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**THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY CONSUMER —  
A NEW MODEL OF THINKING**

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## Introduction

This paper is born out of a feeling that something is not right with the way the word 'consumer' is used nowadays. This word must surely be one of the most frequently used in the lexicon of advertising, marketing and research language. Yet it has not been subjected to the huge attention or to the rigour of analysis as has the word 'brand'.

There has been very little thinking about the concept of the consumer since the dawn of professional marketing. We use the word automatically without reference to the fact that the world has changed around it and therefore its meaning must have altered. Today it does not mean the same as it did in 1945, immediately after the war. It does not mean the same thing in Zimbabwe or Lithuania as it does in America. It does not mean the same thing in the discourse of the Internet as it does in the discourse of fast moving consumer goods.

Neil Postman writes about how technology has entered our language and shaped our world view <sup>(1)</sup>. We have hundreds of new words to use that stem directly from digital technology. Re-programming, information highway, Internet, software and digital are a few obvious examples. But technology also changes the words that already exist such as information, news, public opinion, instant and community. These shifts and nuances are silent and less obvious as indeed are the changes in meaning of words such as fact, truth, intelligence, freedom and memory.

So what about the word consumer? It cannot have escaped a shift in meaning over the past four decades. Why have we not made this explicit since it is such an integral concept to the marketing endeavour particularly in the context of brands? How often do we write or talk about the *brand-*

*consumer* relationship as if it as a fixed constellation in the marketing firmament?

And yet, never in our entire combined 65 years of professional work, have we ever heard any one say to another ‘What exactly do you think about when you use the word *consumer*?’

This paper is concerned with the task of thinking—and rethinking—the term ‘consumer’ particularly in relation to the term brand. We will describe the range of meanings existing at the present time and trace the historical context of each one.

We will then explore the appropriateness of these meanings to the business environment of today and tomorrow. We will propose a new model of *the consumer* and his/her relationship with brands. Finally we will conclude the paper by illustrating the power of the new model for meeting the marketing demands of the new Millennium.

## PART 1

### Current models of meaning

How is the word *consumer* defined in a dictionary?

*Consumer*

- *a person who purchases goods and services for his own personal needs*
- *a person or thing that consumes*

*Collins English Dictionary*

It is interesting that there is no difference between the definition of a consumer and a customer. The latter is defined as *a person who buys* in the same dictionary. In fact *consumer, customer, purchaser and shopper* are all synonyms in Roget's Thesaurus.

It's a simple, economic definition.

However, in the marketing lexicon it seems to us that there are at least six different meanings of the word. To some extent these mirror historical developments in marketing, research and advertising theory. But many of the meanings are as present today as they were 30 years ago.

Their co-existence in present-day thinking explains the friction that occurs between different people in the same organisation and between marketing people and their external agencies. If individuals or groups are holding different meanings of the word in their minds they will not communicate with ease. Nor will they agree on such fundamental issues as how to understand the consumer and how to create marketing interventions so as to influence him/her in the brand's interests.

The six major models of thinking about the consumer we have identified are:-

- the marginalised consumer
- the statistical consumer
- the secretive consumer

- the sophisticated consumer
- the satellite consumer
- the multi-headed consumer

## **The marginalised consumer**

In the post-war years, pre-war economic structures and social attitudes prevailed. Austerity, rationing and a lack of disposable income meant a seller's market. People could only buy what was provided from manufacturing companies and there was no or little choice.

Of course this same scenario currently exists in other parts of the world – Russia, China, Eastern Europe, Africa and Vietnam are only beginning to become market economies.

In this context, a consumer is a person who buys anything that they need. Personal beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, wishes or unmet needs are simply not on the agenda and therefore not part of the marketing equation.

The model of thinking that negates the personal views of an individual is not confined to the dark years immediately following the war or to developing economies. It is alive and well in the current world of advertising, new product development, design, fashion, corporate identity, office design and organisational culture. It is a form of dismissing the consumer that goes something like this:

*'Don't consult consumers – punters know f-all about advertising (packaging, corporate identity, design, fashion, what's cool etc)'*

*'It's nobody's business except ours how we run this company'*

*'Don't ask the consumer about new products/services – they couldn't tell you if they tried.'*

The hidden assumption is that consumers are passive recipients of other (more powerful, more discerning, more intelligent) people's decisions and judgements and that it is less complicated and better to operate in this way.

It is a parental and authoritarian model.

## **The statistical consumer**

In the 'must read' book written to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Market Research Society, Colin McDonald and Stephen King describe the 1950's as a time of greater prosperity and economic confidence based on the establishment of the welfare state. This accelerated a change of heart from a seller's to a buyer's market:

*By 1957...as markets moved from seller to buyer, new ideas of 'marketing' were taking hold. Companies began to grasp the importance of understanding what the consumers really wanted; it could no longer be assumed to be the same as it always had' (2).*

This led to the development of many different methods of research and information gathering (primarily quantitative) to describe the nature and characteristics of particular markets and the range of consumer needs and wants connected with purchasing of goods and services.

