

**SMART  
BRANDS**

**DUMB  
BRANDS**

BRAND 

# The 8 things smart brands do that dumb brands don't

**Are you struggling to grow your business? You're not alone.**

In my 30 years in the industry, I've seen hundreds of businesses come and go. Throughout the years I made mental notes of brands that made impressive smart moves and brands that did things that turned out to be incredibly dumb. Hindsight is 20/20 as they say, and it provides a gold mine of experiences we can learn from.

I'm Steve Ballantyne, and I've been involved in marketing everything from start-ups to large corporates. I've been in boardrooms with some of the smartest marketing brains in business. I haven't seen it all, but I've sure seen a lot.



I collected what I have learned about the good and the bad of branding into a list of 8 things that smart brands do that dumb brands don't. You can learn about them here, with real-life examples of both smart brands and dumb brands, so you can apply decades of knowledge to your brand today.

**Not only that, I have an exciting free offer for you.**

I've helped many businesses and I can help you, too, with a **FREE BRAND REVIEW** and a practical plan for growth. Simple. A fresh pair of eyes on your products, services and brand might be all you need to shed some light on what's holding you back.

Book yourself a **FREE BRAND REVIEW** with me using the Calendly link below, and let's look at where you are now and where you want to be – and work out what's stopping you. There's no obligation to follow up with anything else, but if you want to, we can work on creating a brand strategy to get you there.

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Smart  
brands are  
adaptive.  
They're fluid  
not fixed.

# Evolve to survive

We live in a world of constant change. We have all had to learn to adapt to unexpected sweeping changes to the way we work and live.

It is no different for brands.

Today's brands are not set in stone like their predecessors, with aggressive enforcement of 100-page brand manuals. Communicating the same message with rigid consistency across channels is a remnant of old thinking, when standardisation drove progress.

*Now, brands must adapt and evolve in order to thrive. Fluidity is key to survival. Today's customers expect an experience, and brands need to dance with agility across a range of digital and social channels to deliver it.*

If traditional brands are fixed like statues, today's brands must be fluid like shapeshifters. As we have seen in recent times, what statues are perceived to represent can change over time, resulting in their destruction. Shapeshifters, however, adapt their physical shape as needed for the situation - and can even achieve immortality, like Hyacinth shapeshifting into a lily in Greek mythology.

It's important to recognise that I don't mean you should change your brand to please every audience. Consumers today will quickly see through disingenuous token messaging. Your brand must be strongly grounded in your core principles and elements and communicate them authentically.

## **SMART BRAND - City of Melbourne**

The rebranding of the city of Melbourne embraced the concept of adaptiveness beautifully.<sup>1</sup> Designing a brand for an entire city is a challenge – there are a multitude of services, programs and activities that are represented by it, not to mention politics. It must unite the diversity represented in the city.

Melbourne focused on diversity as the core of their branding. The result is that the new brand is adaptable to each sector that uses it. It is flexible and open to creative interpretation, allowing for unlimited growth into the future. It says Melbourne is vibrant, growing, and future focused.



*At the heart of Melbourne’s brand is an iconic ‘M’ icon which is visually expressed in a range of different colours and textures to represent the diversity and energy of Melbourne’s people and experiences.*

## **SMART BRAND – MAD**

The Museum of Arts & Design (MAD) in New York rebranded with a new logo that could appear in different ways, reflecting the diversity, creativity and inventiveness of artists.<sup>2</sup>

The geometric logo represents the design of their building and their location on Columbus Circle, while using varied patterns of objects to transform the logo depending on the occasion and the context in which the logo was being used.

The designers built an entire alphabet with these shapes to echo the brand. The branding indicates reinvention and transformation, hallmarks of art and design.



## DUMB BRAND – Toys R Us

At one time, Toys R Us seemed unstoppable. Every kid in America dreamed of running free in “the biggest toy store there is,” imagination going wild (as my American colleague recalls, now realising why her parents would never take her and her siblings to one). They knew how to draw kids in - their flagship store in Times Square had a life-size Barbie Dream House, a 60-foot Ferris wheel and an animated T-Rex.<sup>3</sup>

They were a huge success, until they failed to adapt to customers’ expectations of easy online sales with convenient and personalised service. The store’s branding was already outdated when they failed to adapt, and they were quickly trampled by the fast services of slick click-and-buy companies ready to snap up their customers. 70 years of operations disappeared.

The company plans to make a comeback in 2022.



