The Brand Gap (2005)

"The Brand Gap" is bursting with wisdom about defining a brand. "A brand is a person's gut feeling about a product, service, or company," author Marty Neumeier says. "It's a GUT FEELING…a kind of Platonic ideal—a concept shared by society to identify a specific class of things." (Neumeier 2)

At the core of a brand is trust, which is "the ultimate shortcut to a buying decision, and is the bedrock of modern branding" (Neumeier 11). Surrounding that core are the things that set a brand apart from its competition. A brand must be unique, but also singular in purpose. "Keep it pure, keep it different," says Neumeier (Neumeier 33). And it must also have a voice: "Any brand, backed by enough courage and imagination, can become a charismatic brand." (Neumeier 19)

Central to finding an identity, Neumeier believes that three questions should be asked by brands of themselves: 1) Who are you? 2) What do you do? and 3) Why does it matter? (Neumeier 31) Around the answers to these three questions, Neumeier builds five pillars of branding, key to a brand's success: Differentiate, Collaborate, Innovate, Validate, and Cultivate (Neumeier 19). From here, the book goes into detail about each of these pillars. For a deeper dive on being able to "Differentiate," Neumeier wrote the book "ZAG."

With brand identity, Neumeier believes in the strategic as well as the artistic, and gives equal ground to both. "The traditional view of design is that it has four possible goals: to identify, to inform, to entertain, or to persuade," Neumeier says. "But with branding there's a fifth: to differentiate. While the first four are tactical, the fifth is strategic, with its roots deep in aesthetics" (Neumeier 35).

Neumeier's introduction of the historical progression of the consumer's experience with a brand is very easy to understand, if not unforgettable. "The attention of marketing has shifted from features, to benefits, to experience, to tribal identification" (Neumeier 38). The question today is not "What will it do?" or "What will it do for me?" but rather "What will it make me?" Building a tribe is no easy task, as barriers to entry still hold up even the most well equipped brand builders.

Although the concept of a tribe is easy to understand, building one is not easy. The global communications network growing and connecting us to our neighbors in ways never before possible isn't nearly as permeable as the concept of a "global village" once envisioned by sociologists and behavioral scientists of the past. As Neumeier describes it, what we have today is essentially "an electronic layer on top" of our old divisions and boundaries that divide us as humans (Neumeier 40). The keys to breaking through, however, may lie in Neumeier's five pillars.

Throughout "The Brand Gap," Neumeier raises many good questions and draws many great conclusions, but sometimes his points miss. When he discussed the introduction of the Cayenne by Porsche as a break from the wiser brand strategy to stick to your

category (Neumeier 47), he completely ignores the fact that Porsche as a company may have been on the ropes with a weak American economy in 2002 when they introduced the crossover-SUV (CNN). In a way, Neumeier walks his criticism of Porsche back later in the book, when he states "brands can afford to be inconsistent, as long as they don't abandon their defining attributes. They're like people" (Neumeier 133). That's a great line, and worth committing to memory, but it also contradicts the author's belief that Porsche was doing the wrong thing. The Cayenne may not be a two-door sports car, but it is still everything a Porsche is.

Whether ignoring economics or not, Neumeier's analogies throughout "The Brand Gap" are incredible. "Building a brand today is a little like building a cathedral during the Renaissance. It took hundreds of craftsmen scores of years, even generations, to complete a major edifice. Each craftsman added his own piece to the project….Like yesterday's cathedrals, many of today's brands are too large and too complex to be managed by one person or one department. The require teams of specialists, sharing ideas and coordinating the efforts across a creative network." (Neumeier 52)

Many outstanding anecdotes are also shared by Neumeier, including these ones about consumer testing and focus groups: "Sony founder Akio Morita believed that testing new ideas was folly. 'Our plan is to LEAD the public,' he said. 'They do not know what is possible.'" Neumeier goes on to point out that Henry Ford also eschewed market research, quoting Ford as saying 'If we had asked the public what the wanted, they would have said 'faster horses.'" (Neumeier 106)

