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Was Peter Drucker Wrong? The Modern Purpose Of A Brand

One month ago I found myself sitting in a room with about 50 attendees for Wharton's 2nd Annual Customer Centricity Event and there was a panel discussing the purpose of the brand. It was moderated by Wharton's Professor Peter Fader, author of *Customer Centricity: Focus On The Right Customers For Strategic Advantage* and co-director of the Wharton Customer Analytics Initiative, and also featured Denise Lee Yohn, author of *What Great Brands Do*.

Someone brought up the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty and there was a heated debate in the room. Many of the men in the room said the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty was not a successful campaign. Woman after woman in the audience raised her hand to explain the tangentially related benefits of the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty.



It was hard to follow every person's barometer for success as they argued their stance. Perhaps this is because today not everyone agrees on the purpose of the brand. What is Dove's purpose? Is it to sell soap?

The purpose of business—according to Peter Drucker one of the most popular management gurus of the 20th century—is to create a customer. But what about the purpose of a brand? How does this popular management quote apply to business today?

Customer Centricity Defined

After the Wharton event I called up Peter Fader, the Wharton Professor and host of the Customer Centricity event. I wanted to clarify the comments that were said regarding the Dove Campaign For Real Beauty. Why did so many people in the room disagree about this campaign? Fader told me after the event he thought the campaign was “overall positive,” but it was not a good example of what he calls “customer centricity.” According to Fader Customer centricity is when the brand identifies who the most valuable customers are and makes them more valuable. Fader recommends the brand surround customers with products and services and creates enough influence that the customer sees them as a trusted advisor. This creates a relationship more so than a transaction. **During the Dove discussion at the Wharton event panelist Denise Lee Yohn argued that Dove was not trying to sell soap with its “Real Beauty” campaign.** Not everyone felt that way. Fader said in our phone interview, “The purpose of a brand is about pushing a product.” He commented later that he believed his view to be extreme.

That brings us back to our question is the purpose of a brand to create a customer, or is it something else?

The Dove Campaign For Real Beauty

According to Wikipedia:

- “ The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty is a worldwide [marketing campaign](#) launched by [Unilever](#) in 2004 aimed to celebrate the natural physical variation embodied by all women and inspire them to have the confidence to be comfortable with themselves. The strategy discarded the brand essence ladder typically used by Unilever and called for a mission strategy ‘To make women feel comfortable in the skin they are in, to create a world where beauty is a source of confidence and not anxiety.’ All campaigns for Dove Real Beauty need then to follow the mission set forth, each with their own insight. The initial campaign insight was an indication that only 2% of women consider themselves beautiful. The video generated 6 million views and started a national conversation about how women are portrayed in the media. But from a traditional business perspective, many people felt this was not a successful exercise in branding. So what is Dove doing? How is Dove’s campaign an example of a new view of branding?

What Would Peter Drucker Say?

Peter Drucker was born in 1909 in Vienna, Austria. He became an American citizen in 1943 and established one of the first executive MBA programs in the country (at Claremont Graduate University). For many who came up in the 60s, 70s, and 80s Drucker was a business guru so profound his words were unquestionable truths. What if we could go back and ask Peter Drucker his opinion on the modern day role of a brand? We can’t ask Peter Drucker, but we can talk to his grandson Nova Spivack. Spivack was the first outside investor in Klout

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(acquired by Lithium) a tool that gauges influence on the web. He is the co-founder and CEO of Bottlenose a big data analytics solution provider. Spivack told me in a phone interview:

“ Brands are culture. I think the purpose of a brand is to create a culture, not just a customer. If you think about it there's a culture around Nike, Coca-Cola, Apple—that culture has stories. It has different stakeholders, it has rituals. What a brand is doing is trying to communicate and transmit that culture to the different stakeholders that participate in that culture. A brand is a cultural artifact. People use brands as an extension of their personality. When we were hunter gatherers when you killed a bear you might wear some of its pelt or claws. Now we wear t-shirts with brands on them to express who we are—our role as a society, and where we fit. Brands transmit culture. It's not so much about creating a customer, but creating a culture—be a cultural artifact that people want to associate themselves with even if they're not your customer. It's not only about selling something.

So Peter Drucker's grandson believes branding has evolved. The purpose of the brand is no longer purely about creating a customer. He tells me that brands are like diseases that travel and infect people. Brands are genes that get passed down through relationships or generations. “They're trying to colonize and survive – in this case in the minds of human beings.”

Clearly Dove didn't appear to focus on a specific customer-type and sell more soap. They were making a statement about their belief systems. They noticed something they felt was wrong in a large demographic of their community (women) and decided to take a stance on an issue.

The Dove campaign for Real Beauty did not make me want to buy Dove soap. In fact for me there is a disconnect between the soap I see at the grocery store and the branding campaigns I am familiar with. However I personally liked the campaigns—I felt they were a bold and welcome discussion on an issue that doesn't get enough attention. I did not go buy soap after seeing their campaign, but their brand has grown on me. I would be open to engaging with the brand in the future—perhaps I would send out a tweet for them or post their campaign to my Facebook wall. Is my interest in their campaign profitable for Dove? No not really. However when there are hundreds of thousands of people like me, engaging in a conversation that they started, doesn't that add up to something valuable for them? I believe it does. In fact according to the [University of Oregon, only 20% of the coverage of the Dove campaign was critical](#) of it.

I will continue to explore this issue in part 2 of this article in early January.

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