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FROM BRAND PERSONAS TO PERSONALITY LED BRANDS

I BELIEVE IT IS TIME FOR BRANDS TO BECOME SHAPE SHIFTERS

ABSTRACT

Brands come to life in people's minds. However they have become very self-centered, more concerned with building their own personas than with understanding people. I believe that brands should adapt to people's individual personalities as opposed to having a single brand personality that appeals to everyone. To do so, brands must become shape shifters, presenting the right facets of themselves to each person without losing themselves in the process. The convergence of psychology, data and media addressability is making it possible to let go of the constraints of the past and turn brands into emotionally intelligent master communicators.

Brands come to life in people's minds. At the heart of brand building lies a tension between creating a strong self-evolving brand identity and constantly shaping this identity to respond to consumer perception. We oscillate between phases of introspection - defining brands from the inside out, to phases of external validation - shaping brands to respond to external pressures.

The current focus on finding a brand's purpose has thrown brands into a period of introspection. We are very self-centered, more concerned with building brand personalities than responding to people's personalities. As an industry, we write twice as many articles about the former than about the latter¹.

We are developing brands with fully fleshed out personalities, hopes, fears, moral values, motivations... basically everything that makes us human. We have put ourselves in a situation where we are creating psychopaths: entities that simulate emotions and beliefs they are incapable of having. Moreover, any deviation from these very defined brand personalities is perceived by the industry as "brand schizophrenia", the worst possible crime by a brand builder. But is this really such a serious crime?

The issue with building brands with such fully developed personas is that we risk alienating people. The more defined these brand personalities get, the fewer people they appeal to. Research has shown that consumers are attracted to brands with personalities similar to their own², and therefore by definition a brand with a very defined persona can only appeal to a small number of people. Even the most popular celebrities rarely achieve popularity rates above 50%³. So what chance does a brand have to generate a broad appeal with one personality in a world with increasingly polarising diverse opinions?

Creating one brand personality is a doomed effort regardless. Brain research tells us that everyone has a different view of the world. In Searching For

Memory⁴, Daniel Schacter says "different people retain and recollect very different aspects of their everyday environments". What people remember depends on how they encode a memory, and how they encode memories depends on who they are, their past experiences and existing knowledge. Brands are "a collection of perceptions in the mind of the consumer" (Paul Feldwick) and they differ from person to person because every individual thinks and experiences the world differently.

It is difficult to overstate to what extent our unconscious brain controls every decision we make every day and the overall course of our lives. We are preprogrammed with instincts that are burnt down so deeply into our circuitry that we are no longer able to access them. Most of what we call 'think' happens outside our cognitive control.⁵

There are two sides to these instincts⁶:

- Human nature: instincts hard wired into the brain from millennia of collective human experience (i.e. attraction to more fertile partners, disgust protecting us from disease, instant gratification, ...)
- Personality: the individual's unique combination of genes and personal experiences that makes us unique and shapes our individual worldview.

Behavioural economics, inspired by discoveries in social psychology, evolutionary biology and behavioural science, has made a large contribution to leveraging our understanding of human nature for the purpose of business growth.

By comparison, while personality affects every aspect of our lives, including academic and job performance, social and political attitudes, the quality of social relationships, as well as physical and mental health⁷, its application to advertising has been very limited. Beyond old fashioned consumer segmentations and superficial audience profiles, little had been done until recently to influence brand decision making based on deep rooted patterns of personality.

"Along any axis that we measure human beings, we discover a wide ranging distribution, whether in empathy, intelligence, swimming ability, aggressiveness or inborn talent at cello or chess. People are not created equal. Their genetics and personal histories mold their brains to quite different end points." (David Eagleman, Incognito).

I believe that brands should adapt to people's individual personalities as opposed to having a single brand personality that appeals to everyone. To do so, brands must become shape shifters, altering themselves to best appeal to people's values and motivations, always showing the right facet of themselves to develop the strongest match between their propositions and people's personalities.

In the same way that a good communicator adapts to their audience, brands need to step outside the

fixed persona they have created and adapt their behaviour to cues from their audience. Because brands are not human, they are not constrained by one set view of the world. They can free themselves from this self-imposed straightjacket and become much better than the best human communicators at persuading people based on their individual personality traits.

