

FAST THINKING

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Designing Connected Brands

Rochelle Martyn

★ Design ★ Entrepreneurs ★ Innovation Management

Every brand is searching for that all-powerful connection with the consumer. Yet the harder brands try to connect, the more disconnected they are becoming.

We have a big problem. We're experiencing an epidemic of disconnected brands and it needs a few smart, brave minds to step outside of the crowd and lead the change.

Both traditional business models and new technology is contributing towards a mass bombardment of out of touch brand design and innovation. Working in closed offices; using the same teams on every project; relying on focus groups and market research to predict the future and anticipate people's wants and needs; and attempting to "connect" through crowd sourcing and social media - has lead to an epidemic of brands that are out of touch and therefore disconnected on many levels.

I walked into a coffee shop a few days ago with a friend, we sat down and the first thing we over heard was... "I know her, and I'm 'friends' with her, but I've never met her..." Social media is successfully 'connecting' people (and brands with people) on a mass level, but we need to ensure this doesn't make us lazy, or act as a replacement, when it comes to real connections and being truly in touch with people's wants and needs.

Ironically, perceived 'connection' is in fact breeding mass 'disconnection'. And the faster and bigger this grows the harder we have to work to repair what has started to become the default of real relationship building.

In a contradictory world that fears change, yet craves innovation, what matters most is understanding what people want, need and connect with. If you don't have a grasp of this, how can you possibly design the future?

Of the 30,000 new products that launch each year, 95% of them fail. This is in large part due to their lack of connection with people's real wants and needs. This seems like a huge waste of time and resources. So why not use resources wisely, think differently, and step out on the right foot.

The most connected brands, like Apple, Method, Virgin, Google... were all created by individuals that are in touch with people and the world around them. Everybody wants to be like them. They are innovating leaders. So what can we learn from them?

These brands were invented through observing and understanding consumers conscious and unconscious needs and wants, and then by creating products and services that meet these. As time evolves, so have their brands. They innovate constantly to remain relevant to consumers changing lifestyles, and the changing world around them. They have used their insight and intuition to create big ideas, executed to perfection. They recognize the power of simplicity, when coupled with substance.

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Now these brands are today's leaders, but who's going to step up to become the leaders of tomorrow? There are a number of challenger brands constantly entering into the saturated market place... Jet Blue, Innocent, Help Remedies... to name a few. These brands have disrupted the market place with new thinking, finding a different way to meet what consumers want and thereby creating that all-powerful connection. These brands were created by innovative thinkers and individuals with a big vision.

Richard Fine and Nathan Frank are the founders of pharmaceutical brand Help Remedies. They had the idea to create a brand that helped to make solving simple health issues simple. Their range of healthcare products strip away the complexity and fear mongering of the health industry, making it more approachable and empowering for people to make their own health care choices. They have a simple language that connects with consumers needs, such as "Help. I have a headache" or "Help. I have a blister". It removes the traditionally daunting language barrier of this category, creating a light-hearted, approachable tone-of-voice that talks the consumers language.

The Innocent smoothie founders (Richard Reed, Adam Balon and Jon Wright) created a drinks brand that makes it easy for people to do themselves some good. Their simple and honest language is down to earth and connects with consumers in a way that they can relate to on a daily basis, building their product into hectic lifestyles as one healthy habit. They've successfully built their brand and bought it to life beyond packaging in a way that connects with the needs of people and local communities. Their ongoing innovation remains true to their brand, relevant to consumers needs, and reaches new people.

For brands to stand a chance of survival, you need to have a great idea that you believe in, that fulfills a real consumer need, whether small or big. Aim to make lives better or easier. Then express this through a simple, powerful design idea, just like the innovating leader and challenger brands, and you're off to a good start.

The goal is to attract attention, captivate the audience and build intimate connections with consumers that intensify and grow over a period of time. New products and services need to be innovative, intense and touch the hearts of the masses. But creating the ideas in the first place is the biggest challenge of all. Great ideas and innovations come from entrepreneurial thinkers, visionary individuals and networks of smart thinkers that are in touch with what's going on around them. Observing behaviors and patterns; having the space to explore and play with new possibilities; breaking free from the traditional and conventional ways; utilizing a network of smart thinkers; are ways in which innovative thinkers design the future.

Gathering a powerful, eclectic mix of expertise and valuable creative thinking is the way to innovate. Big companies, with big teams, move slower and don't spend enough time looking beyond hunkering down in the office, working through systems and processes and over researching to kill great ideas. So the advice is to keep it small and fluid, encourage innovative individuals to rise to the surface, spend more time observing, listening and thinking beyond what's immediately in front of you. So Get out there and *get in touch*.