### KEY TAKEOUT FROM THIS CHAPTER:

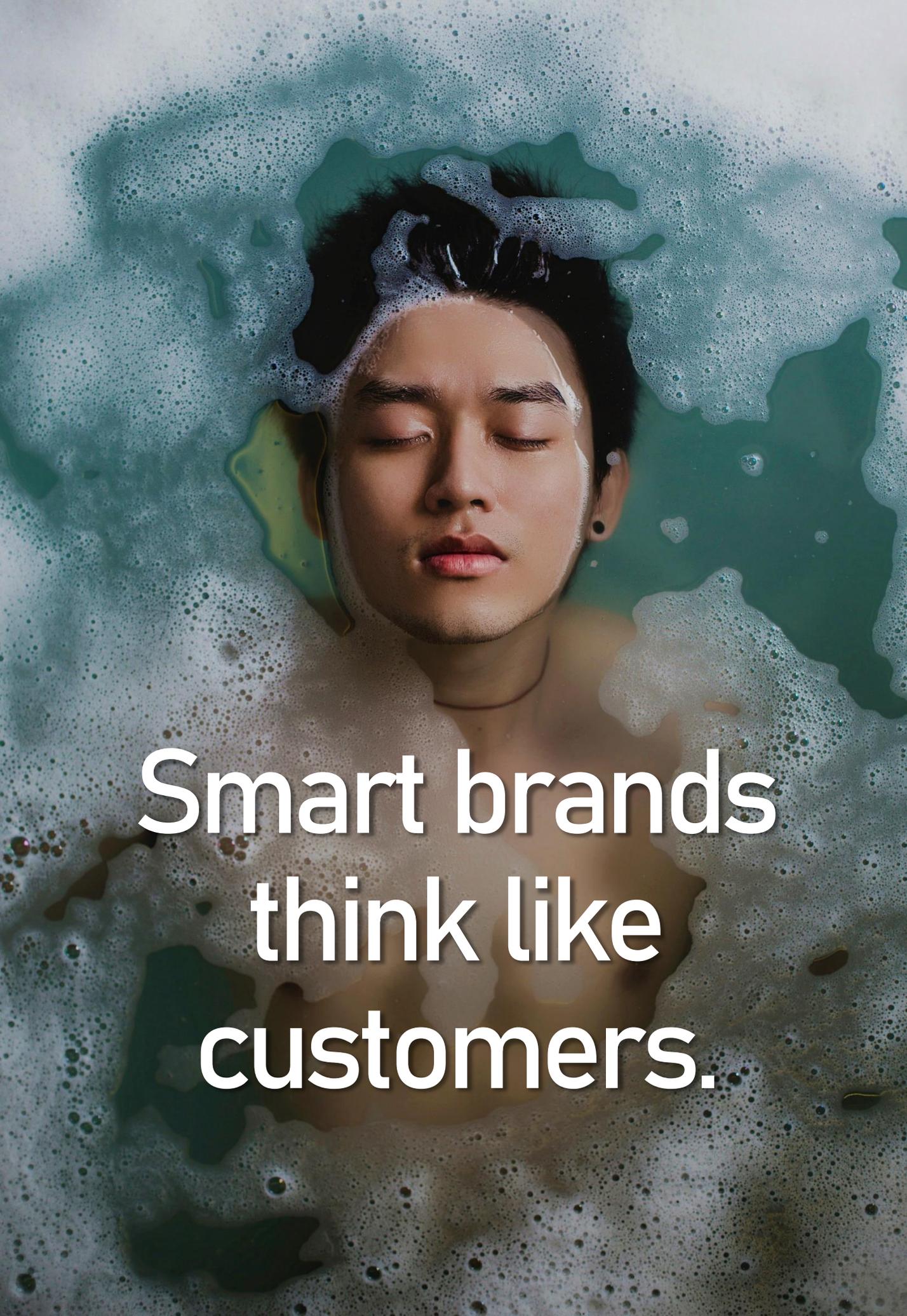
Evolving your brand is critical to survival. To do it right, you must engage your customers. Because today, your brand is what your customers say it is.

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Your brand  
is a story  
unfolding  
across all  
customer  
touchpoints.

Jonah Sachs



Smart brands  
think like  
customers.

## Hero your customers

Many brands take their purpose, values and product and broadcast it to the world, hoping their message lands on the “right” customer. Sound familiar? Focusing on what you can give your customer is thinking from the inside out. Rather, you have to think from the outside in - understand your customers and know what it is they want. Your customer is the hero in your story. It isn't about what you think is important, but what is important to them.

