is the spontaneity of the self. Identity is the thing – we tend to believe – which is present to me without any mediations. But that is not so: identity is a sign and functions according to the laws of signification. The concept of sign always already implies the difference between the signifier and the signified. The meaning of every identity – as suggested by a metaphysical linguistics – is its unique being, its living presence, as eidos, as substance, as essence, as existence – now. (Derrida, 1974, 26) Linguistics, however, should know that the signifier “I” does not refer to something unique. A signifier is the possibility of its own repetition (Derrida, 1974, p. 165).

It is the very conventionality of the signifier which suggests the necessity of a transcendental signified. (Derrida, 1974, p. 127) called “I” or “ego”, which suggests the difference between the “inner” and the “outer” experience, thus that “I” is “different”. But there is no access to this presence, even one’s own. There is no privileged presence. The order of language is reciprocal supplementarity. The origin called “I” is the impossible. Language is not a function of the reciprocal suppositivity. The origin called “I” is the impossible. Language is not a function of the speaking subject. While speaking the subject is absent. Because we always already lack this self-presence called “I” it is what we desire. Identity is a consumer good which arises out of the process of exchange and which we aspire to. Nobody is there for anybody, least of all for himself, except in a process of exchange, which refers to a general equivalent in the circulation and the infinity of references from sign to sign, from representation to representation. Identity is from the beginning a marker, something like a “brand” in a process of exchange. What we need to understand is, how identity now, in a capitalist society, becomes a specific consumer good. For members of the media society the only question of importance is: “How often do I appear in the media, in which ones, and how often am I quoted?” (Burda, 2006) And for the consumer the question is: “How can I become as closely as possible like these successful people?” What attributes do I need and what brands should I wear and use to convey the image of “success”?

On that basis we will understand effective advertising. The “problem of identity” arises in the form which interests us here with the disengagement of the subject from certain social bonds and relationships, which had determined its “identity” before and with the bourgeois demand that the subject be “unique” and “original”. Whereas before social identity had been produced socially, – Levy-Strauss sees the names for family relations constituted in the exchange of women, the clan names arise from the culturally constituted exchange between families – the demand now arises that one ought to think about oneself as somebody distinct from all others. Of course these demands and the reality of late capitalist