
No Logo

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Book review

There are many ways to recognise a truly great book. Does it alter or enlighten your perspective on a topic? Does it retain relevance? Does it explain or predict phenomena that will impact your job – or even your life? These qualities are rare in the modern world, where mass production and bestseller lists guide our knowledge, usually directly back into the mainstream. No Logo by Naomi Klein may have topped bestseller lists, but it accomplished far, far more than that.

Klein describes the idea behind No Logo as being based on a hunch and inspired by protests against multinationals that had become an ever-increasing reality in the mid nineties. Her hunch turned out to be so accurate and so well defined that it not only encapsulated the movement but became a symbol for it. No Logo seemed to articulate people's dissatisfaction in a way they themselves could not. Ironically, No Logo became the logo for those who were tired of the relentless intrusion of brands in their lives and the consequences this was having globally.

Initially the book gives a neat and concise history of the brand and the business of marketing. This recollection explains in some detail the birth of the brand and the logo as a natural extension of the age of mass production. As consumers could no longer expect the friendly and trustworthy traditional shopkeeper, companies were quick to replace them with a great variety of smiling creations to fill the gap. The Quaker man and Aunt Jemima beamed from packaging, hoping to instill the same confidence in a product that was mass-produced in a factory far away.

This range of wholesome characters made up the majority of brands and logos at the time. It was also the supposed death of these icons that catalysed a new era of "superbrands". Any marketer worth their salt should have more than a passing knowledge of "Black Friday".

Despite continuous and vocal advocacy of the power of the brand and one of the most globally recognised icons, it was Marlboro cigarettes that ended branding as we knew it. After a serious downturn in profitability, Philip Morris announced that they would be slashing advertising and had decided to discount their product. Wall Street and news outlets quickly pronounced the death of advertising and the demise of the brand. To quote an oft-used Hollywood line, "stories of advertising's death were greatly exaggerated".

In truth, during this economic recession many companies opted for bargain bins over brands, but they are inconsequential. The more important story revolves around the companies that saw a sudden lack of competition as an opportunity. The global brands that are now household names that we recognise today seem to have shared a common: belief that rather than dispersing of their marketing and brands, they doubled down on their investment and used the less populated to entrench themselves in the minds of their customers.

Nike, Apple, McDonald's, Microsoft and many others retained the philosophy that there was great value in the brands they had created. The question was not one of dispensing with marketing, but rather how to maximise its impact. Both the aim and approach to branding radically changed during this period. In the simplest terms, companies looked for ideas and movements within society and pinned their products to them. Thus began the creation of lifestyle brands, the success of which could be judged by how readily they were adopted and how easily the brand could transition from a hidden presence that was stitched within the collar, to pride of place on the shirt pocket or directly above the heart.

The idea that wearing a brand seemed lame to the new reality that a brand spoke for you and your values or personality. Consider how few people nowadays would say no to a free branded Nike product, but would probably be less keen on the same product with all branding removed.

Klein makes use of three criteria that elucidate the natural evolution of this process to engulf every aspect of our lives.

No Space

An obvious conclusion that it seems almost impossible to find an unbranded surface in our modern lives. In the late nineties, when the book was released, Pizza Hut had launched their new logo by placing it on a NASA rocket, but openly admitted that this was their second option. All initial attempts at launching their new logo had concentrated on branding the moon. It seemed that the traditional public spaces had been co-opted into selling you something. With this came a new set of rules that protected the message to the detriment of the public. Essentially, they had become privatised by default. While malls may constantly attempt to invoke the idea of the traditional town centre, they are fundamentally different. Try organising a protest against Starbucks in a mall and see how quickly the police arrive to remove you. Despite this let us not forget that Starbucks is not a coffee company, they sell the importance of community.

No Choice

Klein makes a strong argument about the impact of dominant companies on the choices available to us. The most powerful example is Walmart, which at the time was first on the Fortune 500 list. With the brand's carefully constructed family-friendly image and its massive consumer base, Walmart has become an unseen censor in the lives of its customers. Revolving displays of shotguns became perfectly acceptable, but there is no way that offensive lyrics or controversial books are going to appear on Walmart's shelves. Only a brave label would produce a CD that Walmart would refuse to sell, considering it accounted for 30% of all music sales in the US. While Spotify has marked the end of such power, it is not as simple in every case. Disney's branded town, Celebration, Florida has to be seen to be believed.

No Jobs

The link to companies investing in the brand and not the actual product may be acceptable around the boardroom table and in press releases, but the consequences are dire. The role these corporations play in the existence of sweatshops, job redundancies, and the creation of the aptly titled "McJobs" may have been largely ignored, but a united a resistance is building against them. Nike, Apple, Gap, McDonald's, and others have been recognised as primary contributors to human rights violations. This is not a part of everyday life that the companies would like to own.

In conclusion

No Logo provides a clear step in the timeline of brand evolution, how it manifests, and its consequences. To the question as to whether it retains relevant to this day, the answer is simple; when one considers the ubiquity of the term "Millennial" with a lack of understanding that Naomi Klein remains the intellectual godmother of the movement, has a far greater impact than the technology to which it is so often attributed.