Beyond illustrating his points so perfectly throughout the book, Neumeier sprinkles the book with tidbits of wisdom, like when he voices his opinion that "Aristotle was a born brander. He believed that 'perception starts with the eye,' and that 'the greatest thing be far is to be a master of metaphor" (Neumeier 88). Further in the book, Neumeier makes a bold statement that can be taken into account when building a brand, or anything in advertising for that matter: "It is usually better to get a rough answer to the right question than a detailed answer to the wrong question" (Neumeier 113). In my opinion, one of his finest lines talks about the need to be compelling but relevant, when he says "…it's possible to be attention-getting without being relevant, like a girly calendar issued by an auto parts company." (Neumeier 128)

Neumeier is also an advocate for the evolution of the symbols that represent a brand. He gets right to it: "Logos are dead. Long live icons and avatars!" (Neumeier 87). But Neumeier doesn't just pay lip service to the idea that adding motion and depth to a flat logo adds to your brand identity. He dives into the concept, expressing that when your brand goes beyond a logo, you can tell more about yourself. "When conceived well, an icon is a repository of meaning…. An avatar goes even further by becoming the symbolic actor in a continuing brand story." (Neumeier 88)

When building a brand, packaging is as important in Neumeier's mind as anything else. "For many products the package is the branding. It's also the last and best chance to influence a prospect this side of the checkout counter" (Neumeier 90). With so much

riding on it, packaging must be done right. "Before you can create emotion with a package, you need to understand the natural reading sequence of your category." 1) The shopper notices the package. 2) The shopper mentally asks, "What is it?" 3) The shopper asks "Why should I care?" 4) If that is answered with a why-to-buy message, a desire for more information is elicited, and then 5) the shopper is finally ready to learn about features, price, compatibilities, guarantees, awards…whatever the category dictates. (Neumeier 91)

Nothing speaks to today's digital world more clearly than Neumeier's thoughts on how communications needs to adapt in a changing world. "The standard model for communications has three components: sender, message, and receiver," Neumeier says. "What this model fails to recognize is that real world communication is a dialog…. The standard model is an antique." (Neumeier 101)

In the author's eyes—and hopefully after reading "The Brand Gap," the reader's as well, brands are part of the fabric of humanity. Brands and their names and identities originate with customers, "and customers will always want convenient ways of identifying, remembering, discussing, and comparing brands." (Neumeier 82)

Also cited: http://archives.cnn.com/2002/BUSINESS/03/05/porsche/

ZAG (2006)

Of the five disciplines of branding as outlined in "The Brand Gap," "ZAG" explores the concept of differentiation. As Neumeier says, "The new rule: When everybody zigs, zag." (Neumeier 26)

Today's real competition—competition that's so pervasive we can't even see it—doesn't come from direct or even indirect competitors. It comes from the extreme clutter of the marketplace" (Neumeier 6). Unfortunately, the clutter only begets more clutter. "Despite a 75% increase in advertising, evidence shows that we're paying less attention to any given product, service, message, or medium," Neumeier says. But the response to the clutter is met with more clutter from advertisers, which is, as he calls it "like trying to put out a fire with gasoline" (Neumeier 11).

It's getting bad. While "92% of people skip the commercials on their recorded programs," advertising has had to resort to "sneaking advertising into editorial copy, television content, movies, and events, all under the euphemistic heading of product placement" (Neumeier 22). Getting your message seen and heard are as easy and also as difficult as ever. Neumeier seems to be getting ready to prepare a eulogy for advertising, but then he suggests that advertising will survive because smart people.

Ultimately, a company must differentiate. "What stops most companies from zagging," Neumeier says, "is the cloud of uncertainty that follows innovation" (Neumeier 34). He goes on to say "companies need to think like artists when they're looking for new market space, because new market space, or 'white space,' is the secret to zagging" (Neumeier 40). In Neumeier's eyes, "the first step in building a brand is to look inside and see where the raw energy will come from." (Neumeier 48)

In "ZAG," Neumeier puts forth one of the most incredible metaphors for brand definition I've ever read. His method to discovering your zag actually starts at the end of your brand's life. "25 years from now your company is wiped out. Now, sit down and write your company's obituary" (Neumeier 50). In order to figure out what you do best, it may help to look back and see what you were doing rather than looking ahead. Either way, you're trying to predict the future—and that's not exactly what you are aiming to do when trying to build an identity.

