



## Demystifying expert branding

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### Review of

Lindstrom, M. (2011) *Brandwashed: Tricks companies use to manipulate our minds and persuade us to buy*. New York: Crown Business. (PB, pp. 292, US\$13.81, ISBN 9780307956323)

### Introduction: The broad strokes

Much like the title states, *Brandwashed* is structured as an exposé of methods companies and marketers use in influencing and/or manipulating consumer behaviour. Its author lists a number of tricks, untruths and hidden messages in marketing strategies and also touches on the various triggers for emotional responses aimed at boosting and furthering sales by attempting to manufacture a bond between the garden variety buyer and the brand. The book's unrelenting focus is on presenting underhanded practices companies use to affect and shape decision making. To that end the author uses several stories from his own career and personal experience.

Lindstrom is a professional marketer who has worked extensively behind the scenes of the branding wars for the last twenty years. His career has mainly been spent advising multinational companies as well as lecturing professionally on the subject of marketing (Lindstrom, 2011: 1). Lindstrom's previous book *Buyology* reached the best seller list in the U.S. and worldwide and was voted 'Pick of the year' by USA Today (Lindstrom, 2011: 292). He was named one of the world's most influential People in 2009 by Time magazine for his work on neuroscience and branding (*ibid.*). *Brandwashed* is his attempt at a relatable look into the

world of marketing and consumerism. In Lindstrom's own words, his inspiration for the book is to help the consumer to resist advertising and make smarter and more informed decisions (*ibid.*).

The book is divided into nine chapters, each with its own theme and conclusion in regards to the subject matter. Each chapter provides an overview of one specific way in which marketing firms utilise sensitive vulnerabilities with major trigger points such as fear, sex, celebrities, nostalgia, body image and peer pressure as well as employing data mining and word of mouth to exert even bigger pressure. As the book unfolds, the storyline describes how consumers become *brandwashed* (a little pun on brainwashed) as early as before they are born (Lindstrom, 2011: 8) and reveals countless tricks marketing companies use by triggering our fears and insecurities. Each chapter makes an argument for a specific subject and is supported by a multitude of stories and examples, which stress the point through constant repetition with the aim to 'blow the reader's mind' (Lindstrom, 2011: xi). A nice touch on Mr Lindstrom's part as most of them have ample entertainment value that more often than not divert focus from the science and are more likely to establish an emotional engagement from the reader by promoting feelings of either happiness or shock, as well as repeatedly hammering in the subject matter.

Although fairly easy to read and at times highly entertaining with many 'laugh out loud' examples, the book offers very little new insight and is mostly a collection of marketing extremes. The material is also likely to cater to a particular kind of reader, one that perhaps distrusts the inner workings of marketing strategies and is looking for validation of foul play. Lindstrom provides plenty of instances of sneaky corporate culture hell bent on hooking consumers on their products and boosting spending habits. However, I found that the real value of the book to be in reviewing and comparing these stories to personal experience and perhaps having the presence of mind not to apply them to every situation. As a point of interest, the author's constant reference to his own background and insights into the marketing industry seems to suggest that the content validates itself in light of his credentials. Given that the author has spent the majority of his life sussing out what makes consumers tick and how to exploit it, a critical reader might wonder why we should view the revelations in this book as anything more than another marketing antic; tapping into our insecurities in order to sell more products – this time books!

The book starts off with forewords by Morgan Spurlock, known for the movies *Super Size Me* and *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* setting a firm tone on how consumers are susceptible to manipulative manoeuvres. This line of thought continues throughout with examples and stories as the author moves from one

chapter to the next, constructing an image of the big bad corporate world. The book is meant to pick up from where *The Hidden Persuaders*, written in 1957 by the journalist Vance Packard, left off (Lindstrom, 2011: 7). Building on Packard's work, the subject matter is supposed to highlight more recently developed fields such as neuroscience, cognitive psychology and current research on consumer behaviour although I'm afraid it kind of missed the mark as the actual scientific results seem slightly fabricated with very little to back up the supposed conclusion.