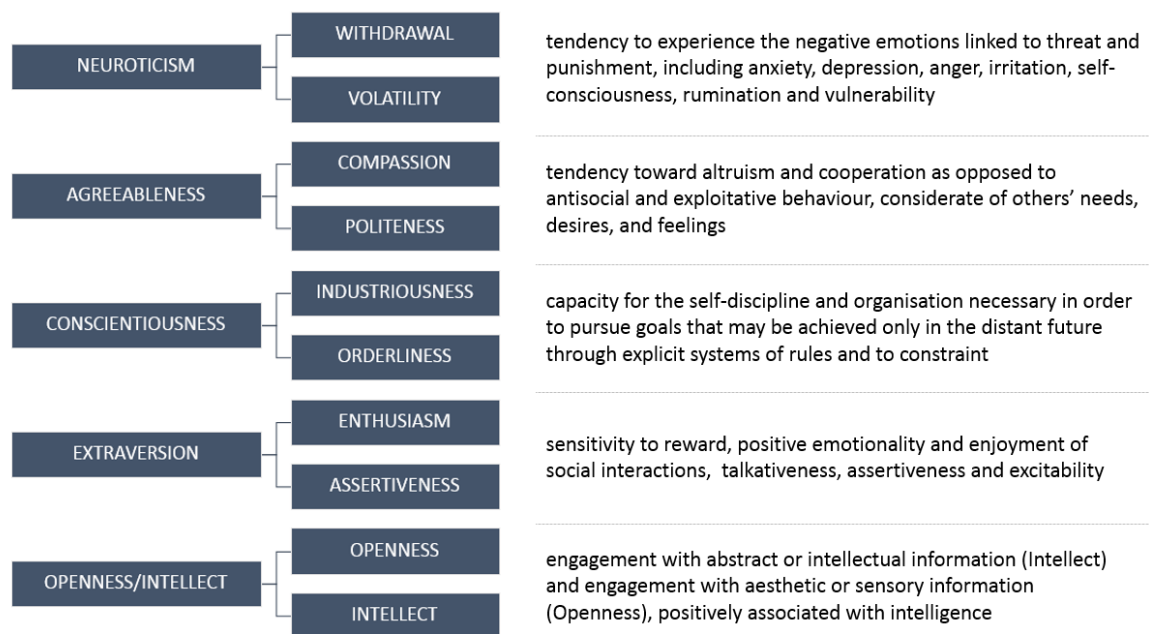
The conditions for a perfect storm are in place:

1. Personality research helps us understand differing perceptions and behaviours
2. Big data finally allows us segment people by personality
3. Addressable media means we can create tailored connections at scale

1. PERSONALITY RESEARCH

While our industry has been discarding psychographics as old fashioned under the influence of the "target the whole market" principle⁸, personality research has made great progress in its understanding of personality traits as a driver of behaviour.

Dispositional personality traits are the most widely accepted foundations of personality research. They show consistent patterns of thoughts and actions and are usually represented by the "Big Five" model, describing personality through five basic dimensions: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism (each split into two further aspects).



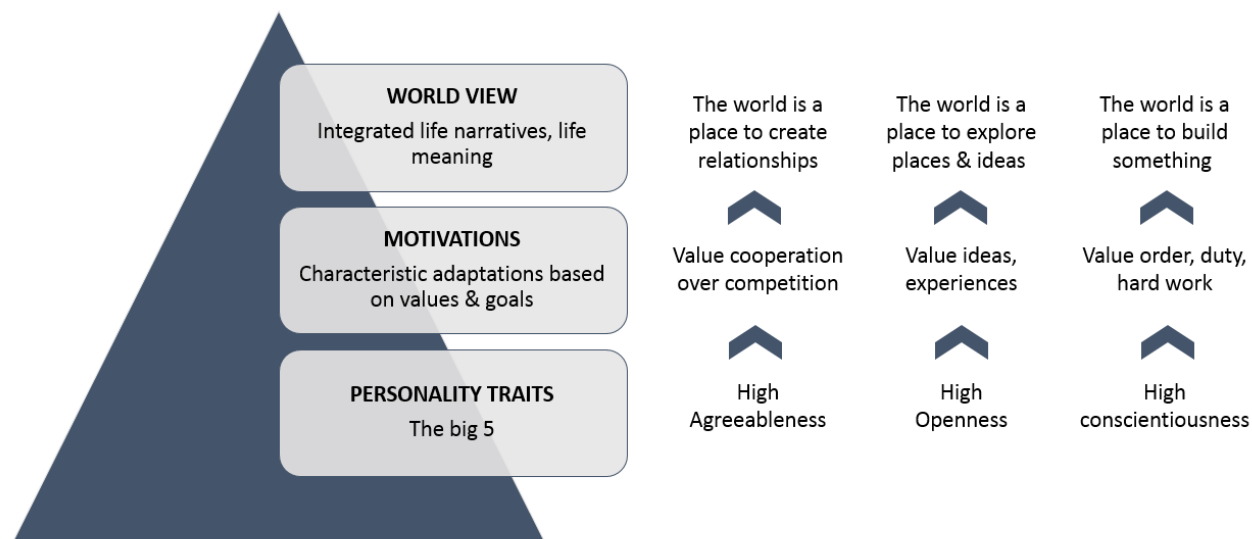
Based on *Personality Neuroscience and the Biology of Traits* by Colin G. DeYoung