Before you run off and organise surveys and focus groups to understand your customers, think about this: does studying animals in the zoo give you the best insight into their natural behaviour? Hardly. Animals that live in zoos are used to people, are fed regularly and do not behave the same as animals in the wild. So why study people in that way? Enticing someone to take your survey for a prize or participate in a focus group for a few bucks is not the same as seeing how your customers actually behave when shopping around.

Get in your customers' shoes. Visit the places (physical and online) where your customers shop. See what is working and what isn't. Read reviews, snoop around Facebook Groups. Do research where they would do research. *Don't just think like your customers – be them.*

Go beyond the obvious demographics and find the emotions that drive behaviour. What are your customers' problems, what solutions have they already tried? What does your customer need today that you can deliver?

### SMART BRAND - Dove

The Dove Real Beauty campaign is a prime example of heroing your customer. They did the opposite of what other beauty brands do – which is show impossibly perfect women with perfect skin, perfect hair, perfect makeup and focused on who their customers really are.



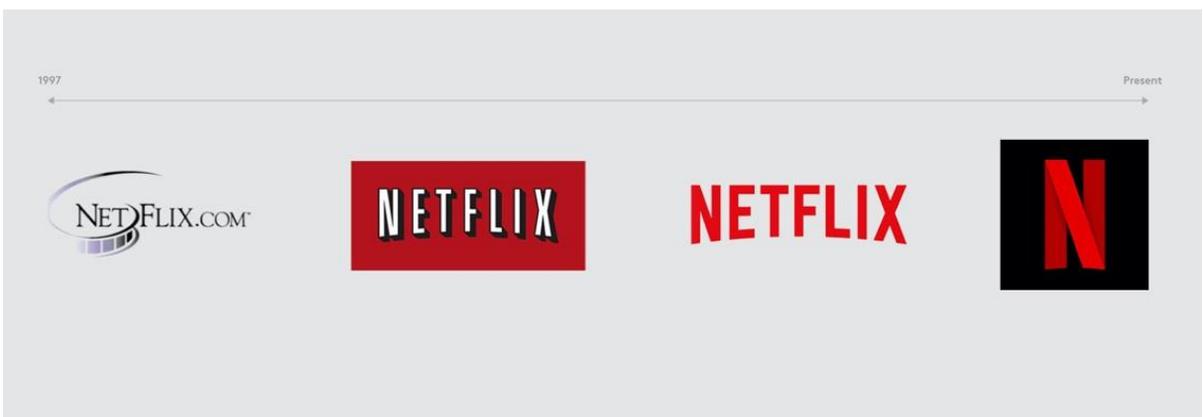
Their customers are real people, with real “imperfections” and that is who they based their messaging on. Women of all ages, sizes, and colour are shown for their uniqueness and empathised with by a brand that proved they recognise them for who they are.

## SMART BRAND – Netflix

Some of you won't remember this, but Netflix started out as a mail-order service. You created a list of movies you wanted to watch, and they mailed a DVD (or a few, depending on your subscription). When you finished watching, you popped the DVD back in the envelope, dropped it in the mail (the removal of late fees was revolutionary!), and Netflix sent the next available movie on your list to you.

Imagine if they had stuck with this plan. It's hard to imagine anyone waiting for a movie to arrive in the mail these days. Wisely, they stayed in tune with what customers wanted. In the 2010s Netflix had to market to an audience that grew up with instant access to information at their fingertips and they responded with on-demand streaming.

Their logos reflect their beginnings as a combination of 'internet' and 'flicks' to their present-day ribbon-inspired N, friendly across platforms.



### BOOK A FREE BRAND REVIEW SESSION

*After reading the book you can apply the principles to your business yourself in your own good time. But if you'd like to start straight away, I'll help you apply the principles most relevant to your specific business in a FREE 30 MINUTE BRAND REVIEW via Zoom. This power-packed session will help to re-boot your brand and create a plan for growth.*

**Here's where you can [book your session](#).**

## DUMB BRAND – Blockbuster

It almost goes without saying that where Netflix shined by heroing their customers, Blockbuster absolutely ignored them. In 2008, the CEO of Blockbuster was quoted as saying that Netflix was not “even on the radar screen in terms of competition.”<sup>1</sup> (A documentary reports that Blockbuster passed on the option to buy Netflix because they thought their market was too niche.<sup>2</sup> Ouch.) The world was evolving, customer demands were changing, but Blockbuster stuck by their traditional brick-and-mortar stores. It didn’t take long before customers got really tired of late fees and hassles. They went from 9,000 stores to zero.<sup>2</sup>



### KEY TAKEOUT FROM THIS CHAPTER:

You are not Luke Skywalker – you’re Yoda. Walk in your customers’ shoes, identify their problem, and guide them to your solution.

