

# Can you see the light? Is branding a religion?

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When I speak with people about brands and branding, I always bring up the point that a brand is not what you say it is, it's what 'they' say it is. This prompts questions and controversy but brings me to the point that a brand is not a fancy corporate identity, it's not a snazzy logo... a brand is a collection of stories, emotions and associations. The way that you and I perceive the Apple brand, for example, is completely different.



Martin Lindstrom

With this interest in brand perception in mind, I attended last week's Buy-ology Symposium in Johannesburg by Martin Lindstrom. Among other things, Lindstrom studies how emotions and neurological responses affect the way we adopt brands.

## Correlation between religion and brands

One of the more interesting - and for me, one of the most practical - sessions of the day looked at the correlation between religion and brands and how as marketers we can learn from the foundations of most religious beliefs.

As a base, I've used the 10 religious foundations that Lindstrom identified and the way he linked them to brand building. I've then tried to interpret each to offer some practical tips to marketers. At no stage do I mean to appear glib about religion; I merely identify with the correlations Lindstrom highlighted and feel his theory could be used as a proactive starting point.

There are many religious beliefs and, despite historical conflicts, each has stood the test of time. They have their own stories, icons, rituals and vision. Similarly, the most iconic brands in history have been around for years: they have history, evoke feelings and are recognised by their specific colours, symbols and imagery.

As marketers it's about adding value to our brand - by creating a story and a context, we build hype, increase the sense of worth, add reasons to believe and ultimately add emotional and financial value.

Here are the first five pillars of religious beliefs that could be applied to brand building:

### 1. A sense of belonging

Possibly the most obvious foundation, everyone wants to belong to something. It's that knowing smile that's shared between fellow Apple users in a coffee shop or the approving nod to the fellow GTi driver in the traffic jam or the Asics wearer on the next treadmill. There is an internal and external sense of pride; for some, a major sports event can be compared to religious pilgrimage.

Understand that your brand has the ability to take advantage of this, encourage it and harness the collective potential this 'team devotion' offers to drive your brand message further. I chat about this often with regards to social media and the creation and management of online communities.

### 2. Clear vision

Lindstrom mentioned that you should be able to remove your brand or company name from your vision statement and still have it stand as a unique vision. So no generic, boring "X aims to be the best supplier of X for the X market." Rather, make sure your vision is an attribute that has benefit and offers a higher purpose.

Think big - for example, Bang & Olufsen's mission statement is "Courage to constantly question the ordinary in search of surprising, long-lasting experiences." Or IBM "Solutions for a Small Planet." Your company should be striving to be the best in your field so perhaps attach yourself to a higher goal or social issue.

### 3. Power from enemies

It goes without saying that religious conflicts have existed since time began. But yes, competition is good and having an identifiable enemy gives us the chance not only to articulate and showcase our faith but also to unite ourselves with fellow believers... us vs them mentality. PC vs Apple, Coca-Cola vs Pepsi, BMW vs Mercedes Benz.

These conflicts attract fans, incite controversy, create loyalty and get people thinking and ultimately buying. An enemy may not always be a competitor product but could also be a potentially threatening social issue or competitor character or gimmick.

Identify your brand's enemies. Think outside the box - are there potential social or environmental threats, for example? By aligning yourself to (or giving the illusion thereof) with a competitor brand, or with a higher social issue, it can grow the category, thereby making the brand stronger.

### 4. Sensory appeal

On a personal level, smell is probably the most powerful sense. Think about how a single smell can instantly take one back to a specific memory and a feeling. Most religious buildings or meeting places have a definite smell, sound, light... based on this, without using your sense of sight, you can usually tell if you're in a mosque, church or temple.

So, too, brands evoke specific feelings and associations based on how they look, smell, sound or feel. The design of a MacBook, the shape of the Toblerone chocolate, the sound of a Ferrari, the smell of Johnson & Johnson's baby powder.

Critique your brand from a sensory point of view and build on the strongest elements. In some cases you may need to add a sensory element... Lindstrom suggests that, at the moment, specific bespoke sounds are incredibly successful in underpinning brand recognition. This got me thinking, as it may be the reason BMW added the subtle but distinct three sounds at the end of each commercial as its slogan appears.

### 5. Storytelling

Everyone loves a good story, and stories seem to assist with learning and remembering. All religions have specific stories that are linked to rituals and icons to underpin beliefs and association.

Create stories for your brand, base them on history and, in some cases, link them to characters/icons to represent and add visual appeal to these stories.

The initial advice is to start to look at your brand in a different way and picture it in a highly competitive 'noisy' environment. In the next article, I'll take a look at the remaining five points.

For more on Martin Lindstrom and his latest book *Buy-ology* and its Symposium tour of Africa organised by Global Leaders, go to [www.martinlindstrom.com](http://www.martinlindstrom.com) or [www.globalleadersevents.com/lindstromza](http://www.globalleadersevents.com/lindstromza). Bizcommunity.com is a media partner.

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