These traits are relatively stable over time and are a good guide for predicting decision making and behavioural outcomes in a wide range of situations. For instance, extraversion does not just explain differences between how people act at social events, it also predicts whether an individual is more likely to choose an immediate or delayed reward⁷ for instance.

More recent research by McAdams and Pals⁹ has built more comprehensive personality frameworks and defined personality as "an individual's unique variation on the general evolutionary design for human nature, expressed as a developing pattern of dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations" (ie. Goals, values, coping strategy, relational patterns, ...), "and self-defining life narratives" (ie life stories to provide a person's life with identity, purpose, meaning), "complexly and differentially situated in culture and social context."

Personality therefore becomes more than just a combination of sub personality traits and more of a filter through which we view the world and develop high level beliefs and ideologies. It encompasses modes of perception, patterns of behaviour, stable motivations and systems of values⁶.

We can therefore look at personality on three levels:



(Adapted from From Dispositions to Goals to Ideology, Xiaowen Xu, Jason E. Plaks and Jordan B. Peterson, 2016)

This explains why there is a clear link between personality traits and political beliefs for example. High levels of openness are reliably associated with democrat/socially liberal tendencies while conscientiousness (and especially the conscientiousness sub-trait of orderliness) is a good predictor of conservative tendencies.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the future of personality science lies in understanding how the brain, as a part of the wider nervous system, interacts and adapts to its environment. Our personalities are constantly evolving through a process of co-creation by exchanging stimuli with other people and our external environment that re-wire our brains⁵. This is especially interesting for understanding the potential of advertising in not only adapting to different personalities but also constantly learning to start creating life narratives.

"You are part of a complex social network that changes your biology with every interaction and which your actions can change in return" (David Eagleman, Incognito)

2. BIG DATA

Personality based advertising works. One recent experiment from Cambridge University shows a fifteen times uplift in effectiveness versus broad targeting for different products and a twice for different messages¹⁰.

However, this didn't matter until recently because we couldn't bring psychographic targeting to life with any scale. Even if we knew that a Karcher high pressure cleaner was more likely to be used by highly conscientious people, it was impossible to find and specifically reach these people. This is why, while personality based consumer segmentations always made a lot of sense to understand motivations and behaviours, they fell out of fashion because they were deemed insufficiently actionable. This is changing.

Big data has made it surprisingly easy to get a very clear picture of someone's personality traits based on their digital footprint. There is a proven link between Facebook likes and personality and this is surprisingly accurate based on even a limited number of data points. An algorithm can predict someone's personality better than a friend with 70 Facebook likes and better than a spouse with 250 Facebook likes¹⁰.

The fact that people love to take personality tests online has created a wealth of first party research data. By having hundreds of thousands of people take personalities tests online and linking these survey results (with the consent of the respondents) to other behaviours, interests and connections gathered from media habits, companies such as Cambridge Analytica have been able to predict psychological traits from digital footprints¹¹.

All this big data may not even be necessary. A voice analytics company is planning to use unique voice signatures to deliver personalized advertisements and bots. It claims to recognize your personality within 30 seconds using artificial intelligence based on language¹².

Big data is fundamental in creating shape shifting brands, its availability finally allows us to reach the right person with the right message at the right time, applying behavioural research to every individual.

3. ADDRESSABLE MEDIA

In many ways, the way we think about brands and advertising has been shaped by the media landscape. In a world where the best way to create visibility for a brand was to advertise on TV to create demand and then be very visible at the point of sale to convert this demand, we created 30sec TV ads communicating one message to a broad audience. The concept of mass communication was created out of necessity.

Addressable media is changing this. In the very near future, people will not be able to tell whether they are being personally targeted or not. This makes the whole concept of necessary wastage redundant.

The United States is leading the way in terms of addressable media penetration. However, Europe is catching up fast and it is estimated that by 2020 80% of digital advertising and 50% of TV advertising will be addressable¹³.

