

# How can we make people live brands rather than consume them?

## A proposal from the Biology of Cognition\*, to reflect on the definition, understanding, communication and branding.

The Biology of Cognition emphasizes, as its name says, the importance of the biology of the one that knows ("every knowledge depends on the structure of the one that knows"), making a difference with other theories that place knowledge in the psychic field, spiritual field, or in the people's soul. For Doctor Humberto Maturana\*\* knowledge is a biological process and, therefore, he cannot imagine man as an agent that "discovers" the world, but he constitutes it, that is, people create the world as they interact with it.

### 1-Structural Determinism

The approach of the Biology of Cognition is that as living creatures we are structurally determined biological systems and, as such, we do not admit instructional interactions. In other words, it is not the information of the environment or external objects that define our behaviour, but our biological structure.

Doctor Maturana's idea about structural determinism appears in an experiment done in the forties by North American biologist Roger Sperry: he took out an eye from a salamander and cut the optic nerve and carefully put it back in the eye cavity, but turned in 180 degrees. After the optic nerve was regenerated, doctor Sperry covering the turned eye showed a worm to the salamander, and the tongue of the amphibious came out and effectively caught the pray. He did the test once again but now with the turned eye. The tongue of the salamander pulled with a deflection of exactly 180 degrees.

According to doctor Maturana, this experiment shows that for the animal there is no existence, as there is for the observer, of above or below, behind or in front, but an internal correlation between the place where the retina receives the disturbance and the muscular constructions of the tongue, the mouth, the neck, and last but not least, the salamander's whole body.

## Smell is not a flower's property; it is what happens to one in the interaction with it.

We will look at another example. If we have a television that turns on by pressing a button, it is indifferent for the television if we press the button with a finger, a plate, or a pencil. If any of these actions presses the button, the television switches because its structure is determined to make this action to change from the turned off to the turned on television. This change is determined by the structure of the television. I do not determine the state of the television from myself. The observer may say "I switched the television" but as doctor Maturana clarifies, if the television does not switch, I do not take my finger to the repairing service, I take the television because it is the one that will work or not depending on how it is structured. That is, our interaction with the environment will trigger most

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\* *Biology of Cognition, Humberto Maturana.*

\*\**Humberto Maturana: Chilean biologist, PhD Harvard, National Science Award, Nobel Prize nominee with scientist Jerome Lettvin for medicine and physiology.*

changes in our organism, but the latter will be the one to determine them, not the object. The smell is not the flower's property, but the smell is what happens to one in the interaction with it. "How this happens I do not know, the only thing I know is the effect that it causes on me".

## 2-Creating the Object

According to doctor Maturana, objects are not defined independently from people. They do not have properties and effects by themselves, so the different actions that we carry out will give form to the object that we interact with. For example: the act of writing gives the pencil its meaning. For a person that does not know how to write, will a pencil be a pencil? The wall gets its purpose from the "do not go through". If I can go through the wall it is not a wall for me. The wall will then be the explanation that we give ourselves to justify the experience of not going through.

Let us see a brand case: Mattel is a brand of toys for boys and girls. Thanks to an ethnographic study it was discovered that kids do not play with toys, they rather collect them. One of the reasons for this behaviour is that parents come home every day with a toy as present because they feel terribly guilty for abandoning their children due to professional obligations. This parental behaviour produced, on the one hand, kids that accumulate excess toys, and on the other, toys being considered as just another present. Playing was precisely the actions kids were not doing with toys. The parental behaviour turned toys into presents, in other words, into instruments to build relations with their children and lighten the feeling of guilt.

Just as mentioned above, an action is what gives form to the object. That is, play is how we define the object toy. The definition is not implicit in the object itself and it is not independent from people.

## 3-How does this new theory help to create and understand brands?

Let us take this statement as an example: "A product is an objective thing; a Brand is one person's individual and subjective summary of all the satisfactions that a product supplies. No two people will see it exactly the same way\*.

Notice there is a difference between product and brand. The first statement meets the traditional belief that objects are "outside", they are external to people and when they are captured and benefit individuals in a subjective way, they transform into a brand. Thus, the brand is a result of an accumulation of satisfactions given by the products, an objective entity.

**The world does not exist as a perfect entity, immutable and independent from the observer (person), but quite the opposite.**

Why does this statement seem wrong to me? Let us remember that human beings do not capture external objects. The world does not exist as a perfect entity that is immutable and independent from the observer (person), but quite the opposite; the observer through his actions builds and defines the world and its objects. Because of that, there cannot be an object "outside", a product in this case, and another that is defined by the subjectivity of the first one. If the first one does not exist, neither does the second.

The difference between product and brand is in the choosing levels (actions); that is, in some circumstances choosing a detergent may not be important at all, but in others, for example when I have to take out a very persistent stain, it

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\* *Brand new brand thinking, Merry Baskin and Mark Earls, eds.*

will make a difference. On the other hand, brands are not established individually, but through the recurrent behaviour of a group. Therefore, we are not going to find the understanding of the brand in the summation of satisfaction a person gives us, but in the repetitive behaviour of a group. That is, brands emerge in the coexistence.

#### 4- What is a brand then?

Persicco is the name of a place in Buenos Aires, where I am writing right now. All the behaviours related to this place, if they are recurrent, will define Persicco as a brand for me; that is, coming, sitting down, asking for and drinking a cup of coffee with a sweet bread, writing, looking at people, being, observing, listening, getting away from the heat, coming back, bringing friends. When I mention Persicco I am referring to endless related actions and experiences (distinction operation). Accordingly, we could say that Brand is a recursive conduct label. And yes, I may have the same behaviours in other similar places, Freddo, Volta, Delicity, and they will all be brands for me.

