

## Research Essay, Marketing Focus

### *Defining Brands from a Metaphysical Perspective*

By Benjamin Marshalkowski

In today's world, brands are all around us. We are advertised to by different brands over 5,000 times a day. People are willing to pay five dollars for a cup of Starbucks coffee they could make at home for one-tenth the price. Apple Computer users vehemently defend the company's products and their benefits over Microsoft. Saturn drivers will drive to an automobile factory as a vacation destination. Brands have pervaded our culture, giving us the Cola Wars, the idiom "Where's the beef?" and Nike's ubiquitous "Just do it."

But what is a brand? When we try to define this enigmatic corporate identifier, we run into trouble. What is it that makes a brand a brand? Is it the logo? Surely Starbucks' unique emblem isn't bringing droves of people in. Is it the corporation? Corporations carry with them a negative connotation. Such a connotation wouldn't be likely to inspire the cult-like unity that Apple users share. It could be the spirit the product or service carries, but again we are left trying to describe an elusive, ethereal thing. The dictionary defines a brand as a "kind, grade, or make, as indicated by a stamp, trademark, or the like." This oversimplifies the brand to a simply material identifier like the logo. But simplicity has its uses; it is, at least, a good starting point.

Whether one takes a realist or anti-realist approach to philosophy, in everyday life we have to work with the material things we interact with. So we can define the parts of a brand that are tangible: the logo, the packaging, the advertising, the price, and, of course, the product itself. Then there are the parts of the brand that are intangible: the corporation, the brand experience, the company's philosophy, and, if the brand sells a service, then that service is probably intangible as well. So at least for the time being, we can look at a brand as the sum of these elements resulting in a corporate identity.

The problem is that these parts exist both as tangible elements and intangible experiences. So what is a brand, from a metaphysical perspective? Do brands exist in the real world, and if so, where are they? If they do not exist, then how do they affect us and our world? In the remainder of this paper, we will examine arguments for the brand as either existing in our world or not, and try to resolve the two into a cogent explanation.

There are plenty of arguments for the existence of brands, many of which were brought up at the beginning of this essay. Most of these arguments can be collectively referred to as "brand loyalty." From a position of brand loyalty, we can certainly argue that brands exist. In June, 1994, "General Motors' folksy little Saturn division invited owners to Spring Hill, TN, to see where their cars were made. 40,000 came — proving that brand equity can be a living, breathing experience." If we look at the existence of brands even from a deflationary

view of truth, where “ $\langle p \rangle$  is true if  $p$ ,” we can easily argue that “the Saturn brand drew in 40,000 loyal customers” is true, because the Saturn brand did indeed draw in 40,000 loyal customers. In fact, it did so again in 1999. With the ability to attract 40,000 people (that’s equal to the entire population of Burlington, Vermont), it is hard to ignore the effect that brands can have. And with such a profound effect, it is almost impossible to imagine a brand as not existing.

Another argument for the existence of brands is our ability to make truth statements about them, and not just truth statements, but truth statements relating directly to the ‘real world.’ For our purposes, the ‘real world’ will refer to the material world we interact with on a day-to-day basis, full of objects and other people, the existence of which realists and anti-realists have argued about indefinitely. We will take the realist’s stance on the world for the sake of this essay, since if we choose to believe that nothing exists beyond ourselves anyway, the argument for the existence of brands becomes moot.

But I digress. Truth statements are a sticky subject in many ways. The value of truth depends on whether you look to coherence or correspondence to relate truth to reality. In addition you may question whether truth can be applied to non-existent things. And all the while the Liar Paradox looms, threatening to tear truth away from our own language structures. However, from a realist’s perspective, truth statements about ‘the real world’ can be judged with a fair amount of confidence. From Nicholas Rescher’s discussion of truth from the perspective of ideal coherence, the theory of completeness tells us that “for any thesis ‘S’ within the domain of discussion at issue, either S itself or its negation ‘not-S’ will cohere with [a perfected database].”

So, if brands exist within an ideal reality, we should be able to make adequate truth statements about them, statements that can be identified as true or not-true. It is easy to make simple truth statements, like “Coca-Cola’s logo is red,” or “Miller Lite’s beer has less calories than Bud Light.” But these statements are self-contained in the realm of brands. It would be similar to making truth statements about fictional characters, like, “Mickey Mouse’s ears are black,” or “Sherlock Holmes’ assistant is Watson.” These statements are true, but only about the characters themselves. What separates brands is that such truth statements can be extended to relate to the real world as well.

For example, one might say, “Herbert Allen is the President of Coca-Cola,” or “Miller has 6000 employees.” These are people existing in the real world, directly affected by the brand. Of course, one can argue that reading Sherlock Holmes can affect a reader, as can watching Mickey Mouse. But these cases really refer to reading a Sherlock Holmes book or watching a Mickey Mouse cartoon. It is not Sherlock Holmes himself that is affecting the world. These fictional characters need a medium, and only through this medium can they affect change on the real world. Brands do not suffer this dependence. When the Saturn brand

drew 40,000 people to the small town of Spring Hill, Tennessee, it was no one medium that brought them there, it was the brand itself that inspired the customer's loyalty. Similarly, when General Motors lays off employees it is a direct affect of the brand itself, not a symbolic manifestation of that brand.