Addressability is dramatically transforming the media landscape but I do not believe that as an industry we have fully realised yet the impact that it could have on brand building in the next couple of years. This presents us with an opportunity to re-invent the way we advertise when we are no longer constrained by concepts such as mass media versus personal media. We have an opportunity to completely reinvent how we communicate at a profound level.

THE TED CRUZ CAMPAIGN- CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA ¹¹

Cambridge Analytica have been at the forefront of psychographic marketing and came into the public eye due to their involvement in high profile political campaigns such as the recent US elections. One of their more thorough projects was the Ted Cruz Republican primaries campaign.

Using big data, they are able to map every person in the USA according to the Big 5 personality traits and, as a result, shape the campaign to individual personalities at scale.

They focused on the lower hanging fruits, people who were likely to vote but needed persuading to move from the centre towards the right in order to support Ted Cruz. Cambridge Analytica were able to determine that this segment of the electorate were low in neuroticism, low in openness and slightly conscientious. They also cared about gun rights. So a persuasion message on gun rights tailored to personality traits was required.

Highly neurotic and conscientious people respond better to rational and fear based messages. The threat of burglary and the importance of having a gun in such situations is very persuasive. Therefore they were served this message: "The second amendment isn't just a right, it's an insurance policy. Defend the right to bear arms".

By comparison, agreeable people low in openness care about family, traditions and the community. Teaching their son to use a gun is a valued tradition passed from generation to generation. Therefore they were served this message: "From father to son, since the birth of our nation. Defend the second amendment."

While Cambridge Analytica haven't made public the contribution of their efforts, they were responsible for most elements of the campaign, and Ted Cruz achieved very strong results (from 5% to 35% vote intentions making him to second stronger candidate after Donald Trump). They famously subsequently went on to work for Donald Trump in the final stages of the elections.

So, personality based marketing is becoming a reality but its activation has been mostly campaign based, short term and tactical so far. What does this mean, not only for the future of targeting, but more importantly for the future of brand building?

BECOMING SHAPE SHIFTERS

There are two dimensions to becoming a shape shifter brand:

- First, creating brands that people can project their world view onto (ie. Different people take out different elements of a brand even if they are exposed to the same brand stimuli).
- Secondly, brands actively adjusting their behaviour to better match individual personalities (ie. Different people are exposed to different brand stimuli)

This infers that a shape shifting brand needs to contain both fixed and alterable features: a small universal brand core (including all features without which the brand would be weakened or unrecognizable) surrounded by peripheral brand features that adjust to their audience.

FIRST, CREATING BRANDS THAT PEOPLE CAN PROJECT THEIR WORLD VIEW ONTO

The fact that people recollect different aspects of their environment combined with confirmation bias, the theory that people are biased toward confirming their existing beliefs, explain why one brand is actually multiple brands in the mind of its consumers.

SHAPE SHIFTER INSPIRATION: The Mirror of Erised from Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone¹⁴



“It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts” explains Dumbledore. Harry sees in it his lost family and Ron, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone as a celebrated quidditch player.

Some elements of a brand are more likely to be common to all and form the brand core: the brand name, its logo, some recognisable visual or sonic elements but also what the brand does and sometimes its brand mission or promise if it is simple and explicit enough. At the very top of the benefit ladder however, the intangibility of most brand purposes tends to divide people.

The main problem with most brand purposes is that they are either very partisan to one world view (usually favouring extroversion and agreeableness) or very lofty, dull and bland because they have to appeal to everyone ("Inspire the human spirit" from Starbucks, "Let's make today great" from Kellogg's).

For some brands, being partisan works because their market is disproportionately made of people with certain personality traits.

Personality is a key driver of behaviour for fashion for instance¹⁵. While demographics only accounts for 9% of the variance in fashion shopping propensity, personality characteristics account for 46%. Being agreeable, extroverted, open minded, and stable are all positively associated with fashion shopping.

However, most brands can't afford to sacrifice part of their market based on their world view. The key is in creating a brand mission which is distinctive enough to build a strong brand while not alienating people. This is actually what the brands with the most memorable and attractive missions do. They represent the specific strengths of a company, reflect what drives people to come to work everyday and are rooted in commercial growth. People can then project their values and motivations on this universal brand core, seeing the brand through their world view to create a shaped brand mission.

