polluted. Thanks, ironically enough, to global-
world. The more companies promote the value
d to seem ethically robust and environmentally
ıcceed in advancing the interests of those they
The fact remains that brands give them far more
otherwise have. Companies may grumble about
ies of brand "fascism" are complaining.

TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

Naomi Klein

The young blonde girl has a bar code tattooed on her forehead as if she were a box of corn flakes. The indignant words "I am NOT a piece of your inventory" appear beside her. And in the corner: "www.zeroknowlege.com."

When I first saw this print ad, I figured it was just another dot.com trying to do the reverse-marketing thing: isn't it terrible the way kids are preyed upon by marketers? Listen, we feel your pain. Now let us tell you about a great new way to buy toothpaste online. . . .

What I didn't know at the time was that Zero Knowledge sells encryption software for the Internet that allows users to surf and make purchases without having their every move "data mined" by market researchers. This isn't another "Image Is Nothing, Thirst Is Everything" Sprite campaign; Zero Knowledge really is selling a product that protects kids from predatory marketing, just like the ad claims. In other words, this company was doing something very strange indeed: in a marketscape filled with cognitive dissonance, double talk and outright lies, it was telling the truth. The possibility hadn't even occurred to me.

If I seem cynical, it's because I have spent far too much time studying corporate branding campaigns and their complicated relationship with the truth. I'm not talking about whether Tide really gets your clothes whiter but another, more problematic kind of advertising truth. Over the past fifteen years, most successful brand-driven companies have attempted to cut through the clutter of consumer culture by forging deeper, more lasting relationships with their customers. They have done this, for the most part, by developing sophisticated "brand identities," a process which, for lack of a better description, is about identifying the inner truth of a corporation.

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In many ways, the branding process mimics the rituals of spiritual or religious quests for truth and enlightenment. To identify their company's brand identity, executives and brand managers sequester themselves in retreats as they probe the deepest meanings of Unilever or Cisco Systems. They emerge from their Socratic sweat lodges clutching profound truths about human aspirations and ideals. We have heard from Nike, for instance, that it is not a shoe company but an organization whose mission is to communicate notions of transcendence. We have heard from Starbucks that it isn't about coffee, but community and "the third place"; we have heard from Microsoft that it is not a software company but a possibilities company, that IBM sells not computers, but "solutions." Martha Stewart is not a home decorator or a caterer but an ideology about old-time family nurturing and doing it yourself. Polaroid's inner brand is joy, not to be confused with the Gap, which isn't selling clothing but unrestrained exuberance.

After their inner truths have been revealed, these companies then produce extraordinarily elegant brand image campaigns to express their new identities. This is a very involved process. First, it requires constant transfusions of fresh meaning: new political ideas, new music, new ideas about community, new historical figures to mine. Next, it requires new pieces of cultural real estate to play host to the campaigns: branded lifestyle magazines, sponsored concerts and art exhibitions, interactive superstores, billboards so large they swallow entire buildings.

Dwarfed by these ambitious branding projects, it becomes difficult for mere mortals to compete with their own expressions of meaning, which is precisely why, increasingly, it is brands—not intellectuals or activists or religious leaders—that are the principle truth-tellers of our corporate age. They are the ones speaking loudest about meaning, helping us to look with awe and wonder at the world, even if what we are looking at, ultimately, are branded sneakers, lattes and laptop computers.

Quite understandably, the people behind these campaigns have come to think of themselves as cultural philosophers, spiritual guides, artists, even political leaders. For instance, Benetton, rather than using its ads to extol the virtues of its clothing, opted instead to communicate what Oliviero Toscani believed to be fundamental truths about the injustice of capital punishment. According to the company's communication policy, "Benetton believes that it is important for companies to take a stance in the real world instead of using their advertising budget to perpetuate the myth that they can make consumers happy through the mere purchase of their product."

It seems like a noble goal, yet Benetton's political branding campaigns implicitly promise customers a happiness of another sort—not just beauty, status or style, the traditional claims fashion companies make, but virtue and engagement. And that's where the problems arise, because this claim is simply not true. Benetton's clothing has nothing to do with AIDS or war or the lives of prisoners on death row, and by using these issues in sweater advertisements, Benetton is inserting a layer of distance and mediation—represented by the Benetton name itself—between consumers and these important issues. Put another way, Benetton's political campaigns aren't about truth *in* advertising, but truth *instead* of advertising, the transformation of truth itself into a marketing product.

Though less dramatically, this experience is present in almost all ambitious brand-meaning projects. There is a fundamental dichotomy between the promise embedded in brand meaning campaigns—of community, of transcendence, of pure joy—and the usually banal experience of consumption. Quite simply, branding doesn't deliver. We don't find community at Starbucks, a global commons through Cisco or transcendence through Nike, just as we don't find political engagement through Benetton.

Because enlightenment is permanently out of stock at the mall, as brand managers seek to deepen their quest for truth and meaning, they necessarily sever ties with the products and services they are actually selling, thereby fostering even more cognitive dissonance. The brand has evolved, as Tibor Kalman put it, from a mark of quality on the product to a "stylistic badge of courage" on the consumer. And because these badges, no matter how beautiful, no matter how filled with brilliant insight, have been divorced from the products they represent, the entire corporate branding industry is rapidly poisoning our relationship with the very idea of truth.

It shouldn't be at all surprising that this process is breeding a kind of anti-brand backlash. As marketing becomes more ambitious, and brand identities more meaning-filled, companies such as Nike, Starbucks, Wal-Mart and Microsoft are increasingly finding themselves the target of activist campaigns slamming them for everything from alleged sweatshop abuses to predatory business practices. More and more, activists, connected to one another on the Internet, are taking the claims that corporations make in their marketing campaigns and measuring them against their real-world corporate practices, with often devastating results. Commenting on the phenomenon, Scott Bedbury, a former brand manager for both Nike and Starbucks, describes the Internet as "a truth serum" for brands, actively helping consumers to expose the hypocrisy behind even the most successful branding campaigns.

This rise of anti-brand activism is a direct response to the dichotomy between the powerful claims brands place on truth and meaning, and the reality of what consumer products deliver and how they are manufactured. The branding economy is a series of broken promises, of unfulfilled desires. It feeds off of all that is truthful in our culture and then ritualistically betrays those truths by using them not for self-knowledge or social change, but as props.