Modern marketing in disguise: creating value connections between companies and consumers
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Preface

When I was still living at home with my parents a dilemma of sorts started to unravel in my mind. My father, being in the textiles business, used to come home with samples of fabrics that he said people would like and wear within a year. To me that always was a mystery: how could these textiles producers be able to know what the trends and fashions would be in the future? When I asked my father about this he used to reply with some reticence that there were regular secret meetings, mostly in France, where a handful of opinion-leaders would decide upon that. To me that always seemed like a plain unrealistic conspiracy. After all when we went shopping my parents were quite critical and their opinions and preferences did not always coincide with what was on offer in the stores. So even if a conspiracy was there, it seemed that consumers are not necessarily buying into companies offerings, but to what extent are our consumption choices dictated by companies and marketers?

Of course at the time I was not the only one questioning the voluntary nature of choice. As I grew up the growing dominant discourse was that marketing was bad by default, as it was considered the ‘tool’ corporations would use to manipulate our perceptions and buying behavior towards their exclusive advantage. Of course companies do wish consumers to buy their products, and do try to manipulate consumer behavior and perceptions. Nowadays however the maybe most used rhetoric device in marketing reads: ‘consumers have become unpredictable’ or else the world is changing at a pace never seen before, becoming too complex, and so on. Indeed it seems increasingly hard for companies to predict and influence buying behavior. So what should marketers do? Should they collect more information about consumers in order to predict them better? Or should they ‘let go’, try something and hope for the best? Or is maybe some combination of these two approaches possible?

All this questioning stimulated me to study marketing. At university however I quickly gave up marketing and business studies to enroll for general economics, mainly because marketing textbooks seemed uncritical and more prescriptive than sophisticated in their explanations. I found these books rather annoying as they taught ‘how to do it’, but seemed to say little about ‘why or how does it work’. If all these people knew so well ‘how to do it’ how come that so much apparel was on discount that my parents, like most consumers, would always wait for the sales period to buy clothes? And how come that many successful entrepreneurs are proud not to have any education?
At the end of my university studies I was asked, very much to my surprise, to write a PhD in history of economic thought at the University of Amsterdam, the subject being the ontology of the concept of unemployment. However it quickly became evident that this subject did not have my full interest, and as that possibility faded Ed Peelen, at the time professor of marketing at the same university, offered me to write a PhD in marketing, and in doing so gave me the opportunity to explore the company-consumer interaction dilemma, and even get paid for it! Within the realm of marketing academia however I encountered again some misgivings. PhD courses taught me how to apply sophisticated statistical techniques, but the use of these techniques was never really questioned. The ‘how to do it’ was still more important than the ‘why or how does it work’. So, I decided that academia was not for me and left university to learn more about the textile business and fashion.

At the Amsterdam Fashion Institute a research group had been set up by professor Dany Jacobs, who at the time was also lector at that institute. There finally everything came together. Dany Jacobs seemed to understand the doubts I had with the established academic world, and introduced me to critical literature about marketing and methodology that I found not only interesting, but exciting and fun to read. Part of the excitement was due to the fact that I realised that I was not the only one having those doubts. Then he mentioned that if I wanted I could even write a PhD based on these insights, adding the whimsical statement: “Poveri ma belli”.

In the years that followed I have tried to understand why some designs, styles or brands give us a ‘warm’ feeling, whereas others give us a sense of repulsion, or leave us indifferent. I found that to consider consumers as individual decision makers with their own motivations and psychological characteristics, as most marketing scholarly works do, provides a rather limited view on how preferences are formed. Only by considering the linkages between individuals, their cultural and social reference systems, do the dynamics of the interactions between companies and consumers become clear. Inevitably companies are a part of these systems. Their products and brands often act as a glue that keeps people together, and are therefore taking over the role of more formal institutions, like those representing religious or political affiliations. Or maybe more appropriately, religions and political parties have become just like commercial brands. Brands have meaning for people, and, if marketing is an activity of conveying that meaning, sometimes companies manipulate consumers, but frequently the opposite is also true. In this book I explore the conditions under which the first or the second occurs. So I first look at ‘how does it work’, by introducing frameworks and
concepts, to than turn to ‘how to do it’ when giving suggestions as to possible marketing approaches a company can apply in the context of specific business and branding strategies always considering that the social or societal context in which one operates can have an inevitable and significant impact on their effectiveness.

To do that I analysed four meaningful brands that have been quite successful for at least ten years: Diesel, Innocent drinks, Mini and MINI. I have dedicated separate chapters to each of them except for Mini and MINI which are confronted in one chapter. In a somewhat postmodern vain several recent marketing and branding books suggest the reader that the chapters can be read separately; that there is no sequentiality in their exposition. That is a tendency that characterises many other contemporary cultural products as well, so for instance one does not need to listen to the work of a DJ from the beginning onto the end to fully enjoy it. Although the chapters in this book do make sense if read independently, I strongly advise to start from the introduction (intro and theme exposition) and end with the conclusion (gran finale and outro). This because I have not merely exposed what I have done, but tried to build up a story.

For the completion of this story I am mostly indebted to Ed Peelen and Dany Jacobs. I thank Ed for giving me the opportunity to do research and write, and showing me how that is actually great fun. As a matter of fact only now that I have – hopefully – broadened my horizons I feel I understand the relevance of the research he had proposed me to pursue. I am extremely grateful to Dany Jacobs for showing me a totally new world, which I would name the world of honest scientific inquiry. Moreover I thank Dany for never taking what I did or said for granted. His detailed critical comments forced me to think twice (at least…), and somehow always made sense totally, even when they implied rewriting entire chapters from scratch. I am grateful to have received the opportunity to do academic research within the setting of a university of applied science (the Hogeschool van Amsterdam, of which AmFI is part) although having to teach four days a week in an institute with no academic tradition and culture does not always make it easy to do scholarly work.

It is not by chance that I mentioned my parents at the start of this foreword. They have stimulated my curiosity by always listening to my ideas and questioning them. At the same time they gave me the opportunity, both mentally and financially, to find out what I wanted to know and to do. I also thank them for having moved to Italy right before I was born. This move greatly helped me to understand the role and importance of culture and society in the
formation of preferences and norms. Hopefully it substantiates my pledge for a more Latin
view on business and society, a view according to which most institutions that guide our
behavior are inevitably implicit, informal and fortuitous, which does not imply that one
should be a fatalist. In the words of Niccolò Machiavelli “la fortuna è donna”, or else: luck
must be seduced.

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