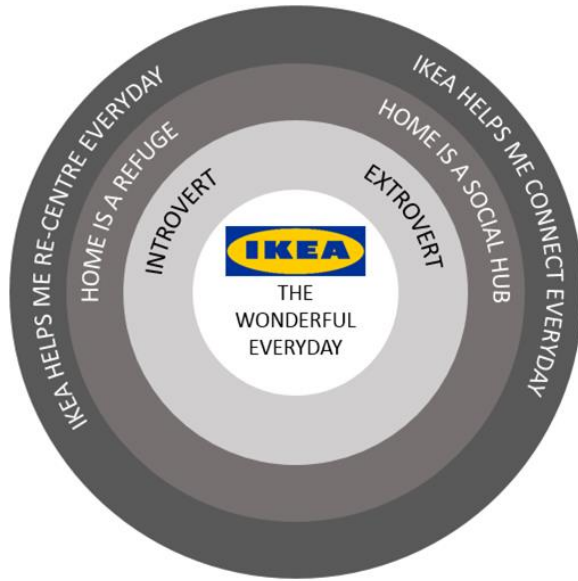


Let's illustrate this framework with a few brand examples.

IKEA

IKEA's mission¹⁶, created by its founder over fifty years ago is to "create a better everyday life for the many people". This mission has been fundamental to the success of the company. It is based on the business' strengths ("offering a wide range of well-designed, functional home furnishing products at prices so low that as many people as possible will be able to afford them"), a compelling reason for its employees to come to work everyday and is deeply rooted in commercial results (delivering products many people need). In the UK, this mission has been translated into The Wonderful Everyday consumer facing marketing platform. IKEA is a brand that believes that everyone is in the market for one of their products at any moment in time. Their target market is everyone, and therefore their approach to targeting is not to sacrifice but to segment the market.

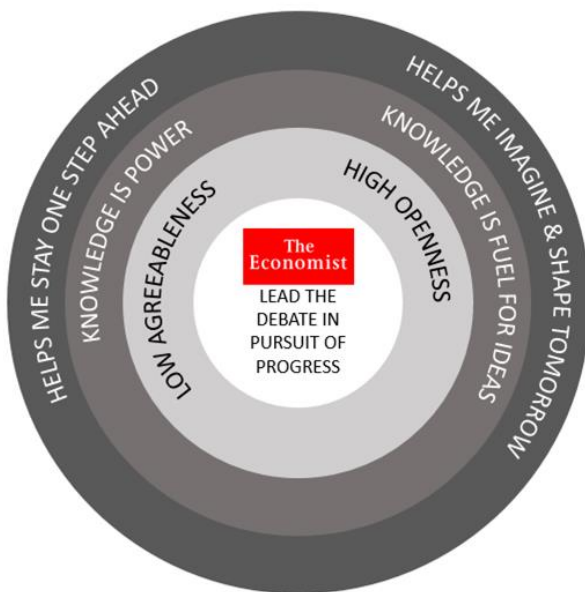
Home is a concept that goes directly to the heart of who we are as people, it is a strong reflection of our values, desires, hopes and dreams. As a result, personality is a very strong predictor of home related decisions across many of the Big 5 traits and the extroversion dimension is especially relevant.



Introverts, who feel drained by social interactions, view their home as a refuge in which to re-fuel. IKEA can create a better everyday life for them by helping them re-centre. At the opposite end of the scale, extroverts view their home as a social hub, a place to interact with people who are closest to them and let more people into their lives. IKEA can create a better everyday life for them by helping them create more quality human connections.

The Economist

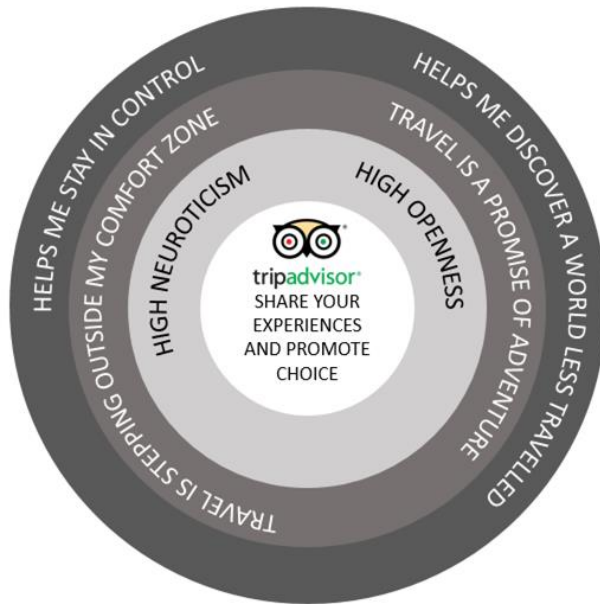
The Economist was founded by James Wilson in 1843 to propagate the principles of free trade, internationalist and minimum market interference. Its mission statement was to "take part in a severe contest between intelligence, which presses forward, and an unworthy, timid ignorance obstructing our progress". Its modern translation is to "lead the debate in the pursuit of progress"¹⁷.



