



ANDERSON JUNIOR COLLEGE

JC2 Preliminary Examination 2015

GENERAL PAPER

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PAPER 2

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Lee Anderson considers the effects of branding and image on society.

- 1 'Born' in 1921 to proud corporate parents, the endearing Betty Crocker, synonymous with boxed cake mixes and canned frosting, has been carefully nurtured into one of the most successful branding campaigns the world has ever known. She was originally created to provide housewives with cooking, baking, and domestic advice, and, as her popularity burgeoned, she was given a face, a voice, and her very own signature. Her appeal to housewives was so great that she had her own cooking show and radio programme. She even became the second best-known 'woman' in America in 1945, following First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Previously known as the First Lady of Food, the name of Betty Crocker remains current today, sharing advice and recipes with loyal followers on a contemporary and well-maintained website. All this is only made possible with clever marketing and effective branding. 5 10
- 2 Branding has never been more important than it is today, as it helps a company to maintain its prominence in the market. Apt brand promotion is necessary especially with the increasing levels of global competition that businesses face in most industries. To capture new markets, companies need effective branding to penetrate people's wall of indifference towards their products or services and create brand heat and product lust. In the face of current economic challenges that have been gripping much of the modern world, it is worth noting that brands do better in tough times compared to unbranded products. Indeed, companies that can withstand economic recessions are those that manage to seduce the growing middle class in countries like India, China and Brazil into buying premium brands at premium prices, arguably to a point of obsession. 15 20
- 3 Are brands really worth the price consumers pay for them? Nobody can deny that some brands can remain appealing for long periods because of the tried and tested quality of their products. Still, not all brands necessarily have products that truly match up to their name. The appeal of brands is often built around people's perception. People see what they want regardless of the reality that surrounds them. Indeed, this illusion becomes their reality. If facts were to rule the day in marketing, many of the top consumer brands would be relegated to the bottom shelf. If not for the power of branding in manipulating perception, many new brands would not evolve beyond mere business plans, as some recognised brands have already established a perception of strength, quality, or leadership in the minds of consumers. It seems that all that matters in the world of business is that consumers believe in the image that brands strive to portray. Hence, it is not without reason that some marketing strategists believe that having a better brand is better than having a better product. Brand is perception and perception is reality. 25 30 35
- 4 Indeed, so powerful is perception that it can even devalue how we view others and even ourselves. Many, including celebrities, go online to build a particular image – one that they may not morally agree with, and may even resort to lying and deliberately engaging in destructive behaviour – just to get more attention from others and increase their self-worth. Such obsession has morphed conventional branding into a highly narcissistic exercise – one selfie at a time. People may make hopeless attempts to take that immaculate Instagram-worthy selfie, only to be obsessively analysed by others and even by themselves. On one end of the spectrum will be those believed to have won the gene pool lottery and are deemed to be the epitome 40 45

of beauty, and on the other, the 'lesser' mortals. Such obsession with image can also cause great harms to the body and bank account. A simple and mindless comment can drive some to break the bank to go under the knife to achieve the 'perfect' look, only to end up as victims of botched surgeries. Others seek to complete presumably worthy challenges – planking¹, batmanning², and fire challenge³ – that get them burnt, bruised, battered and bloodied. When people's attempts to build a perfect image fail, they often get ridiculed, which deals a further blow to their already low esteem, and can cause them to isolate themselves from their peers and the world. 50

5 Despite knowing that image is superficial and that it is rarely real, people remain fixated on their image and that of others. Seductive or repulsive, dazzling or ordinary, chic or dated – image has a stranglehold on society. No one understands this better than people with political ambitions, who often engage a team of professional image consultants to coach them on their physical appearance, body language, and even the way they speak to convey an image of a strong, approachable leader. Voters are so attuned to embracing images that they are unknowingly swayed by such subliminal messages embedded in campaigns. At the ballot box, it is the overall package they vote for. Candidates with sound policies but with less adept political campaigners often end up trailing behind in the polls and may not get elected. 55 60

6 A well-crafted positive image weathers negative comments on controversial business practices. Nike's Swoosh remains popular even if it has been linked to sweatshops. Clever advertising allows companies to distract consumers from their immoral deeds. Unilever, which owns Dove, has been accused of deforestation of the Sumatran Rainforest to grow oil palms used in its products. Yet, Dove has grown from a \$200 million soap brand in the early 1990s into a brand that is estimated to be worth nearly \$4 billion today, all thanks to the impressive cultivation of a socially responsible image. In addition, some of these companies' success can also be attributed to them consciously associating the brand with a higher purpose and making consumers identify with them. Hence, despite some companies' less than scrupulous practices, their profits are unscathed. 65 70

7 Branding can have unintended effects too. Companies can be so fixated on projecting an impeccable image of their brand that they may not be mindful of how a diverse audience can interpret their intended advertised messages. Sometimes, the image which was carefully cultivated can be perceived by consumers in markedly different ways and ironically end up reducing sales. Victoria's Secret's tagline "The Perfect Body" and its stereotyping of feminine beauty unwittingly communicated an offensive message to an increasingly informed and vocal consumer base. Consumers today are more than able to see beyond the guise of sophisticated advertising, and have no qualms about castigating companies which they believe are promoting socially damaging values. Companies that fail to understand evolving market sentiments can unwittingly hurt their own image and brand beyond measure. 75 80 85

8 It is nonetheless unlikely that we are able to shake off the influence that brands have on us completely. Brands seek to become symbols of quality and reliability in the marketplace. Reinventing an image can help a brand stay relevant in the long haul. Just look at how Betty's image has evolved over the years – from a typical housewife in the 1920s to a strong, empowered career woman in the 1990s, to a faceless brand today. A powerful brand dwells and grows in the mind of the consumer. 90

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¹ planking: also known as the lying down game where the participant lies face down in unusual locations, keeping the hands along the body and the feet outstretched. When this plank-like position is achieved, a photo is taken and then posted to the Internet.

² batmanning: hanging upside down from something by the strength of your feet and ankles

³ fire challenge: the application of flammable liquids to one's body and then setting the liquids aflame, while being recorded on video##

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