

Birth and Evolution of the Brand in 7 Steps

By Joan Costa

The commercial brand was born 3500 years ago. First it was a sign, then a meaning, later a TV story in 30 seconds. Today, it is a complex social and transmedial phenomenon.

1

The ancestral human tendency to «mark» their own body to add distinctive signs had an essential identification function: to acknowledge ourselves —and manifest ourselves to others— as part of a group or tribe. Other intentions joined this marking self expression of belonging, being of hierarchical significance in the group, having ornamental, decorative or esthetic character.

This branding practice of the body in primitive towns has no obvious relation whatsoever with the branding of products nowadays. But it does exist something in common with both practices: the identification function of introducing, recognizing and remembering the individual's belonging to a group, or a diverse set of products to an organization: the company that offers them. But this is only an antecedent that has nothing to do with the commercial use of the marking act.

2

With the rise of economical exchanges in the Remotest Times, 3500 years ago, the discovery of more than 6000 brands of Roman potters (*sigilla* or «seals»), confirm that such brands served to identify the potter's workshop from which the amphorae came, or to find the merchant who did the sale of the goods (wines, oils, grains, ointments and other typical products of the Mediterranean).

This potter and merchant's need of identification through marks had a policing function, since it allowed to trace the precedence of the commodity when it was recovered after the pirates had stolen it when it was traveling by sea. Such was the function of the branding at that time.

These brands show an unarguably historical interest, and the intrinsic importance of their formal singularity and the identity information that they offer. That permitted archeologists to study in a pertinent manner the big commercial waves of old ages, and be able to confirm that an amphorae discovered in Ireland, Sweden, Finland or the north of Africa shows the commercial relationship among Italy, Greece, Spain and other countries of the

Mediterranean area.

However —and despite being commercial relationships, that is, economical exchange of goods—, it would be abusive to assign to these brands of over 10 centuries the role of today's brands. The fact is that the marking of the amphorae that carried the commodities by sea did not even make any reference to the products it contained. They did not have, therefore, the sense of «packaging» of the packed current products, in which the brand exerts a commercial role of first order. They did not serve either to fight against the competition or defend oneself from it.

3

In the Middle Age, the performance of the corporative regime implied a wide use of brands. There were individual brands of craftsmen, and also, the collective brand of the corporation, and both were protected against usurpation. But their function was, above all, policing (again) of the corporative system, more than a conquest of clients role. The medieval corporative brand served to ensure that craftsmen would not invade the territory of another corporation. Regarding the brands of the artisans did not have the mission of conquering the clients, but it was the signature of their work and the authenticity of their origin. The corporation took eventually legal measures against the artisan that did not fulfill the quality standards of the time. The brand had here an identification and economic control function by the State.

The corporative or union-trade brands were compulsory and served also to ensure the public certain qualities of manufacture, the used procedures and materials. These brands recall quality seals or labels, or collective brands. But in no way were they instruments of commercial competition, which will only come into play completely in the context of mass production, that is, in the industrial age, between 1750 and 1950.

4

With the French Revolution, the medieval corporatism was over. The revolutionary right proclaimed the liberty of industry and commerce by the law of Le Chapelier, since March of 1791. Thus, all corporations, guilds and fraternities were suppressed. At the same time, all the distinctive signs of those corporations and especially all compulsory brands. Nonetheless, the principle itself of freedom of commerce and industry implied the licit recognition of individual brands of facultative character. But as they were not subjected to any regulation, many abuses, falsifications and usurpation of foreign brands occurred, which were left without sanction. Also, industrials and merchants wanted a most needed legislation.

The revolutionary right could not reestablish privileges in favor of any other profession —the Revolution of 1789 was, above all, the advent of legality—, but it could not dictate general and lasting rules. Finally, a law of the 28th April, 1824 was destined to ensure the protection of the commercial name when it was inserted in the products. This law was applied against falsification of factory brands.

In the time when industrial development, mass production and trade exchanges were more and more intense, the necessity of a law on brands was felt imperatively. That was the law of the 23rd June, 1857 which, for over more than a hundred years, has guided in France the right of the brands. It was the origin of the classic property seal «®».

5

With the development of advertisement, this legal regime became unsatisfying. The consecutive laws of June, 1975 and the rights of July, 1965 and September, 1976 constitute the current brands regime in Europe. The adopted signs to be registered in property can be extremely diverse: patronymic names, geographical names, all the arbitrary or fantasy designations (including slogans, initials or numbers). It is said then that the brand is «nominal» or verbal. But the brand also consists on drawings, figures, combination or disposition of colors, and can even be constituted by the shape of the products or the packaging. It is said then that the brand is «figurative» or visual.

The first industrial revolution —of the steam machine from Watt in 1769— had extended since 1780 in England until 1860 in Western Europe. Across the XVIII and XIX centuries a new technique was developed and spread: electricity, which would give place to the Second Industrial Revolution. But years before, in 1630, advertisement had already appeared in Paris, and at the beginning of the XVIII century would do it in The United States, England and Germany. In the mid of the XIX century, the modern brand is born in the sense of the guarantee and responsibility seal of the manufacturer looking for trust from the consumers.

At this time is when the brand asserts its commercial value, supported by advertisement, and assumes its distinctive role —that is, competitive—, which the brand did not have before. In 1950, television was expanding: 11% of the households in the USA already had a TV. The media explosion and telecommunications contributed notably to the distribution and mass broadcasting of the brands.

6

In the same period, 1948, the decline of industrialization and the beginning of a new techno scientific era would have been forged. It was the year when two books that would change the world: *Cybernetics*, by Norbert Wiener y *A Mathematical Theory of Communication*, by Claude Shannon were published. And that was the same year in which IBM would launch the first *data processing machines* to the market. These three simultaneous epics were the trigger that transformed radically the relations among people and with information. The big change of paradigm was based on the intertwined concepts among Cybernetics —transformed later into Systemic—, Communication and Information (H in bits).

The brands would find in the line of successive technological advance an unusual world for their diffusion and, above all, a transcendental change in the relationship with companies, products, services and society. Internet (the net of nets), the webs 2.0: these are the new instruments for the strategies of brand communication. On the *Website* brand«experiences» are produced as navigation entails a dialog, an interaction in which the individual carries the

initiative on the search for something they are interested in. The contingent, random character of the individual contact with the advert in the traditional media changes its root: the passive individual recipient becomes an actor in the free and open to all possibilities cyberspace, as much for the information and communication as for the consumption.

Branding practice, since the creation of *naming* to the design of brands, is spectacularly enhanced, not only because of the most visible, which is the use of Internet and the *World Wide Web*, but also for another combined strategies —those are, creative ones— and by other devices and gadgets, such as *smartphones*, tablets, browsers, videogames, etc., which along with television and the computer, are the trans media support of *Brand storytelling*.

7

Lately, neuroscience progresses open new knowledge in the functioning of perception, the creation of meaning or the interpretation of sensitive stimuli that —regardless of trivialities like neuro economy and neuro marketing—, what they do is to confirm the validity of the psychology of perception laws and semiotics, as well as the ones taught in neuro linguistics.

But there is also another aspect in the evolution of the brands. This is: the physical aspect, the shape aspect, both visually and audible, which gives them reality. If the most ancient known graphic brands —like the ones of Latin potters and Egyptian stonemasons— are graphic synthesis of geometric character based on the elemental forms, the historical journey of the branding culture has undergone the complete evolution of arts, styles, esthetics, ism and popular art, passing through Op-Art, illusions and optical phenomena.

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