While The Economist is likely to appeal to people who have an interest in knowledge and debating ideas, these people may have different values and motivations. For people low in the agreeableness traits (who are not just rude and mean as the word may suggest, but driven by competition over cooperation), knowledge is power. The Economist can help them stay one step ahead. For people high in the openness trait, knowledge is valuable in itself because it fuels new ideas and fosters a better understanding of the world we live in. The Economist can help them imagine and shape the world for tomorrow.

TripAdvisor

TripAdvisor's mission¹⁸ is "to give travelers a voice to share their experiences, promote consumer choice and encourage a level playing field for everyone in the industry– all within a free forum for sharing open and honest opinions".



The emotions associated with travel can vary significantly across personality. For people high in the neuroticism trait, negative emotions linked to threat, anxiety and vulnerability mean that stepping out of their comfort zone is difficult. TripAdvisor helps them minimise the risks and stay in control. For people high on the openness traits, travel is about discovering new places, cultures and the promise of new adventures. TripAdvisor can help them explore even further and discover less travelled parts of the world.

These examples demonstrate how a brand may be valued for different reasons, and therefore perceived differently, based on different worldviews without the brand even making an active effort to adapt to different personalities, as long as the brand is built on an universal core that allows these different world views to surround it. Now let's examine what may happen when they make a conscious effort to shape shift.

SECONDLY, BRANDS ADJUSTING THEIR BEHAVIOUR TO DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES

SHAPE SHIFTER INSPIRATION: Mystique¹⁹

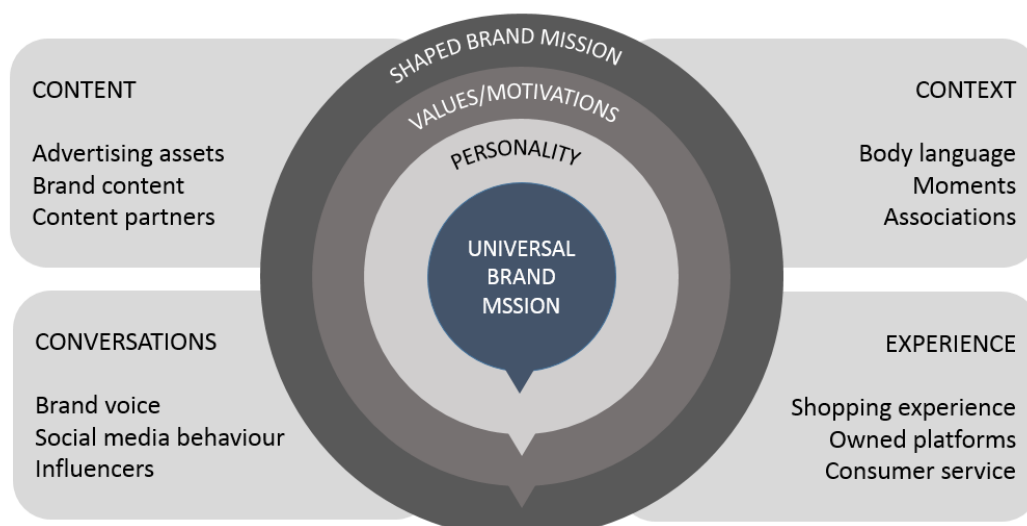


Mystique (Raven Darkhölme) is a fictional character appearing in Marvel comic books, commonly in association with the X-Men. Mystique is a mutant metamorph. She can shift the atoms and molecules of her body and her clothing to change her appearance. As a result she can cause herself to look and sound like an exact duplicate of any human. Her control is so exact that she can precisely duplicate another person's retina pattern in her own eyes, finger, palm and skin-pore patterns on her own hands and skin, and vocal cords to match voices to the point of corresponding voiceprints. Although she can maintain the form of a person of her height, weight, and build indefinitely, the longer that she maintains the form of a person physically bigger than herself, the greater the strain she feels.”