The problem with consumer market research as used by traditional marketing companies, according to the authors of a new book called Radical Marketing is simple:

*'It deals with averages. It tells a marketer what an average consumer wants. But there are no average consumers. As the old saw goes, "Some people like iced tea and some like hot tea, but very few ask for lukewarm tea."' (3)*

Whilst many professionals would deny, if asked directly, that that they think in an aggregate way nowadays, it can be detected through the kind of language that is commonly used in marketing and advertising briefs, in articles and on conference platforms.

The term - *the* consumer - is a dead give-away. *Our* consumer is another leak.

People who buy goods and services are dehumanised and lose their individuality. The consumer is described as if all people who buy the product or service are homogenous. The underlying model of the consumer is one of objectivity and distance. The consumer is a fact and as such is simplified, analysed, segmented and targeted.

A recent media magazine advertisement showed a picture of a truck unloading consumers (labelled as such) wrapped in brown paper with a bull's eye painted on the side. The target consumer is alive and well in modern marketing.

### **The secretive consumer - a bundle of hidden motivations**

During the 1960's, marketing and advertising professionals became aware that descriptions of markets and consumers were insufficient in the quest to find the levers of influence and persuasion. The focus widened to embrace the 'why' question in addition to 'what' and 'how many'.

This was the era of motivational research that after hiccups, a backlash and witch-hunting, gave birth to contemporary qualitative methods of enquiry. The consumer was laid on the couch and interpretations of attitudes and behaviour were drawn from the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis. Projective questioning and techniques were adapted from these disciplines and became favourite tools for mainstream qualitative researchers.

Over the next two decades, researchers from different disciplines, namely sociology and social anthropology attempted to understand why consumers did what they did and thought what they thought, from the point of view of man as a social animal and as a product of culture. The need for broadening the way in which human behaviour could be understood was clearly argued in an excellent paper by Judy Lannon and Peter Cooper called 'Humanistic Advertising: a holistic cultural perspective' published in 1983 (4). They first made the profound observation that 'its not what advertising does to consumers but what consumers do with advertising' that is the key question.

Today there are a vast number of different research approaches drawn from academic and scientific disciplines that have made qualitative research an eclectic method of enquiry. Semiotics, ethnography, cultural analysis, brain science, spirituality and New Age concepts have been added to psychology and social anthropology. This repertoire of approaches is currently being used to reveal the inner dynamics and cultural influences that reveal the

hidden ways in which consumers relate to brands, businesses, products and services in both the public and private sectors.

The 90's have seen the emergence of new initiatives in traditional marketing companies. Job or programme titles such as 'Getting closer to the consumer', 'Manager of the Consumer Insight Initiative', 'Getting under the skin of the consumer' or 'a Consumer-Connection Programme' illustrate that research information alone is considered insufficient.

Some form of proximity to the consumer is beginning to be understood as the best way to obtain genuine insights that can be transformed into powerful marketing activities.

### **The sophisticated consumer**

In 1981, Ryan and Gordon <sup>(5)</sup> <sup>(6)</sup> postulated the concept of the consumer as someone who *consumes advertising* as well as goods and services. In the course of many qualitative studies the authors observed that a considerable number of people claimed to enjoy the ads more than the programmes. Others, particularly younger people brought up on a childhood diet of TV found advertising fun, challenging and clever. They responded to the execution of the advertisements and commercials over and above the relevance of the message and brand.

Since this date there have been many follow-up studies in both the UK and abroad that support the initial hypothesis. <sup>(7)</sup> <sup>(8)</sup> <sup>(9)</sup> <sup>(10)</sup>. Nowadays the sophisticated consumer of marketing activity (not only of advertising) is recognised and respected.

It is understood that people consume experiences too. A visit to Seattle coffee-house or to Bluewater Retail Park in Essex is more than a visit to buy a cup of coffee or something from the shops. It is the consumption of an experience.

The model of thinking about the consumer as a sophisticated and aware consumer of brands, communications and experiences has elevated the consumer to the position of final arbiter and judge of marketing activities. Many brand teams, senior managers and politicians will not make a decision without deferring to the views of the consumer. This is a criticism

that has been levelled at the Blair government and has led to the denigration of the focus group as a ridiculous forum for consumer approval.

### **The satellite consumer - held in orbit by the brand**

Since the fateful day in 1988 when Nestlé bought Rowntree (and its brands for a price that was five times the disclosed net assets), the creation, nurturing and support of powerful brands has been the dominating agenda of the last 15 years.