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**Smart brands  
focus on being  
different.**

## Disrupt the status quo

So many brands implement the same sort of thinking over and over, from customer service to marketing and everything in between. They look to what other people are doing and replicate it.

A smart brand goes against the grain. They see things differently. They ignore popular opinion and disrupt the status quo. What are you willing to do that your competition isn't? What problem can you uniquely solve for your customers?

Today, competition is global, and it takes hard work to get noticed. A brand's success hinges on having the courage to resist the obvious strategy of doing what everyone else is doing, and instead steer your own course.

Change your focus from being 'best in class' to being 'only in class.'

One of my favourite narrative strategists is Andy Raskin. He talks about 'attacking the old game' and 'naming the new game.' This world is in a state of rapid change, and you can lead your customers to help them win 'the new game.' Take charge. Be a disrupter. Innovate your category – hell, make your own category.

The point is that to stand out, you must be different. Not better – different.

*My book Radically Different shares my strategy for differentiating your brand. It is free to download at [www.brandiq.co.nz](http://www.brandiq.co.nz).*

### **SMART BRAND - Liquid Death**

*"Don't be scared. It's just water."*

Bottled water is pretty boring, right? Well, Liquid Death put their water in a can and gave it a curious name. Their "evil mission" is "to make people laugh and get more of them to drink more water more often, all while helping to kill plastic pollution."

They promise "Death to Plastic," because aluminum is infinitely recyclable, and plastic is a permanent problem.



They donate a portion of proceeds to non-profits fighting plastic pollution and giving people access to clean drinking water. Their “tallboy” cans are packaged in 12-packs, like a case of beer, with artwork on the bottom of the box. Their shopping cart icon is a tiny coffin. Their “punks and poets” image is the opposite of the serene and healthy image of most water brands. Everything these guys are doing is disrupting the status quo of bottled water marketing.



## SMART BRAND - Ink Hotel

Think about the last time you stayed in a hotel. The experience is pretty much the same everywhere – a clean room, standard toiletries, neutral décor. One place is like the next. Location and price are the only real differentiators.

That’s why I will never forget the time I stayed at Ink Hotel in Amsterdam. The building was the former home of a Dutch newspaper, and its history is embraced in every aspect. The whole theme of the hotel centers around stories. The lobby walls feature typeset letters. The walls of the rooms have hand-drawn maps of the city, with notes about special locations. There are interesting antique objects, each with its own story behind it. They deliver an experience unlike any other hotel.



## DUMB BRANDS

Really, they are everywhere. So many brands just copy each other. Entire industries are bland imitations from one brand to the next. Look at retail clothing for example. The same experience is delivered in every store. Restaurants. Coffee shops. Your eye doctor or dentist. One is much the same as the next.

The tech world gives us brands that are incredibly successful and great examples in many ways, yet they offer virtually the same products.

Smartwatches, smart phones, and tablets that are basically copies of each other, offering the same functionality. Take personal home assistants: Amazon was first with the Echo. Then came Google Home. Then, Apple released Home Pod. I certainly wouldn't call them dumb brands. The thing these guys rely on is undying customer loyalty.

Unless your brand is as big as Amazon, relying on loyalty to be successful is a dumb brand move.

### KEY TAKEOUT FROM THIS CHAPTER:

Instead of focusing on what your competition is doing, focus on being different. Create a league of your own and own it.

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Smart brands  
create trust  
through  
transparency

## Embrace radical honesty

Today's consumers aren't impressed by just a fancy label. They want to know that the businesses they choose to buy from are in line with their values. Where you're sourcing your product from, your environmental impact, or what your brand stands for, need to match their ethics.

To win today's consumers, you must be authentic and candid. Think of your brand as an open kitchen in a restaurant. Let your audience see everything.

That might sound scary, but it is necessary. Social media has opened up everything to public scrutiny like never before. If your brand appears to be hiding something, your story will be told for you by the judging eyes at the end of the keyboard.