### **Overview: Making the most of extremes**

While I do find some value and entertainment in browsing through extreme examples (when read with a critical eye), the chapters are structured so that each extreme example is more or less pounded in as gospel and there is little or no room for interpretation. Here Lindstrom employs a formula by starting off with a personal admission on behalf of the author, which is both leading and conclusive, seemingly to establish common ground with the reader before putting forth a main example which then corroborates the author's personal message with a corresponding case. For instance, at the very beginning the author declares a brand detox for six months, giving the reader a sense of the author's personal achievement, or as the case may be, his ultimate failure in the war on *brandwashing*. The main argument being that it is almost impossible to escape brands in today's society. It is evident that the author is prone to interpret extreme cases in favour of the tone he sets in an attempt to create shock and awe, often completely bypassing any other explanation or mention of actual scientific validity of quoted studies. On the whole the book's general directive seems primarily to prove one point or another with possibly plausible, but ultimately rather thin, arguments. For instance to validate his findings, Lindstrom often refers to fMRI, which is a technology that measure brain activity. The subtext being that with a herd of neurologists, market researchers and computer experts it is possible to read your mind and sway your will. There are few factual references and the idea seems a little simplistic and overstated. In addition, the constant repetition of the firm's name throughout the book feels more than a little like product placement, which is one of the examples mentioned as hidden marketing ploy commonly used in big buck media productions.

It's clear the book's theme falls squarely into the categories the author claims to caution and inform on as he plays heavily on, for example, fear and paranoia, starting with our protective instinct towards family. One case in particular really touches a nerve when read at face value. The case in question describes how a Philippine candy brand distributed free coffee flavoured candy in maternity

wards to pregnant mothers, in an effort to develop dependence on the Kopiko coffee brand in their unborn babies. The same goes for statements that at times seem exaggerated with the sole purpose of proving a point and shocking the reader. One such statement is: *'What is the first word recognized by most kids all over the world? No, it's not "Mom" or "Dad." It's "McDonald's" (or "Ronald")'* (Lindstrom, 2011: 17). However, Lindstrom is quick to downplay the statement by saying that what babies actually do is recognize the McDonalds logo.

From a purely marketing point of view, it's actually quite clever to repeatedly establish mothers and infants as targets of unethical ploys this early on in the book. It evokes a protective side common to most people and the reader is more likely to suffer through other incredulous parts, just in case you miss something vital to the wellbeing of our more vulnerable members of society. Either ironically or deliberately, this scare tactic would be the very thing we have to be conscious of when dealing with branding experts. Nevertheless the overall effect of reading about excessive tactics is a refreshing look at one's buying habits and perhaps a healthy revision into how we see ourselves within consumer culture, either as puppets of market laws and trends or decision makers driven by our own needs and standards.

### **Outline of chapters: Brand washing from the womb to eternal youth**

The book starts off with the ground-breaking argument that consumers are targeted as early as in the womb (Lindstrom, 2011: 10). On reflection I found it's not a huge stretch to imagine that in theory this is actually a possibility, however remote. After all, expectant parents are told to play music and talk to the little bundles of joy in the womb in order to establish a bond and a rhythm the child is likely to recognize and find both familiar and soothing. It's unlikely though, that the lulling sounds of Michael Bublé emanating from supermarket speakers is going to have a lasting impression on the little would be consumer, perhaps by spurring the adult versions into a buying frenzy of pregnancy cravings every time they hear 'Haven't Met You Yet' as Lindstrom seems to be suggesting.

Lindstrom goes on by explaining how marketers play on emotions like fear, paranoia (germs, disease, and future self) and other insecurities with the sole purpose of scaring consumers into buying their products. This little titbit is especially aimed at women as, according to studies, women are more prone to fear and guilt than men (Lindstrom, 2011: 39). Backing up this argument, he gives examples of how companies have used global health scares to boost hand sanitizer sales, preying on public panic. Continuing along these lines, Lindstrom explores brand addiction, zeroing in on elements such as social media, foods and

even how lip balm is made addictive and also the alarmingly young age kids are targeted with free online games where shopping is actually made a goal, thus conditioning them even further (*ibid.* 78). All of which are illustrated with funny stories and examples of how companies trigger these cravings with unconscious signals.

Moving on from mothers to men, chapter four is dedicated to the fact that sex sells. I am fairly certain it is not a huge surprise these days. Again the author refers to an fMRI study (Lindstrom, 2011: 89-90) that allegedly supports the most revealing point in the book: men actually notice and are attracted to physically fit men in underwear advertisements. Not a terribly surprising or shocking finding.

Half way through the book, I found an interesting chapter on the topic of peer pressure (Lindstrom, 2011: 104). Here the author points out what can only be described as herd mentality. We all like to think of ourselves as individuals but he makes the argument that, as a group, we tend to follow those who are more self-assured (Lindstrom, 2011: 107). He also implies that we want others to choose for us and we give up this choice instinctively for what we perceive as a consistent dynamic within a larger group we identify with on daily basis. Later in the book the author calls this effect: 'turning our brains off' (*ibid.* 177), meaning we actually prefer someone else to make choices for us. Be it a book, top news item or what face cream to buy.

