

Title: Obsessive Branding Disorder
Author: Lucas Conley
Publisher: PublicAffairs
Copyright: 2008
Length: 211 pages
Price: \$22.95
Reading time: 5 hours
Reading rating: 9 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)
Overall rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

Written by Lucas Conley, *Obsessive Branding Disorder* is a revealing, often shocking account of how branders are attempting to penetrate the American mind. Throughout the book, the author presents specific company examples, highlighting new branding techniques and methods of persuasion used to chart consumers' inner thoughts and influence their daily lives.

According to Conley, a contributing writer for Fast Company, ESPN magazine, and the Boston Globe, consumers are consistently bombarded with branding messages which have infiltrated many aspects of their lives from education to sex, prescription drugs, hospitals, and cemeteries. Americans, the author states, are exposed to between 3,000 and 5,000 advertisements a day. In 2006, approximately 300 billion dollars was spent by U.S. advertisers trying to reach consumers.

Consisting of 9 chapters, the first part of the book explores the rapid growth of place or destination branding, the declining state of U.S. research and development, and the new era of the "experience economy" which Conley describes as an attempt to reach consumers by branding their experiences, memories, and emotional connections. The author explains that the brain, when stimulated by emotion, will act 3,000 times faster than normal. In other words, emotional manipulation is being used to undermine consumers' critical thinking skills. Consequently, Conley notes, "consumers are willing to pay up to 200% more when basing their decision on emotion rather than reason" (p. 3).

The author attributes the decline of research and development in the United States to the perceived importance of image over services and products. For example, while an average of 150 everyday items satisfy 80 to 85 percent of consumers' needs, over 35,000 new products appear each year. Of these new products, Conley notes, 9 out of 10 will fail and "with such fierce competition for so little space, brands are forced to strategize on how best to bond with consumers" (p. 67). Therefore, instead of developing better products, companies tend to rebrand because it is easier and less expensive.

The next three chapters provide a discussion on various techniques used by branders to bypass consumers' mental filters. Conley provides disturbing examples of ad creep in the form of product placement and invisible branding. Product placement in the media has increased significantly in recent years, constantly bombarding our senses through branded television shows, films and, most recently, novels. Procter & Gamble, for example, forged a partnership with the authors of *Cathy's Book* to incorporate Cover Girl

lipstick and eye shadow into the young adult novel plot. Another form of ad creep is invisible branding. Historically considered the most reliable form of marketing, word-of-mouth advertising has taken on a new meaning as a type of invisible branding. The field has become formalized with “buzz agents” – described by Conley as everyday people who make personal recommendations for products to friends and neighbors without revealing they are working for a company. In turn, buzz agents are compensated for their services in products or cash from the company. Conley investigates invisible branding ploys at companies such as Dr. Pepper, Sony, Volvo and Wal-Mart.

The third section of the book examines new branding research methods and personal branding. While Conley acknowledges that branding has a place in our society, he warns that “saturated in branding, Americans will increasingly see themselves as brands – as goods defined more by their packaging than their contents” (p. 201). The author also points out that a new generation of marketing researchers is exploring high-tech methods in the fields of psychology, artificial intelligence and neuroscience in hopes of gaining the ability to redefine our reality from inside our heads.

Conley states that Americans already suffer from marketing-related diseases (obesity, smoking, and gambling) and warns that any small increase in marketing effectiveness could be detrimental to public health. On an ending note, Conley appeals to consumers to rein in obsessive branding before it becomes commonplace and accepted. The author asserts that it is up to the consumer to decide where the balance is and how much is too much branding.

Reminiscent of *The Hidden Persuaders* by Vance Packard (1957), *Obsessive Branding Disorder* is certainly food for thought in the marketing-infused world of today. The book is informative, interesting, and easy to read.

Carroll Brown is an Assistant Professor of Hospitality and Tourism in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. Her research interests are special interest tourism and community tourism development. For previously reviewed books, visit our Web site at www.wcu.edu/cob/.