Trends drive branding. "When focus and differentiation are powered by a trend, the result is a charismatic brand that customers wouldn't trade for love nor money," Neumeier says. "When you look under the hood of a high-performance brand, you almost always find it's powered by a trend" (Neumeier 56). It's nearly impossible to outright own a trend—after all, if no one else was interested it wouldn't be a trend. Meanwhile, being smaller or arriving late to the game isn't always a recipe for failure. "The biggest winner," Neumeier says, "is not the brand that's first into the marketplace, but the one that's first into people's minds" (Neumeier 61) Still, Neumeier believes that if you're not one of the top three, "it usually makes more sense to start a new category than to battle the top three incumbents." (Neumeier 62)

Competition isn't always so obvious when it comes to capitalizing on a trend. "Sometimes the enemy is not a competing company but the old way of doing things," according to Neumeier (Neumeier 81). A brand must always be aware of trends, and even more importantly, be aware enough to know what to do when the trend they were riding ceases to be one. IBM is an example Neumeier points to. "How do you get a complex organization [like IBM] to execute a simple idea? Of course, first you have to get a simple idea—a zag. Second, you have to use 'generative learning' rather than 'simple learning," but most importantly, the answer to that question "'…requires that the organization do something different, value something more than it has in the past, acquire skills it doesn't have'" (Neumeier 126). Often times finding the zag means parting with the long-standing way of doing business. "When a company needs to get itself from a dying market to an emerging one, the best vehicle may be a 'two-stage rocket," Neumeier says, later pointing the fact that Kodak made such a move. (Neumeier 133)

In "ZAG," Neumeier introduces the *onliness* statement and the *trueline.* "An *onliness* statement provides a framework for your zag," Neumeier says (Neumeier 68). And although the statement should be well thought out, it should not be wordy or confusing. "If you can't keep it brief and use the word ONLY, then you don't have a zag" (Neumeier 66). A *trueline*, on the other hand,, may not set you apart, but it is something that you

can own. "A *trueline*," Neumeier says, "is the one true thing you can say about your brand, based on your onliness statement." (Neumeier 86)

You also need to fit into your customer's life in some way. "Brand alignment is the practice of linking your business strategy to customer experience," Neumeier says. And while you can certainly become to first brand that comes to a consumer's mind for one thing, or even more, Neumeier warns to not try and become everything to everyone. You can dilute the power of your brand, and open yourself up to attack even where you have the sturdiest ground to stand on. "If adding an element to your brand brings you into competition with a stronger competitor, think twice." (Neumeier 73)

"What will the customers get from joining the tribe?" Neumeier asks (Neumeier 78). Coming back to the concept of consumer tribes so memorably described in "The Brand Gap," Neumeier explains further how to get people into the one that belongs to you. "Customers experience your brand at specific touchpoints, so choosing what those touchpoints are, and influencing what happens there, is important work," he says. "More to the point," Neumeier says, "where should you NOT put them?" (Neumeier 96)

Once they are part of your tribe, when "customers are loyal, 1) they stop considering other brands, 2) they request your brand by name, 3) they recommend your brand to others, 4) they wait longer and travel farther to get your brand, 5) they accept brand extensions more readily, and 6) they continue to pay a premium price" (Neumeier 100).

Neumeier cautions, however, that there is no magic combination that can make a customer become a part of your tribe. "Loyalty can't be programmed." (Neumeier 101) On the other hand, loyalty can be completely unseen and unfelt. Neumeier quotes Samuel Johnson's take on the "chains of habit," saying that they are as Johnson said, "too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken." (Neumeier 124)

When they buy from your tribe, they won't necessarily buy everything from your tribe. "Customers want choice, but they really want it AMONG brands, not WITHIN brands" (Neumeier 108). Which is why Neumeier believes that brands cannot be spread out across categories, but instead, should fit into a house. When it comes to the idea of a house of brands, "each brand must be funded, built, and managed separately." Even when done right, Neumeier says, "all the offerings won't benefit equally from the company brand" (Neumeier 105). When you try to spread your brand's "stickiness," or the foothold it has in a consumer's mind, you can run into problems. "Not only does stickiness limit stretchiness, but a downward stretch pulls perceived value down with it." (Neumeier 110)

Just as with "The Brand Gap," Neumeier provides excellent analogies, shares perfect anecdotes, and brings the concept of zagging to life with wisdom and wit. The excellent metaphor he for the life of a brand with the children's game of scissors, paper rock (Neumeier 116) may be one of the easiest to understand illustrations of the life of a brand.