Wrapping up, the author takes the reader through wonders of nostalgia and days gone by, fame and celebrity product endorsement, the power of spiritual enlightenment and how consumers buy into hopes in jars (Lindstrom, 2011: 181). He manages to illustrate in a very entertaining way how these are potent emotional triggers and effective ways in which companies go about *brandwashing* consumers. And last, but not least, Lindstrom hammers home the ever present big brother inference by enumerating the startling lengths companies go to in data mining. Even more disturbingly, just how much information we as consumers share with the world every time we use our credit card, loyalty cards, go online, update our status on Facebook or tweet. The list goes on and on. Now we are already aware of the fact that our digital footprint is likely to remain for the rest of our lives as Lindstrom very severely highlights (Lindstrom; 2011: 235). He suggests the consumer might resist by deactivating Facebook, cancelling credit cards etc., but makes the bold statement that 'We're far too *brandwashed* to do anything as drastic as that' (Lindstrom, 2011: 236). Here Lindstrom's point of view is more towards the invasion of privacy rather than information gathering as the price for consumer experience. Not taking into account that possibly it's a

voluntary invitation by the consumer, a little tit for tat, perhaps some info for the ease of card transactions?

Lindstrom finally wraps up this myriad of marketing exploitations with a social experiment based on a popular movie called *The Joneses*, demonstrating the influence of word of mouth and trendsetters, in which a family is hired to convince neighbours to buy certain brands, revealing the most powerful hidden persuader of all that is: 'your very own friends and neighbours' (Lindstrom, 2011: 239). Again he defers to fMRI studies to confirm that the greatest persuader is the influence consumers have on each other.

It came as a bit of a surprise that after building up the manipulative and decisive power of companies in the first nine chapters, Lindstrom seems to use the final pages of the book to soothe the readers' minds and insecurities. There is a complete turnaround and he wants the reader to know that it isn't all that bad and in the end it's us, the consumers, that own the brand and companies need to be aware of that fact (Lindstrom, 2011: 252). His final morsel of wisdom is that companies and marketing departments don't really hold the power as it's actually the people who are the driving force and deciding factor. He suggests brands of the future simply be transparent and live up to their promises. Stating that: 'Trust me any brand that doesn't, will be instantly and painfully exposed and reviled. That in the end is what this book is about' (Lindstrom; 2011: 252). The whole conclusion feels like an afterthought inserted late in the writing process, perhaps when reviewing more current research, and is not at all in keeping with the overall theme of the book.

### **Conclusion: What it boils down to**

I have to say, I don't feel this book offers anything ground-breaking and really mostly relies on the notion of digging up the most outrageous marketing strategies to keep the reader interested. Despite the fact that the author draws attention to some aspects of marketing mania that are both interesting and worthwhile, the presentation tends to be repetitive and often overstated. The author seems most interested in taking the reader on a journey of his career. Sort of an unofficial biography told in an entertaining way. It's either deliberate or indicative of the author's writing style that he employs every trick the book itself cautions against and throughout he hits all the right trigger points. I think it's safe to say that consumers are indeed influenced by brands and marketing and buying decisions are not always conscious. This however does not entail a limitless power over free will.

I suppose that in essence my main problems with this book were: the assumption throughout the chapters of the absolute power of brands; the traditional sender receiver perspective; and how the topic was represented making it fairly easy for the reader to become a little suspicious of the book's overall intentions. I mostly feel it's a bit out-dated given all that has been written about consumers, marketing and brands. Such as Holt's (2002) argument, that brands are not capable of hiding their commercial motives as each generation of new consumers learns from experience. It's not until the book's conclusion that the consumers suddenly become empowered. Personally I would have found the subject matter more engaging if the book had focused on the latest developments in brand awareness, rather than different ways that companies and advertisers are possibly manipulating and brandwashing the consumer. Generally, the read left me with the feeling of a piece of work carefully constructed to provoke, rather than inform and perhaps to create enough of a buzz to land it on one bestseller list or another. I'm sure with the right timing and marketing it's a possibility.

Nonetheless I'll happily admit the book does provoke some thought into how to escape brands and perhaps to carve out a little personal space devoid of brand awareness. So all things considered it actually delivers on its main goal set forth in the first pages (Lindstrom, 2011: 255) of jolting the reader into making more informed and smarter shopping decisions. And perhaps the book's general cringe factor will shame us into better understanding buying habits as well as providing a few involuntary 'AHA' moments along the way.

## references

Holt, D. B. (2002). Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(1): 70-90.

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