Marketing professionals have developed a wide repertoire of brand models, processes and programmes that explain what a brand is and how it can be dissected. There are models that indicate how to position a brand and how to define a brand proposition. There are ways of thinking about how a brand's strengths can be leveraged, how it can be stretched in order to maximise its potential and how the changes that are made to it can be measured. Marketers have learnt to think of brands in human terms – with personalities, values and characteristics. Brands have financial value that can be calculated according to a number of different formulae. Strong brands are the most important asset that a company can own.

All kinds of organisations -governments, local authorities, Nations, the monarchy, service organisations, retailers and traditional marketing corporations - believe that they *own* their brand. It can be designed, positioned, re-positioned, developed and communicated in such a way that the consumer is drawn towards it.

A brand is thought of as an *it*. Like a planet in the sky, marketers imagine that the brand can be controlled to shine as brightly as possible so that the consumer notices it. It sends out messages, carefully calibrated, so that the consumer, like a moon, feels the gravitational pull and is drawn towards it remaining in orbit.

### **The multi-headed consumer - need-states**

In 1994, Wendy Gordon re-introduced the concept of need-states to explain the fact that there are more differences between the same consumer making

a brand choice on two different occasions than between two different consumers choosing the same brand on the same occasion (11). People choose brands to fit a particular context that can be described in terms of environment (design, aesthetics, location, atmosphere, facilities, services, products), human environment (accompanied or alone, other consumers, service people), external factors (weather, date, fads, trends) and individual physiological or emotional needs.

To illustrate very briefly – on one occasion I may choose to drink a Budweiser in the pub during the week after work whilst on the next night when visiting the same pub at the same time with my partner, I might choose to drink a glass of white wine. The moment of choice is influenced by a wide variety of factors. My perceptions of other people in the pub, the meaning of the occasion for me and the characteristics of the environment are equally as important as my internal needs.

This leads to the idea that a brand can be positioned against a need-state and through communications and promotions can become the brand most identified with it. Many of the alcohol and confectionery brands have adopted this model of thinking. It is a useful model for explaining repertoire behaviour in crowded and highly competitive categories.

However it is very like the brand-centric model. The consumer may experience multi-needs but she always relates to the brand in the same way.

### **The consumer (and the brand) - a model of control**

All of these six ways of thinking about the consumer (and their relationship with brands) share something in common. They assume that the consumer and the brand are *fixed point in a fixed space in a fixed time*.

***If the consumer occupies a fixed point then he/she can be targeted and segmented.***

A mass of different individuals can be condensed into a single point.

***If the consumer occupies a fixed space then this context can be described.*** There are boundaries that are understood and dynamics that characterise the space.

***If the consumer exists in a fixed time then he/she is anchored in the present.***

This allows marketers to feel in control, to work out formulae of prediction and therefore to believe that they will be effective in their interventions on behalf of the brand.

Is this model of control and prediction appropriate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This is the key question. Does it help companies to innovate and compete in the future? Does it help organisations to grow in the fullest sense of the word – financial success, personal fulfilment and satisfaction for those human beings that choose to buy the products and services?

Our view is that the control model is anachronistic. It no longer works and yet it is fiercely clung to like drowning person clings to floating debris. In this it is not unlike the business environment in which it developed and of which it is such a central tenet.

## **The Business Environment - today and tomorrow**

The Planning Cycle is a useful tool to begin this section. 'Where are we now' and 'Where could we be' if we think of the business climate at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and compare this to the challenges as we cross the cusp into the first decade of the New Millennium?

Ever since the recession of 1989, traditional manufacturing and marketing businesses have been running scared. The last decade has seen the delivery of return to shareholders change from that derived by optimistic expansion in the boom times of the 1980's to that delivered by careful and considered massaging of costs. The elusive 'feel-good' factor has been a constant theme of the nineties.

Led by the major management consultancies many companies have downsized. Terms like process re-engineering, outsourcing, supply chain management, cost efficiency and marketing effectiveness have become the currency of the decade. Growing profit through mergers and acquisitions – the daily staple of business news pages – is still with us as we write these lines (Sunday Times headlines on November 14<sup>th</sup> read: 'Mannesmann to snub Vodaphone', 'Air France wants big stake in Virgin', 'Medeva deal puts Celltech in fast lane').

The net effect of this is that people working in traditional manufacturing and service organisations have become myopic and inward looking. They spend so much energy and intelligence on managing internal efficiency initiatives that they rarely look over the parapet at the real world 'out there'.

Not all companies suffer from this blindness. For every Marks & Spencer, MFI, Sainsbury's, British Airways, Barclays, Hoover, Motorola and Nintendo there is a Nokia, Gap, Dell, Schwaab, Amazon, Starbucks, Sony and Ikea.