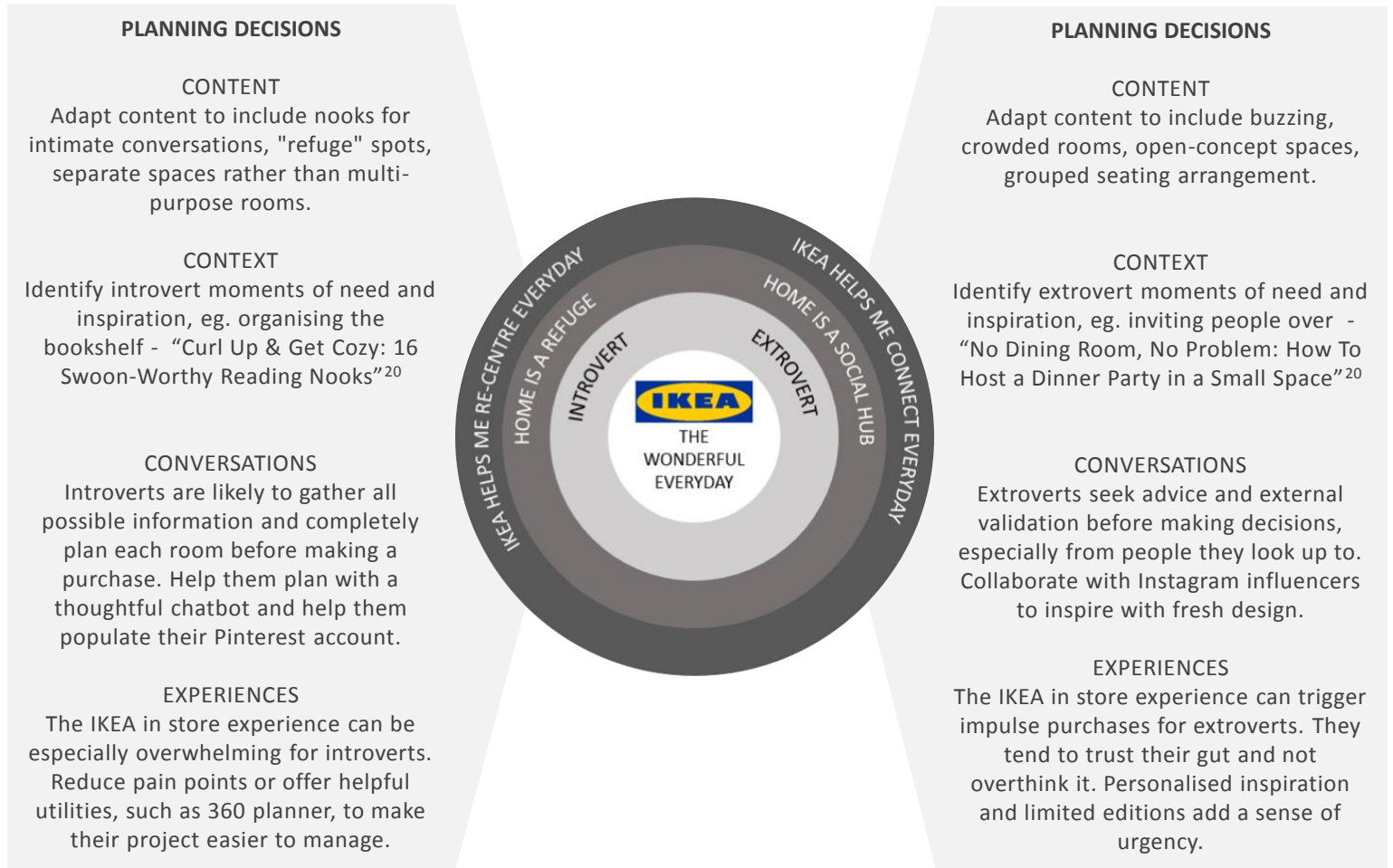
At this level, brands should consciously shape themselves around people’s personalities with a combination of alterable features that aim to build brand equity and as well as trigger certain behaviours.

Brands should “shape” we way they express themselves through:

- Their content: creating dynamic product portfolios, advertising assets and content to deliver on the shaped brand mission
- The context in which they communicate, matching personality profile not only with what they say but how they say it too.
- The conversations that they engage in and how they behave socially.
- The experience they create through physical interaction, platform usage or consumer service.



Let's illustrate this model with IKEA.



INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTION OF IKEA



INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTION OF IKEA



The IKEA brand is very unique, because of its brand mission as well as its unusual shopping experience. As a shape shifting brand, it will remain very distinctive. The essence of the brand, the instantly recognisable logo, stores, catalogue, Swedishness, attachment to democratic design and understated humour will form a strong universal core. Many people will also have in common their associations between IKEA and meatballs, “who can assemble a chair faster” competitions and will have a few spare IKEA pencils in a drawer at home. However, they will also form more personal memories of when IKEA felt like the exact right brand for them: helping them design their perfect kitchen, thoughtfully suggesting this may be the mid-century inspired bedside table they’ve been looking for or telling them stories that truly moved them.