A study a few years back revealed some interesting stats about consumers, transparency, and trust:

*70% of consumers do extra research into the companies they buy from*

*78% say brand transparency is very important*

*73% would pay more for a product that offers complete transparency*

*94% are more likely to be loyal to a brand that offers transparency<sup>1</sup>*

Being transparent builds trust, and trust builds lifelong loyal consumers.

How do you create transparency? Establish your brand purpose and stick to it. Share what you stand for, and your vision for the future. Be open about how you got to where you are today, both the high and low points. When you make a mistake, own up to it. Radical honesty lets people know that you are human, getting attention for the right reasons.

### **SMART BRAND – Lush**

Cosmetics brand Lush stakes their success on radical transparency. Their buying team of 15 staff act as investigators, traveling the world to ensure their supply chain matches their commitment to ethical ingredients. For example, in 2014 the company from which Lush bought mica (a glittery mineral that adds shimmer) was sold, and reports came out that mica mines were using child labour.<sup>2</sup>

The new company would not allow the buying team access to their facilities. Lush removed all mica from their products, eventually finding a synthetic mica to substitute.

They were publicly open and honest about every aspect of their effort to ensure transparency in their supply chain. For further transparency, every Lush product is handmade and features a sticker stating who made the product and when (with a secret message underneath). Lush ensures consumers can be confident that they are a brand to be trusted.



## SMART BRAND - Domino's

Being transparent isn't just about honesty in supply chains and ethics. Domino's pizza had a terrible reputation some years back. Instead of trying to sell people on a 'new and improved' recipe, they issued a public apology from their CEO saying, "We're sorry our old pizza wasn't very good." People were intrigued, perhaps touched by their human approach, and sales soared. In another instance, Domino's broadcast real-time unfiltered reviews from their customers on a billboard in New York's Times Square. A risky, ballsy approach to radical transparency.



## DUMB BRAND – Nike

Years ago, when news broke that Nike used sweatshops to create their athletic shoes and apparel, it hit the brand hard. It took Nike a few years, but they eventually publicly disclosed their factories and set to improve working conditions. However, in 2017



Nike refused to allow labour rights experts to assess their factories.<sup>4</sup> Universities who had contracts with Nike for licensed apparel requested that the NGO Worker Rights Consortium conduct an independent audit of Nike's suppliers, but Nike said no. The message this lack of transparency sends is that Nike cannot be trusted when it comes to claims about their supply chains and working conditions. Students organised protests. Universities cancelled contracts. Demonstrations took place in 12 countries.<sup>5</sup> It took Nike two years to allow independent monitoring of their supply chain by WRC – a positive move, but one they only made when forced by a global campaign.

## KEY TAKEOUT FROM THIS CHAPTER:

The Dalai Lama says: "A lack of transparency results in distrust and a deep sense of insecurity." Today, brands must be prepared to reveal all.

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# Smart brands aim for simplicity



## Make it easy

*“Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it’s worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains.” – Steve Jobs*

When we are flooded with information, it’s the simple stuff that stands out. Our overwhelmed brains seek simplicity. Making choices takes time and effort. It brings up feelings of anxiety and fear of regret.

You might know someone who sits down to watch something on Netflix but spends an hour browsing and ends up not watching anything. This is the paradox of choice. They probably end up watching something on regular television programming just because it’s on. The simplest decision wins.

Brands that deliver with simplicity win, time and time again. Siegel + Gale surveyed tens of thousands of consumers worldwide to present a Global Brand Simplicity Index. Here are some of their findings:

*64% of consumers will pay more for a simpler experience*

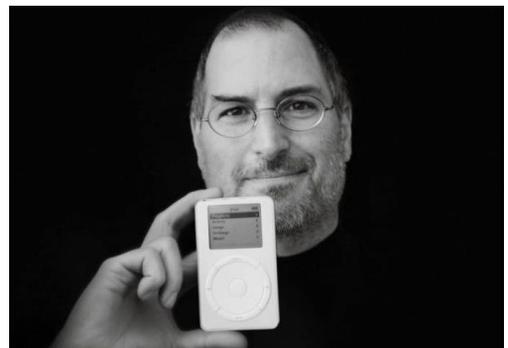
*61% are more likely to recommend a brand because it is simple*

*62% of employees at simple companies are brand champions, compared to 20% at complex companies<sup>1</sup>*

How do you embrace simplicity? By offering the simplest solution to resolving your customers’ problems. Make decisions easy for your customers. Give your customers what they want, when they want it, in the easiest way possible.