What is the difference between the two groups of organisations?

The first group – the Traditional Establishment – have become detached from those human beings that buy (experience, consume) their products and services. They may have sophisticated marketing, research and

information feedback processes but these are failing to alert decision-makers as to the true nature of what is going on in the real world. There are many reasons for this but one of the most common is the complexity of the marketing department. Layers of professional people structured by brand or function each following individual goals and targets are insensitive to emerging trends that influence the whole organisation. They define their competitive boundaries too rigidly, act too slowly and too safely, thus losing the opportunity for aggressive advantage

The Control Model of the consumer is part and parcel of this rigidity.

This second group – the New Wave – are different from Traditional Establishment companies largely because they understand the nature of innovation namely that it re-defines the competitive space. CEO's who embody the values of energy, flexibility, courage and creativity and for whom innovation is integrated with the strategy of the business lead these organisations. They respect speed and the idea of 'doing it' even if it turns out to be a mistake.

They know that brand interaction is a multi-faceted experience. They understand the difference between the brand as a promise and the brand as delivered. They know that loyalty cannot be orchestrated but is awarded for merit.

They know that human beings are 'meaning-making' machines who make sense of the world around themselves by creating *stories* from clues. These clues are communicated consciously and unconsciously not only in the course of social interaction but also through overt brand communication and covert brand body language.

As Michael Wolff says in a recent lecture at INSEAD:

*'If your company owns the franchise of a brand identity, then every conversation you have and every gesture that you make on its behalf will either affirm or negate your customer's belief in that brand. They own the brand not you. You are simply the business that will benefit or suffer directly as a result of the quality of experience that owning the brand brings to people's lives....'*

*Customers create brands.  
Organisations create brand identities’.*

*INSEAD 7<sup>th</sup> May 1999*

Business culture is changing. Figure 1 identifies some of the attitude and behavioural differences between this century and the next:

*FIGURE ONE*

**Say goodbye - 20<sup>th</sup> century**

Stable and predictable  
Large and extensive  
Command and control  
Rigid organisation  
organisation  
Control by rules and hierarchy  
values  
Information fortress  
Rational, quantitative analysis  
and intuition  
Need for certainty  
ambiguity  
Reactive and risk-averse  
entrepreneurial  
Process-led endeavour  
exploration  
Corporate independence  
alliances  
Vertical integration  
Internal organisational focus  
Consensus  
Competitive advantage  
Competing for today's markets  
markets

**Say hello - 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Ever changing  
Quick and responsive  
Leadership and empowerment  
Flexible and virtual  
Guided by vision and  
Information sharing  
Imagination, creativity  
Tolerance of  
Proactive and  
Solution-seeking  
Interdependence and  
Virtual integration  
Focus on the market  
Constructive contention  
Collaborative advantage  
Creating tomorrow's

From this chart we can see clearly that the Control Model of the consumer falls within the paradigm of 20<sup>th</sup> century thinking, but does not fit with the business culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is too rigid, too static, too concerned with stability and predictability and it is framed in the past tense of 'what we know'..

Our new model of thinking takes its cue from the new business culture, the dynamic, chaotic world of the Millennium. It aims to shift the paradigm

from predictability to unpredictability; from rigidity to flexibility; from a need for certainty to a tolerance of ambiguity.

And above all, it is framed in the reality of the present and the *possibilities of a future that is fundamentally different from what we know and with which we feel comfortable.*

## PART 2

### Rethinking ‘the consumer’

Part 1 defined the six key models of thinking about the consumer that have grown up over the past 50 years. They reveal an extraordinary paradox.

Although we know that ‘the consumer’ and her world have changed beyond all recognition over these five decades, all our models still co-exist within the present time-frame.

In the argument of this paper this is because we actually still **think** of ‘the consumer’ fundamentally in the dictionary definition: *a person who purchases goods and services*.

We have a kind of intuitive mental formula in our heads

Person + the act of purchasing goods and services = ‘consumer’.

All you have to do is get to know and understand the inner person and you’ll nail ‘the consumer’.

Whether we are thinking about the marginalised consumer, the secretive or sophisticated consumer, or—even—the multi-headed consumer, we subscribe to a taken-for-granted idea of ‘the consumer’ as a kind of Barbie doll: a figure we can dress up in the clothes of the brand. Glamorous Barbie in her Issy Mayake perfume, Pragmatically Caring Barbie in jeans and sweater, whisking the Domestos round the lavatory bowl, so Baby Barbie will be safe from germs. New Labour Barbie reading The Guardian. But always Barbie.

Barbie is our ‘*person who purchases goods and services*’. (No matter whether there is an actual financial transaction or it is a question of ‘buying into’ an idea or an ideology. The equation is the same. Person + buying/buying into = consumer)

In this person-centric model, the inner figure pre-dates consumption. It’s there, already in place, waiting to choose which brand to wear. Or, to be

sucked into the brand orbit, reflecting back the light of the central planet. It is a fixed point.

