On Marketing, Words...

Jon: I noticed a subtle theme in the content of this issue, and it points to the larger theme of interconnectedness in all the work we do: language, and the use and misuse of words. Steve riffs on “green-washing”; Elizabeth describes the use of obscurities in subcultures (“crate digging” and “spinning”); and James Hudson talks about the awful cliché of trying to “wow” the consumer. I remember doing some work with Yum! Brands and barely being able to contain my laughter when executives described how they wanted to “put yum all over people’s faces.” What’s with the need for companies to wrap their creative work in ridiculous colloquialisms?

Richard: I’m not sure it’s all that ridiculous. The specific choice of such words may not always be appropriate, as Don argues is true of the word “confidence” in the label “confidence monitor” (to the extent that the word “confidence” is a colloquialism). But aren’t the chances of making a meaningful connection with a customer or user increased via the use of such words?

Jon: I don’t think so. Perhaps I’m being naive, but I would like to imagine that customers are generally able to see through the slogans and get to the heart of the offering. The superficiality of the connection that might be made through the marketing machine seems easily severed once the product “doesn’t”—doesn’t wow, or provide confidence, or deliver in the way it was promised. I see a lack of connection between the substance of the product, service, or system and the way it is positioned in the marketplace. I’m not talking about “brand promise” or anything vague like that. I mean brass tacks: Does the thing do what it’s supposed to? Does it last? Does it make me feel good, powerful,

clean, happy, or whatever I’m supposed to feel?

Richard: I don’t think we disagree. And as I mentioned in our July+August 2008 cafe discussion, the open interaction that companies increasingly facilitate about their products facilitates exposure of such disconnection. This is an example of the societal benefits that Nicole Ellison and her colleagues argue can emerge from “social network sites,” though that label might not be fully appropriate in the context we’re discussing. Perhaps I too am being naive, particularly given the greed that led to the economic mess the world now finds itself in, but I want to think that such “technology-enabled connections” will have these kinds of positive impact. Bill Tomlinson’s proposals in our November+December 2008 issue, regarding online tools through which communities can engage in conspicuous consumption in ways that achieve environmental benefits, give me added hope.

Jon: So do you think there is an objective sense of goodness that a product—any product—can afford, when we strip away the marketing hype and the slogans and branding and labeling?

Richard: I don’t think we can strip away the slogans and branding and labeling. They are a reality of business, and to a great extent, they are essential. Yes, they can be deceptive; they can be inappropriate; they can be ridiculous. Let’s give customers the tools to ultimately decrease the frequency of that. Let’s help companies by giving them the tools that let them see the need for them to change their ways.

—Richard Anderson and Jon Kolko

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