My perception of a brand is already different from yours. The evolution towards shape shifting brands will ensure that these differences are not just random, but explained by our different world views and life experiences. We’re all likely to remember the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building after visiting New York, but it is coming across an impromptu jazz session on Staten Island on a summer evening that will make this trip yours, because it is your own curiosity, instincts and preferences that drove you there.

CHALLENGING BRAND BUILDING BELIEFS

1. Create one fixed brand purpose

The belief that brands with purpose grow faster is currently being seriously challenged²¹. In addition to these doubts about their effectiveness, I believe that fixed brand purposes can be a straightjacket that prevents us from leveraging the power of brands to its full potential.

Brands are a cultural construct whose reason for being is to help persuade more people to consume our products on more occasions. The more we insist on creating near human fixed personas for brands, the more we restrict our ability to create a broad appeal.

It is time to admit that brands are not human. They do not have feelings, beliefs or moral values. As a result, they can be a mirror to people's needs and desires. To admit this is not to be dishonest or schizophrenic, it is to acknowledge the true nature of brands. Every brand needs a mission but these need to be relevant to diverse world views to be truly valuable.

2. Target the whole market

I do not wish to challenge this principle as much as reframe it. It is often assumed that targeting everyone in market for the product we are selling means abandoning any targeting filters beyond broad demographics and geographies. I would argue that in some cases psychographics define the market. When a product is disproportionately in demand among specific personality profiles, it would be contrary to this principle not to target based on personalities.

It is also assumed that targeting the whole market means advertising to everyone in the same way. Sub-segmenting the market will help us be more relevant to more people, by flexing the brand to appeal to them more personally.

3. Always strive for consistency

The importance of building brands with consistency over time in order to re-inforce existing memory

structures and brand promise credibility is one of the most widely accepted principle in advertising, supported by Byron Sharp, David Ogilvy, Millward Brown, among others.

But how does this apply where everyone's perception of a brand is different to start with? I believe we need to make a distinction between fixed and alterable brand features. There are certainly brand element that should remain consistent over time and without which a brand would be weakened (ie. what makes the brand recognisable, trusted with a consistent promise), but there are also brand elements that should adapt to people's values and motivations.

A brand need to be consistent in a consumer's mind, however this doesn't mean that it needs to be consistent in the same across everybody's minds.

4. Humans versus machines

Our agencies are organised into putting a lot of human strategic resources, pulling rich insights from psychology and behavioural science, towards achieving brand based KPIs, and then relying on very technical teams equipped with machines to achieve more direct response based KPIs.

There is a assumption that once a campaign goes live, optimisation will happen naturally using complex algorithms that are too complex for humans to understand.

Computer algorithms can be very good at predicting future behaviour based on past behaviour but if only the computer understands why. Drivers of behaviour need to be understood throughout the purchase journey if we want to learn and improve advertising effectiveness. I believe a layer of psychology needs to be applied to data to be able to respond to behaviours with the right brand stimuli.

As big data is driving personality research, personality research needs to be applied back into activation.

WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

The personality approach comes with a degree of controversy, made worse by its very public application to high profile political campaigns - so how do we navigate the ethical implications?

Until now, the contrast between the omniscient, highly sophisticated advertising that people thought we were capable of and what we were actually achieving was almost comical. According to Mark Ritson, "we may be about to become as smart and as powerful as everybody in the market assumed we always were."²²

We must adopt very strict data ownership rules and ensure that we do not violate this contract with our consumers at the risk of increased regulation and permanent lack of trust.

Personality could make advertising paradoxically less focused on the individual and their personal data. Of course, this approach implies being able to absorb large quantities of personally identifiable information to begin with. However, the subsequent emphasis on deep rooted behavioural motivations means that individual life events matter less. By understanding personalities, we go back to more universal drivers, shared by relatively large groups of people.

CONCLUSION

We must realise that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and allow this principle to guide our communication. Personal data and addressability are profoundly changing the advertising landscape. This is our chance to completely re-invent the way we build brands, not by becoming slaves to technology but by applying our understanding of human nature and personality science into ever more compelling propositions and experiences. To achieve this, we need to free brands from their rigid and overbearing personas and allow them to become shape shifters.

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