Effectively this is marketing's take on Rene Descartes' famous dictum of identity, *I think therefore I am*. 'The consumer' is a thinking (and, of course, feeling) 'person' at the centre of a world which s/he understands from a unique perspective, a person who is the author of her own thoughts, feelings, behaviour and decisions. A person who purchases.

If we are to really take apart the old way of thinking, this is where we have to start.

By deconstructing 'the person' and replacing it with a new model of identity.

As Laura Oswald puts it. (12)

*Rather than bringing a ready-made inner self to the mall for a change of clothes, the subject of consumption produces and is the product of styles, trends and marketing strategies. The subject thus conceived eludes the metaphysical hierarchy, which grants fixed, original status to the self and secondary status to the roles it plays on the stage of life.*  
(The Place and Space of Consumption in a Material World)

## **The new model—a subject in search of identity**

Our new model of thinking confronts the intuitive principle that 'the consumer' is an extension of 'a person' with an existing and defined identity, who we can then understand by getting to know their 'person' life and circumstances in all of its diversity and richness.

We argue instead that the 21<sup>st</sup> century 'consumer' is a 'subject' that continually **constructs** identities for itself by entering into the process of consumption.

In Oswald's words

*The subject of consumption is nothing if not an actor in search of an identity.....Lacking a basic core identity, the post-modern subject constructs itself around the image it projects for others in consumer*

*culture. "I am what you perceive me to be." Consumption enables people to change hats as the occasion demands. (Oswald, op cit)*

This chimes strongly with French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's ideas on subjectivity. Lacan queries the whole idea that we have one fixed and 'centred' identity—*I think therefore I am*—and suggests that we are continually 'split' between 2 different 'states of subjectivity' that actually allow our identities to change (13).

Lacan's argument—very much simplified—runs like this.

As subjects, we continually oscillate between a fixed, point where we know who we are, and where we believe we are saying what we mean (and, of course, meaning what we say)—and what he calls The Other.

This Other is not a fixed point, it is a dynamic process where meaning is not constant or objective. When we are in the state of The Other, we are, as it were, in between identities. We could be anyone..

We shall call these two states of subjectivity Consumer Mutability and Consumer Stability.

### **The mirror of identity**

To make us ourselves stable and to make sense of who/what we are depends on finding some mirror in which we apparently see ourselves clearly.

Indeed, Lacan calls the first moment of identity 'the mirror stage'. At somewhere between 6 & 18 months a child begins to recognise its own image in the mirror as an autonomous being. It acquires a sense of identity and can see itself as different from the mother to whom it had previously been attached.

This process is then completed when the child gains language and can fully understand itself as a definable 'subject'.

In Catherine Belsey's explanation

*In order to speak, the child is compelled to differentiate; to speak of itself it has to distinguish 'I' from 'you'..... Subsequently it learns to recognise itself in a series of subject positions ('he' or 'she', 'boy' or 'girl.')*  
(Belsey, 1980, pp60/1)

In more simple and domestic terms, we can see from our own experience how children create subject-positions in language from their very first words, *Ma-ma, Da-da, Ba-ba.*

Language is the unconscious mirror that makes us stable and gives us identity. We are, if you like constructed in and through language.

## **Communications: a world of mirrors**

The languages of communications can be verbal—or they can be visual, musical, spatial, temporal, olfactory etc. Think of the meanings of fragrances for example or the way the aroma of fresh bread speaks to us about the kind of supermarket we're in. All 'languages' act as a mirror in which we come out of our mutable state of 'otherness' and see ourselves clearly as a Stable Subject.

In the tale of Goldilocks and The Three Bears, Goldilocks finds herself in the mirrors of chairs, porridge and beds. When the chair is too big or the porridge is too hot she is in the state of the Other, shifting until she finds an image that seems tailored-made for her.

The importance of language as a mirror to stabilise our identity is twofold. On the one hand it means that we cannot become Stable Subjects (*I am a .....*) without a communication system in which to see ourselves reflected. And, on the other, like an empty mirror, communication systems do not have any meaning unless they provide a point of identity for a subject.

## **The 'Moment of Identity'**

In Lacan's theory, the child achieves identity because it recognises its own image in the mirror. *This is me.*

If the image were to be 'dressed' as a cat, however, the child would construct a new identity for itself. *I am a cat.* A blue and white scarf around the neck and *I am a Chelsea fan.* An apron, *a cook.* A bushy white beard and a long red cloak with a hood. *Ho, ho, ho.*

Now imagine all these identities happening in rapid succession, like a speeded up film. The person in the mirror is constantly 'splitting' between an unconscious state when s/he doesn't know who or what s/he is—and a conscious being when the ego is apparently transparent to itself. *This is me.*

Importantly, the two states are contingent upon one another.