### **SMART BRAND – Apple**

When Apple was developing the first iPod, Steve Jobs wanted to be able to get to a song in 3 clicks. The consumer wouldn’t care about the complex process behind the scenes. It needed to be as simple to use as possible.



This thinking influenced Apple’s entire brand. It revolves around simplicity and bringing order to complexity. When most electronic gadgets were black, Apple went with white for a pure, clean look.

The packaging of Apple's products isn't covered with messages trying to sell you on its features. The boxes are easy to open and reminiscent of opening a gift. When you buy an Apple product, it comes with just the essentials you need to get started - no wordy manual or extra cords and adaptors. Every part of the Apple experience is focused on simplicity.

## SMART BRAND – Brandless

Brandless' products are packaged with plain, generic labelling with no obvious branding. The Brandless product range features household and food items that are organic, non-toxic, and cruelty-free. They research every product to deliver the "gold standard" in what is good for you and the planet. They offer only one option for every product, because they have chosen the absolute best one for you. Need toilet paper? There's only one kind. One kind of lotion, one kind of dish detergent. They have embraced simplicity to offer their customers the easiest experience possible.



## DUMB BRAND – Yahoo

When they launched in 1994, Yahoo was the go-to search engine for internet users and charged a premium for advertisers to place ads on their site. But the company didn't focus on its search features as it was only 6% of their income stream at that time.



Yahoo's purpose was not clearly defined – were they a search company, a tech company, or a media company? When Google entered the scene with its clean, focused user interface it stole Yahoo's users who realised they didn't have to deal with flashy banner ads and could get what they wanted in a simpler way.

Yahoo still exists as a mix of products and still features annoying ads and a cluttered homepage that caters to their advertisers. I'm guessing most users stick with it out of nostalgia or fear of change.

### KEY TAKEOUT FROM THIS CHAPTER:

In a complex world, simplicity wins. Save your customers time and energy by making everything as easy for them as possible.

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Smart brands  
don't just ride  
trend shifts.  
They start  
them.

Ann Handley

Smart  
brands focus  
on actions  
not ads



# Walk the talk

*“What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say.”*

The above quote is attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Although he didn't put it exactly in those words, the sentiment remains.

People are bombarded with thousands of marketing messages every day. And they aren't listening to the majority of them. No one likes ads. No one believes them anymore. The fake news world we now live in has led most of us to be suspicious of what we hear. Social media is filled with misinformation that makes it difficult to know what is true anymore.

What speaks to people? Actions.

Your actions must provide proof of your brand's values. It's what you do that people care about, not what you say.

Smart brands focus on practical ways to help customers. To stay relevant, you must be proactive in meeting your customers' needs – especially in our current changing landscape. It is more important than ever to be empathetic in your actions and authentic in your approach.

It's what you do that will make an impact. Not what you say.

## **SMART BRAND - TOMS Shoes**

Blake Mycoskie was travelling Argentina when a chance run-in with a woman volunteering on a shoe drive changed his life. He travelled with the woman and her group and became aware of the far-reaching effects of kids not having shoes – like infections and sores that prevented them from going to school or even getting water – and the problems her organisation had with getting donations to match the sizes and quantities needed. He felt compelled to help but knew another shoe charity was not going to be a long-term answer.

Blake used his entrepreneurial experience to come up with the idea of a for-profit company that helped those in need. His concept was to “sell a pair of shoes today, give a pair of shoes tomorrow.”<sup>1</sup> Every time someone bought a pair of TOMS, a pair would be donated.



This would ensure a constant flow of donations – rather than relying on people to donate to charity, he could make people feel good about a purchase for themselves that helped someone else.

He found some artisans that were willing to try making his adaptations to the traditional Argentinian footwear *alpargatas*. Blake altered them to suit the American market, making them more durable and stylish. He took 250 samples to America. People fell in love with his story, and he soon had more orders than he could handle. After *Vogue* ran an article, celebrities started buying his flat, comfortable canvas shoes.

Why call them TOMS? "I'd been playing around with the phrase "Shoes for a Better Tomorrow," which eventually became "Tomorrow's Shoes," then TOMS. Now you know why my name is Blake, but my shoes are TOMS. It's not about me. It's about a promise - a better tomorrow."

TOMS Shoes is a penultimate example of letting your actions speak for your brand. It was his story that sold his shoes and enabled him to deliver on his promise - making a tangible difference in people's lives.