Someone looking for a comfortable resolution to this problem of the existence of brands might look at these arguments and posit that brands do indeed exist, but as abstract objects outside of the tangible world. Investigation into this assertion, however, reveals a problem. By the simplest definition, abstract objects are things that do not exist in space or time, yet they do exist. Numbers are probably the most obvious example: the number five exists, it has always existed. For eternity, the notion that there are five of things has existed, even before we were around to count such a number. Why shouldn't this be a reasonable way to categorize brands?

We have not yet looked at the arguments that brands do not exist, so we cannot speak with any certainty on the spatial existence of brands. However, we can say with much greater certainty that brands exist in time. We can look at the example of Lee Jeans. Prior to 1889, there was no Lee Mercantile Company. Prior to 1849, there was no Henry David Lee to found Lee Mercantile Company. So, the prior to the company's founding in 1889, there was no Lee brand, and given that Henry David Lee wasn't born until 1849, it is safe to argue that the idea of a Lee brand did not exist either. So we can argue that the Lee brand began existing in 1889, and the idea of the Lee brand may have existed a little earlier than that. A new discussion and a new paper could be started on precisely when a brand starts to exist, but in the meantime, what is important is that there was a time that the brand did not exist, and then a time when the brand did exist. In other words, every brand has a starting point in time. With this practical example, we can argue with confidence that brands exist in time. As manmade inventions, each brand has a time of creation. In fact, many brands use this existence in time to establish reputation and experience. So we cannot label brands as abstract objects do not exist in space or time.

While these effects on our world and characteristics in time defend the argument for brands' existence, there is evidence that suggests that brands are more elusive, and less concrete, than we think. By the definition we started our investigation with, brands are a tool for corporate identity. A corporation is defined, however, as "an association of individuals, created by law or under authority of law, having a continuous existence independent of the existences of its members, and powers and liabilities distinct from those of its members." Corporations exist solely as a tool to facilitate the management of a group of people. They were invented in order to simplify government administration of business. In essence, corporations exist only on paper as an agreement between a group of people and their

government that a sort of bond exists between them. This bond acts as its own entity, with its own rights and responsibilities, but it only exists on paper.

In fact, the very purpose of brands is to make these corporations tangible to the everyday public. They put a face and a name to an otherwise elusive and intangible association between a few people. So, how can a part of an entity existing only on paper claim to exist in the ‘real world’? It can be argued that this particular part is meant to be the tangible face of the otherwise ethereal corporation. But, even this tangible face’s existence is conditional. The condition is one of social acceptance.

Brands ultimately rely on social ontology in order to exist. Without our selves and our frameworks, brands would not exist. Just as the Lee brand did not exist until it was created, no brands would exist without people to create and recognize them. This is a stunningly anti-realist stance, echoing Putnam’s views that reference to the real world is a batch of “functional properties of the organism-environment system.” This suggests that brands need both an environment and people to interpret them. If this is the case, and brands cannot exist outside of our framework, then we are ill prepared to be realist about them.

Where does all of this leave us? What we have is abundant evidence for the existence of brands, and a resilient philosophical argument for the non-existence of brands. There needs to be a way to bring these two positions together to find an adequate and coherent definition of brands. We started with the idea of brands as the sum of several tangible and intangible elements resulting in a corporate identity. Beyond this, we have concluded that brands can have a direct effect on ‘the real world’ and are manmade inventions. In addition, they rely on social ontology and provide a tangible image to otherwise intangible corporations.

With this information we can define a brand as “the sum of a group of tangible and intangible elements, created in order to provide a concrete representation of an otherwise abstract corporation, which is recognized and accepted by society.” Now that we have a working definition of a brand, what does it mean in philosophical terms? A brand seems to exist as a set of objects, but does that set exist? Can we refer to that set with any more confidence than we refer to fictional characters? Where, ontologically, does a brand fit?

One answer that seems reasonable is to refer to a brand as an abstract artifact. As our example of Lee Jeans showed us, a brand is created, and has a specific time of creation (whenever that time may be). So, the brand, while elusive in space, exists in time as a manmade invention. We cannot find the whole of a brand in any given space, but we can recognize the elements of that brand. We recognize the Starbucks logo. We know an Apple computer when we see one. We can sense the unity Saturn owners feel on the sole common trait of owning the same brand of car. With this evidence it is impossible to argue against

the existence of a brand unless one argues that it is simply a mass coincidence, which is a very shaky argument at best.

This abstract artifact does rely on social ontology. Without social acceptance, a brand means nothing. If people do not like a brand, its product won't sell and its corporation will fail. On the other hand, if people like a brand, it can propel a corporation farther than its products alone ever could. So while brands rely on our social framework, an apparently anti-realist view, they also reside comfortably within their own definition. The very purpose of the brand is to act as a tangible image for society, so their reliance on society promotes their existence as tangible objects from society's perspective.

Some will argue that this definition tries to have its cake, and eat it too. A definition can't use realist and non-realist arguments to promote an overall realist view. This view, however, is strictly pragmatic in its effort to promote a working definition for the use of brands in everyday life. While philosophers continue to delve into the problem of realism and anti-realism and try to find which view obtains, everyday life will go on. Brands will continue to be advertised to us, brands will continue to have a direct affect on our lives, and we will continue to be able to make truth statements about those brands. With this evidence we can safely argue that, for our own purposes, in our everyday lives, brands do indeed exist.

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