In order to fully engage with all the different possibilities of our cultural world—to make choices—we have to divest ourselves of the last ‘identity’ we inhabited. We have to return to the Mutable position. This means that any stable point is only temporary.

We have called this temporary position the ‘Moment of Identity’. And now our model of thinking begins to look something like this

Mutable Subject + Communications Mirror = Moment of Identity.

### **Through the looking-glass**

To fix or stabilise ourselves into a Moment of Identity, we have to literally insert ourselves into the meaning system of the image in the ‘mirror’. We have to become part and parcel of its discourse.

The concept of ‘discourse’ is critical to the process of consumption and bears careful explanation.

To go back to the multiple identity examples - the signifier apron gives the image the identity of ‘cook’ because it is part of the system of ‘cooking’. Without the system, the apron would have no meaning for us. It would be a signifier with no signified.

This system of meaning, or discourse, is a complex arrangement of all the languages— verbal, visual, musical, architectural, formal, shape, colour, comedy, drama and so on— which structures how we think and feel about a product field. . And, most importantly for this paper, it give us a position from which we can understand not simply the discourse itself, but ourselves as part of that discourse.

Discourse takes us through the looking-glass.

All areas of our cultural life have their own discourses. We only have one cultural pot but we bring out quite different language and imagery to describe, say, motor cars or financial services or ice creams.

It would be culturally normal to speak of a *'delicious ice cream'*, but odd to say *'I've just taken out a delicious Health Insurance'*.

Back to the apron. Aprons are a signifier of the cooking discourse: as, of course, are kitchens, food, the mouth-watering aroma of roast turkey, etc. Santa's outfit is part of the discourse of Christmas. So stick a Santa hat atop an apron and I see myself in the semiotic mirror as *'me cooking the Christmas dinner'*. Or, if you like, *a veggie who'll be cooking a vegetarian Christmas dinner, or an Australian who's throwing some prawns on the Christmas Barb-e.*

The permutation of subject positions in any signifier is endless. But whoever I see myself as, I achieve my Moment of Identity through the same process. The discourse allows me to grant meaning to the signifier and I then find a position in the discourse from which I can stabilise myself as 'me'.

### **Multi-discourse messages**

In the signifiers of advertising, packaging, retail design, e-commerce, we constantly discover new identities for ourselves as we consume. Often multiple identities in the same message.

Marks and Spencer produced a 'Who wants to be a Millionaire' box of chocolates for the last 20<sup>th</sup> century Christmas with a multi-discourse pack design:

*'Crisp, thin mints'* on dark blue background—the 'after-dinner' discourse; *bars of chocolate money*—the Monopoly, family Christmas games discourse; *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* logo—the popular TV discourse. Plus a small e-commerce symbol in the corner—the infinite IT discourse

The subject positions on offer thus ranged across sophisticated lifestyle, warm-hearted family member, couch potato and net-literate surfer. At least four Moments of Identity. All in one pack.

If one small seasonal box of chocolates can produce so many identities, imagine the potential for multi-subjectivity inherent in the discourse of a

brand. Laura Oswald describes this as ‘the semiotic aura surrounding goods, including brand legacy and brand story, produced by advertising, point of sale display and logos circulating in the popular imagination’ (ibid). Gordon and Valentine have also written elsewhere about the influence on consumer identities of the siting of brands in different retail contexts (14). And then there are contexts within contexts.

Far from being a bright planet holding its satellite consumer moon in orbit the brand is more like a million star points in an infinite galaxy of discourses, any one of which the Mutable Consumer can insert itself into and settle—just for a moment—into a stable identity.

The key to the development of meaningful brand-consumer relationships is therefore to start from that point.

Not from the consumer, the fixed person, Barbie—nor the tablets-of-stone essence of the brand, but the point in discourse where the two meaning systems collide and coalesce into a Moment of Identity.

As an inspirational brand slogan put it

*You’ll know when you’ve been Tango’d.*

### **Modelling the ‘Moment of Identity’**

It has been the task of this section of our paper to deconstruct the intuitive way we think about of the consumer as fixed ‘person’ who pre-dates her consuming self—and replace it with a new model.

Rather than being a person who we can get to know—and therefore control—‘the consumer’ becomes a temporary, precarious point of identity, which is ever-changing, ambiguous and unpredictable. We have called this point the Moment of Identity.

In the process of developing the model, we have introduced several new terms. We make no apology for this. Without new words, we would simply revert to the old way of thinking. However, the words themselves are not carved in stone. They are simply signifiers. If better signifiers come along,

let's use them. After all, this is a model of flexibility and change, of imagination and creativity. All we are concerned with is 'doing it'.