## DUMB BRAND – BP

“Greenwashing” is the term used to describe marketing ploys that make a company appear more environmentally friendly than their actions prove them to be. Recently, BP altered their image to appear committed to addressing climate change issues, but the core of their business still relies on fossil fuels.

Changing their name from British Petroleum to Beyond Petroleum didn’t fool anyone. Their ads claiming to “make energy cleaner” were pulled when they were called out by environmental lawyers for misleading the public.<sup>2</sup>

The lawyers compared them to the tobacco industry, saying their ads would need warning labels similar to tobacco products, like in the image on the right.

More than 96% of BP’s annual spend goes to fossil fuels and just 4% to low-carbon energy.<sup>2</sup>

What they were saying didn’t match what they were doing.



### KEY TAKEOUT FROM THIS CHAPTER:

Actions really do speak louder than words. Make sure your actions are in line with your brand’s values.

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Smart  
brands lead  
with story  
not product.



## Forget the facts

Stories are over 20 times more memorable than facts.<sup>1</sup>

When we hear a story, multiple areas of our brains are activated that bring us into the story as if we experienced it ourselves. Neurochemicals are released that cause us to pay attention (cortisol), feel empathy (oxytocin), focus and retain information (dopamine) and enjoy the story (endorphins).

Our brains are wired for stories – our ancestors' survival depended on it.

Facts are forgettable, so pushing your product features won't work. These days, we are oversaturated with marketing messages in a world that allows for less and less of a human touch.

Smart brands lead with story that shows their human side. Your story differentiates you – no one else has the exact same one! Your story can share your challenges and successes, your reason for being, the effect you aim to have on the world. Communicate what you want to be remembered for – not how your product is better than the next guy's.

Storytelling allows us to make emotional connections and develop trust. Unless no one else in the world has the same product attributes as you, you need a story that is bigger than your product.

### **SMART BRAND - Burt's Bees**

Skin care has got to be one of the most flooded markets. Consumers are overwhelmed with choices, from global corporate giants to local artisans. How do you make an impression? With a really great story. Burt's Bees tells their endearing story on their website:

*It was the summer of '84 and Maine artist Roxanne Quimby was thumbing a ride home (back when you could still do that sort of thing). Eventually a bright yellow Datsun pickup truck pulled over, and Roxanne instantly recognised Burt Shavitz, a local fella whose beard was almost as well-known as his roadside honey stand. Burt and Roxanne hit it off, and before long, Roxanne was making candles with unused wax from Burt's beehives. They made \$200 at their first craft fair; within a year, they'd made \$20,000. Pretty auspicious beginning – but just the beginning, all the same.*



*Burt Shavitz – co-founder of Burt's bees*

Now this could read something like “Burt and Roxanne met in 1984. They started making candles from beeswax and within a year had sold \$20,000 worth.” See the difference? Their origin story is about a hermit and a hippie who met up and started an organic skin care company. Their tagline “True to nature” encapsulates their values and their story backs it up. Burt passed away a few years back and Roxanne has since sold her shares, but the story persists. Burt’s image is still used in the company’s logo, linking the human touch to the products.

## **Dove (again)**

Dove’s Real Beauty campaign tells a story about their purpose. By using real people of all shapes, sizes, and ethnicities in their advertising, they tell a story that communicates the brand’s values. They hero the beauty of all women, not some flawless ideal. They are not here to just sell soap but to enhance the self-esteem and confidence of all women to enable them to reach their full potential. The grace with which they communicate this message gives it authenticity.

Recently, they unveiled Project #ShowUs to invite people to create a photo library that destroyed beauty stereotypes for women and non-binary people. Their well-told story hits home with consumers (they are the #1 preferred soap brand in the US) with an impact greater than the product features of a bar of plain white soap ever could.<sup>2</sup>

## DUMB BRAND – Pepsi

Brands have to balance telling stories with a human touch while being authentic and hitting the right tone. Pepsi recently ran a campaign that was meant to tell a story of global unity and harmony. The campaign featured Kendall Jenner leaving a photo shoot to join a protest, and when the protesters meet a police blockade she steps out of the crowd and hands a police officer a Pepsi. The crowd cheers – hooray, Pepsi made peace! Except the way the ad was perceived backfired. The footage Pepsi used in their story reflected recent news stories of altercations between police and protesters around the Black Lives Matter movement.