Knowing the difference between one brand and another, what will make me prefer one and not the other? It will all depend on how I want to use the brand: I am going to meet a friend, I want to work, I want to feel more at home, I want to read and have a coffee. The action that I carry out will determine, at that moment, my preference for one among all brands. Will motivations move me to choose one among others? No, because it is emotions and not motives that move us to act or not to act. We act according to what makes us feel best in the world.

How can we define a brand then? If it originates from the relationship of the product with people, the brand will be the meaning, the design of all the behaviours that we observe in the product-people relationship. Discovering all these behaviours in a social group, that is, that more people like me have the same behavioural label, will establish Persicco as a brand in the city of Buenos Aires.

#### 5-Adoption of brands by people

As social beings that we are, we want to belong to groups and be accepted. (We will distinguish a social group by the number of recurrent actions taken by a group of people). Therefore, the adoption of a brand will depend on how this will help people belong to different social groups, and not because of the benefits of the product.

That is, brands are subordinated to the satisfaction of social relationships.

“Things” make sense when they are significant in our area of social existence, not by their qualities. That is, brands are subordinated to the satisfaction of social relationships; they must be means to generate social worlds or conversation creators. However, brands fail to communicate with people, since the conversations are not aimed at people but at consumers. “Low prices”, for example, do not generate links or social membership.

#### 6-Are people loyal to brands? / Do they have to? Are brands loyal to people?

We can define brand, in this field, as the historical continuity of the brand-person relationship in a particular place. This implies that the relationship is maintained for a long time. One wonders how it is maintained.

How should brand communications be to generate loyalty? We should understand first that the communication is behaviour\* and that the phenomenon of communication does not depend on what is delivered, but rather on what happens to the person receiving it, which is very different from “conveying information” or “communicating benefits”. Under this premise, communications between brands and people will be the mutual triggering of behaviours between

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both, where both brand and people will be changing.

Therefore, brand communications should follow this flow of changes to be able to maintain the relationship, that is, transforming themselves (at this moment brands seem deaf to peoples' communication!).

The direction the brand will take will depend on its meeting with people. However we will have to discover what has to be preserved in brands so that they can create changes. The autonomy of mobility will only be possible to the extent that the brand has "something" to support it: an identity. The plasticity of the brand is given by all the possibilities of behaviors it allows people to have.

## 7-Market research

Market research, from the most traditional to the most sophisticated, is focused on consumers' search for answers, aspirations, and projections. The mistake is that to understand and to get to know the meaning of a brand, this should be observed from its interaction in social groups, not according to how it is received by the "consumers". I have already mentioned that brands do not have benefits, values, or uses in themselves: these are given by the relationship of the experiences of each person with the "thing" and that is where the observation must focus: in discovering the experiences of people with the brand. These experiences are not found in the answers to in-depth interviews, in focus groups, nor in the mind or subconscious of the "consumers", but rather in observing the actions of people. As Doctor Francisco Varela\* says "give the individual its voice, do not demand answers".

Another big mistake in market research is to classify people by their economic standing. -ABC1, C2, C3, D-\*\* assuming that the economic "variable" is the one that defines and determines their preferences towards the brands. The experiences are what differentiate people, not their economic standing. There are many very different variables that influence preferring one brand over another. More aberrant, however, is treating people as consumers or shoppers, as though they made only two actions in relation to brands: buy them or consume them.

I think research should be more focused on generating new ideas, and not intended to "settle" and quantify reality and predict the future.

## 8-That is,

Brands are not what they are because of their properties, benefits, or promises, but for the actions that people take when interacting with them.

Before, the brand was relevant, later came the "consumer". Today, the invitation is to focus on a meeting between the two.

Therefore, loyalty towards brands will be given to the extent that this allows the social participation of people in a social world. It is important to consider that people use brands to interact in the world; hence the importance of knowing and understanding the context where they are inserted. The failure of the globalization of communications or the idea of brand lies exactly in believing that the brand is independent of the cultural context that supports it, and the people who interact with it.

How the brand will be incorporated into each culture will depend on the analysis of the relationship between the

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\*Paul Watzlawick, *Communication Theory*. "It's impossible not to communicate; all the behaviours are a way of communicating.

\*Francisco Varela, Chilean biologist. PhD Harvard, author with doctor Maturana of *The Tree of Knowledge and Of Machines and Living Things*. *Atupoiesis: the organization of the living*.

\*\* Chilean socioeconomic segment

brand and the system where it will be incorporated, and how people define the brand in that context, because what matters is not the contents of the brand, but its social and cultural use.

Brands should invite to do more than inform of benefits, so that people live the brands more than consume them. Work on the networks made by people and brands will help maintain the people-brand relationship in time.

Before, the brand was relevant, later came the "consumer", today the invitation is to focus on a meeting between the two.

### **Buenos Aires, Spring 2009**

*"Dear Marcela,*

*our article is interesting and well conceived. What I would like to correct is calling the Biology of Knowledge a theory, or rather "the operation of knowledge as a biological event". The biology of knowledge is not a theory; it is a demonstration of a biological event that we evoke when we speak of knowledge. The biology of knowledge is the explanation of the phenomenon of knowledge as a biological event, or rather, the demonstration of the biological event that we evoke when we speak of knowledge or knowing".*

*Best regards. Humberto Maturana R.*

*November 20th, 2009*