The key terms are:-

- **Mutable and stable subjectivity.** As subjects we continually shift between these two positions. Stable subjectivity is when we can see ourselves clearly in one identity or another. Mutable subjectivity is when we are 'between identities' waiting to become *this me that I am*.

We have to be able to shift into a mutable state in order to move from one subject position to another. Otherwise we could not change or grow or respond to the myriad need.states which structure our choices.

**Discourse.** We become stable subjects by 'seeing' ourselves in the imaginary mirror of communications. This stems from our earliest experiences when we see ourselves in the mirror as an 'I' different from a 'you'. Our subjectivity is thus constructed in a mirror of language. *Ma-ma, Da-da, Baba*.

As we look at different images, we construct different identities for ourselves. We do this by inserting ourselves into the meaning system that makes the image coherent. This system is called discourse.

A discourse is made coherent by the cultural assumptions and taken-for-granted meanings we share about the product field in which it is embedded. (Apron means cooking, Santa-hats mean Christmas) Without the process of subjectivity and discourse, all we would have would be a set of disconnected signifiers. (Red, triangular shape, with a bobble on top). Products, brands, line extensions... all have their discourse. Sometimes several discourses in one marketing message

- **Moment of Identity.** We achieve identity by inserting ourselves into the discourse. But because the subject is both mutable and stable, any 'identity' we construct for ourselves is only temporary. In marketing terms, the moment of consumer identity is a fleeting point where the subject settles—just for a moment—into a stable position. *This is me*.



## Where do we go from here?

We have argued, there can be no consumer without a brand discourse, Equally there is no brand without the process of bringing the subject from a mutable to a stable position. Or, more properly, when they create multiple points of identity in the brand discourse for today's complex marketplaces.

This is the explanation behind many advertising campaign failures, irrespective of genre. The life-style ads of the seventies, the soaps of the eighties and the post-modern ads of the 90s often failed to provide a point of entry for widely different subject positions that could encompass the mass target audience for the communication. The same criticism can be levelled at packaging, brochure design, virtual communications and below-the-line activity.

As researchers, therefore we must make ourselves concerned as much with the brand discourse as with the real lives and behaviour of the 'people who purchase'.

James Parsons' recent ESOMAR paper *Me nuh 'ave nuh time for nuh bag a chat*<sup>1</sup> takes up this idea and develops it further (15). The paper details how an advertising idea for Red Stripe beer appealed across an enormously varied marketplace, including poor ghetto-dwellers in Kingston, Jamaica and middle class white men in affluent New York.

Parsons suggests that the reason the campaign provided two such diverse subject positions can be explained by the concept of 'intertextuality'. Intertextuality is the cultural web that surrounds all brand and marketing messages, and from which they take their meanings.

The two cultures used different intertextual references to decode the idea. For the New Yorkers it was ironic, witty and playful, full of post-modern implications and for the Jamaicans it tapped into much more sentimental heartland beer values of togetherness, community and the direct experience of drinking.

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<sup>1</sup> The paper's title is Jamaican patois for *I have no time for any nonsense*

Citing Roland Barthes, Parsons explains that a text gathers meaning because it is '*woven entirely with ..... references, echoes, cultural language*'. *It is both inscribed with the traces of the texts that have gone before it, and formed with the encyclopædia of references we all carry with us as participants in our culture.* (op cit).

Importantly, he uses this project to argue that, as researchers, we need to develop a ‘reflex’ to understand the particular cultural web in which consumers live—and from which they draw the intertextual references that enable them to understand brand messages.

This idea is not new.

We have already alluded to Cooper and Lannon’s paper of 1983. ‘Humanistic Advertising: a holistic cultural perspective’. In 1989, Jon Chandler and Mike Owen argued that our proper object of study should be consumer culture rather than ‘the consumer’<sup>(16)</sup>. The same year, Virginia Valentine and Monty Alexander introduced the concept of Cultural Class, the spontaneous segmentation of groups of ‘People Like Us’<sup>(17)</sup>. The paper suggested that we are all members of many cultural classes and that we join the appropriate group of People Like Us according to the context.

*Each facet (of our identity) becomes a sort of sub-identity.....sometimes in contradiction with other facets; yet always making sense within its own context.*

(Cultural Class, researching the parts that social class cannot reach)

Setting up membership of a cultural class is a key component of forming the brand-consumer relationship. Brand and Consumer have to appear to share the same worldview, the same set of cultural assumptions.

The point at issue is this: to understand the Moment of Identity—the movement from mutability to stability—we have to understand the way the discourse is constructed. We must learn to decode the intertextual references, to wrinkle out the cultural assumptions behind their use.

To do this, we need tools.