Many saw it as making light of a very real issue for product promotion. It came across as insensitive and that Pepsi was trying too hard to appear to celebrate diversity. They pulled the ad and issued an apology for “missing the mark” and “putting Kendall Jenner in this position.”<sup>3</sup>



### KEY TAKEOUT FROM THIS CHAPTER:

Stories connect with people more powerfully than facts. Make sure you're telling your story in the most effective way.

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Smart brands  
speak their  
own language.



## Voice your difference

Google. Uber. Netflix. Zoom. What do these words have in common?

They are all names of companies whose brand name has come to be associated with the common word for what they do. “Google it” refers to searching the web no matter what engine you use. “Let’s get an Uber” covers any ride service. “I have a Zoom at 3” could mean any video chat service like Google Meet or Microsoft Teams, but it’s easier to say.

These brands used their brand language to create an association in people’s minds between their brand and specific words. They did so with such success that they essentially own the language in their categories.

Having a strong brand language raises awareness of your brand while differentiating you from the rest. Word choice and tone both play into your brand language. Tone changes perception. Say you want to be seen as expert in your field. Are you friendly (‘your expert guide’) or controversial (‘more expert than anyone else’)?

When you decide on your brand language, use it across all channels – sales, marketing, PR, internal and external communications. Weave it through your content so it is embedded in your product. It will take time to develop the associations between your language and your brand. Applying it consistently is key. Larry Page used Google as a verb back in 1998 on a listserv. By 2006 it was in the dictionary.





## SMART BRAND – Disney

Disney is perhaps the most obvious example of brand language. Words like 'magic,' 'kingdom,' 'dreams,' 'fantasy,' and 'imagination' are all associated with the Happiest Place on Earth. Why? Because they insert their language into every possible outlet. (Watch a Disney movie with your kids and look at it from a brand language perspective.)

At Disney parks, employees are called 'cast members' and the rides are 'attractions.' Their unique brand language is truly embedded into every aspect of the customer experience in every outlet.





## SMART BRAND - News UK

In a time when readership of print media is in decline, News UK managed to boost *The Times* circulation by 11%.<sup>1</sup> Subscriptions went up 236%. Says Times Newspapers CMO Catherine Newman, “We haven’t changed the paper, we haven’t become cheaper, we changed our creative and the way that we talk to our audience.”

They worked with consultants who analysed the language around the brand. Their ‘Know Your Times’ campaign worked to change perceptions. For example, the subscriptions campaign was changed to ‘Don’t Miss the Moments that Matter.’

Their advertisements communicated clear, unbiased, sensitive reporting. Overall, their new campaign conveyed trustworthiness and a sensitivity to the current times.

## Dumb brands

Rather than pick on one dumb brand here, I'll give a few examples of brand language fails and how to avoid them.

American grocery store chain Kroger tried to change grocery shopping to "Krogering." Simple, recognisable words work best.

Mercedes-Benz launched in China under the brand name "Bensi" – which means "rush to die." If you might be global someday, be sensitive to translation.

Jell-O tried to take on the acronym FML and change its meaning to "Fun My Life." You can't own something that already has its own meaning.

In the U.S., Electrolux vacuum cleaners tried "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux." If you choose to be cheeky, make sure it lands right.

### KEY TAKEOUT FROM THIS CHAPTER:

Your brand language conveys meaning to your audience. It clarifies your purpose and the role your brand plays in their life. Carefully consider your language and use it consistently to create an association with your brand.

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# Book your FREE BRAND REVIEW

Is your brand acting like a smart brand?

To sum up, the 8 things smart brands do that dumb brands don't:

*Smart brands are adaptive. They're fluid, not fixed.*

*Smart brands think like customers.*

*Smart brands focus on being different.*

*Smart brands create trust through transparency.*

*Smart brands aim for simplicity.*

*Smart brands focus on actions not ads.*

*Smart brands lead with story not product.*

*Smart brands speak their own language.*

As I mentioned in the beginning, I would like to offer you a FREE Brand Review to take a look at your brand and see where you are, where you want to be, and what's holding you back. Covid has disrupted so many businesses and this is one thing I can do to help.

There's no obligation to do anything further. Just a fresh set of expert eyes on your brand. Of course, if you like I can work with you further to create a brand strategy and put in motion the steps that will get you to where you want to be.

Create a smart brand that your customers will love. I'm offering this free 30-minute session. Book a slot in my calendar today at <https://calendly.com/steve-ballantyne/free30minutebrandreview>.

I look forward to getting to know you and your brand.



Steve Ballantyne  
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