The person-centric model of the consumer has given us ever more sophisticated and powerful tools for understanding Barbie and her psychology. These have been adapted from the cognitive, psycho-analytical and humanistic disciplines of psychology and social studies. Projective techniques such as collage boards and other construction or associative techniques widely used around the world today, are good examples.

What we need now are the complementary tools to understand the brand and consumer as Moments of Identity constructed (*formed*, in Parsons' creative and generative term) together in discourse.

The good news is that we actually already have them. There's a store of complementary power tools out there, including:-

- Need State analysis – relying on insights from observational interviews in a wide range of contexts such as point of consumption, in-home or retail environments and virtual experiences - using the discipline of documentary film-making and photography as the framework.
- Semiotic Analysis – a rigorous analysis of the characteristics of a particular discourse whether it be bread or coffee, money or health.
- Trend detection – reading emerging trends from around the world as soon as they begin to be noticed by the media – newspapers, lifestyle magazines, leading edge publications, films, books and TV/film role models.

The bad news, however, is that after ten years of use by a handful of reputable researchers these complementary tools are not yet considered sufficiently mainstream to be taught and practised by the majority of research companies as a central methodology. It's a Catch 22 situation. So long as we work with the old model of the consumer, we will use person-centric research methods. And so long as we stick to the same research approaches, we will not fully understand the post-modern consumption process. As Parsons says, the old tools are simply not 'adequate' enough.

We need to bring the complementary tools into the centre of our thinking and to innovate and expand the repertoire.

Above all, we need *the will* to think differently, to develop a new reflex and to give up the intuitive urge to control and command 'the consumer'.

## **PART 3**

### **Bringing the consumer and business together**

We have proposed a new model of the consumer and her relationship with living brands. We have called this the Moment of Identity.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer is post-modern to the core. She shifts identities and uses a vast wardrobe of brands to create herself into whoever she wants to be. Others construct their own stories about her by decoding her brand attire at that moment within a particular cultural context (discourse).

This has huge implications for marketers and the way in which they use research to help businesses and anticipate the needs of customers of tomorrow:

The relationship a consumer has with a brand is continually changing. The meaning of a brand can only be understood in the context of the discourse in which the brand is being consumed.

Discourses are themselves in continual change. The instant coffee discourse in the UK has been transformed by Starbucks and Seattle café culture so that familiar brands (like Kenco or Nescafe) no longer mean the same thing to people as they did ten years ago. They have become anachronistic in their communications, packaging and 'brand propositions since they no longer offer many coffee drinkers meaningful points of entry (and identity) precisely because they are out of step with cultural trends.

The challenge for researchers is to understand these multiple points of identification and to remember that the post-modern consumer is an expert and talented actor. This makes focus groups a less than optimal choice for a number of reasons:

- The underlying dynamic is aggregation—searching for a common agreement, rather than allowing varied entry points.

- The interviewing environment is divorced from the Moment of Identity, namely the purchase, consumption and *ownership of the brand* as it is embraced in everyday life.
- Focus groups hothouse the marketing and research agendas (that rely on the consumer model of control) thus failing to reflect the reality of the brand and cultural ambiguity.
- Stimulus material is designed to fix, modify or improve marketing-led ideas of brand messages, positions, concepts—rather than to open up the intertextual references and cultural assumptions that go into the brand discourse.

The solution lies in the adoption of *concurrent* research methods that:

- Offer the opportunity to monitor as many moments of identification as possible. (Like the legitimate academic mix of methods—or *bricolage*<sup>1</sup>)
- Redress the balance between person-centric methodologies and cultural context approaches so that brand and business development can be anchored in the future rather than the past or present.

To conclude this paper, it is worth returning to the list of 21<sup>st</sup> century behaviours illustrated in the chart on page 12. The right hand column highlights a number of fundamental shifts in the way business professionals need to think and act.

Continuous change requires speedy and responsive solutions. If we take too long over our innovation and marketing processes we will lose the race to unforeseen competitors. Bravery is a much-needed value in an aggressively competitive future.

We must focus on the external market rather than our internal business and brand operations and seek ways to be proactive in creating products, services and experiences for tomorrow's customer.

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<sup>1</sup> A pieced-together, close-knit set of practices that provides solutions to a problem in a concrete situation...It is a contraction that changes and takes new forms as different tools, methods and techniques are added to the puzzle

Leading companies and brands will tolerate ambiguity allowing creativity, imagination and intuition a legitimate place at the Board table. A potent brand-consumer relationship that works well for both the legal brand owner and the consumer (as owner of meaning) is an act of creativity.

In our view, we cannot achieve the turnaround in attitude demanded by these behaviours unless we shift the paradigm from a traditional idea of a fixed market of controllable consumers—to the idea of *a constantly changing cultural space in which people and brands dance together for brief moments of shared identity.*

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