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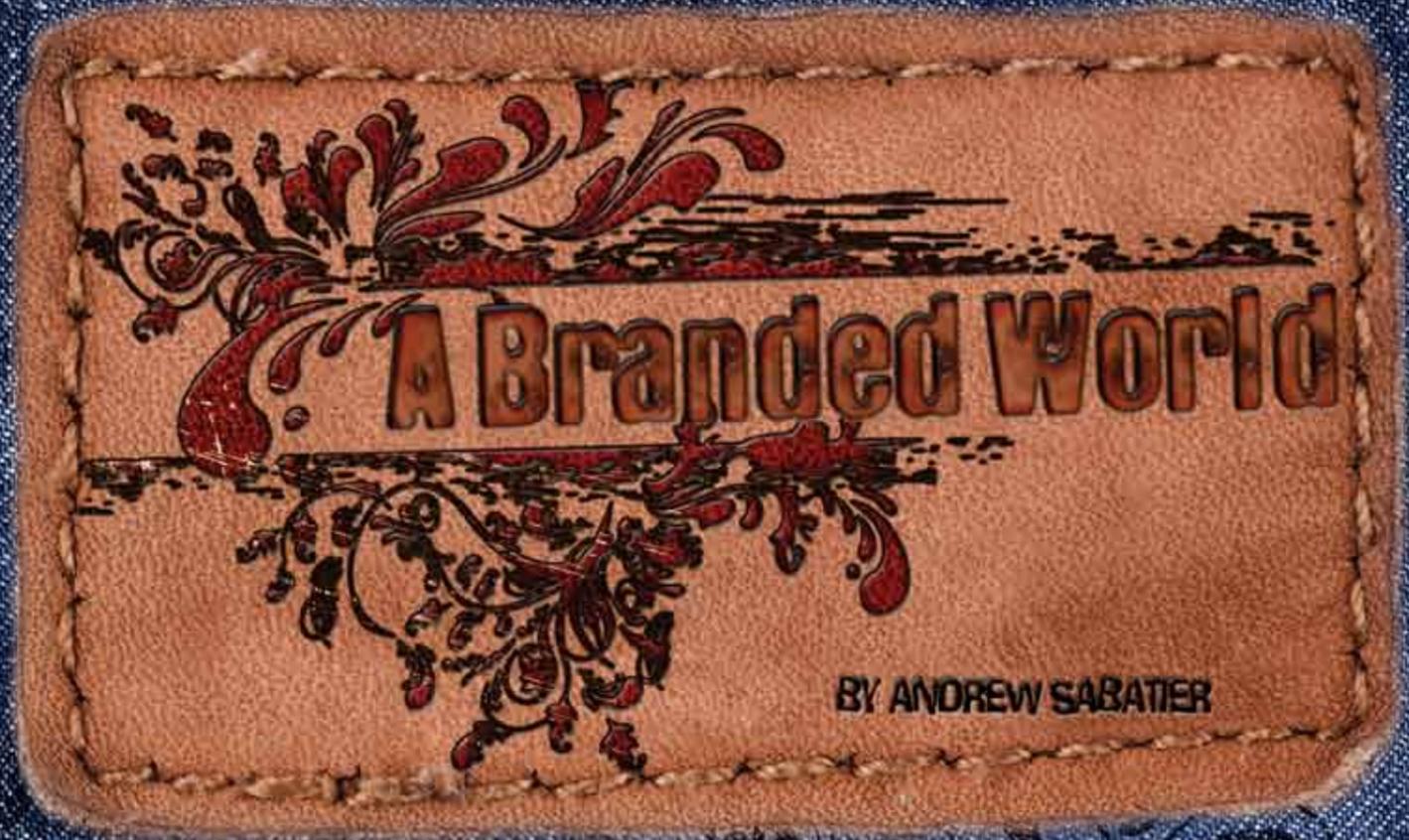
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## BRANDS ARE NOT JUST ABOUT COMMERCE, THEY ENABLE US TO MAKE SENSE OF THE WORLD

People tend to view brands as things to be guarded against, held at arm's length, or as necessary commercial evils, and if left unchecked, will invade every aspect of our lives, turning us into soulless consuming clones. This view demonstrates a limited grasp of the fundamentals of identity and human experience in general. Brands enable people to make their way in the world—brands always have and always will. Any "thing" that constitutes the world can be usefully held as a brand. All that varies between brands is complexity, consistency, and efficacy. The more effectively a brand relates to the world the more it will inspire people to use and promote it. This is how brands become known, this is how they become successful, and this is what makes them so directly relevant to every aspect of our lives.

Andrew Sabatier is a UK-based graphic designer who specializes in brand identity origination and design with a media theory approach to articulating brand strategy. He has more than ten years' experience conceptualizing brands for global brand consultancies and direct clients. He is also a brand critic and theorist, promoting an existential view of the role of brands in society.

**W**hether contemplating existence, cooking a meal, or putting a man on the moon, brands are involved in every instance of every socially significant activity, no matter what type of value is being exchanged. With such a view it's not difficult to realize that without brands experiences worth sharing aren't possible.

This remains true not only for sophisticated consumers in developed countries but across all cultures and for all peoples of the world. Any identity that's articulated sufficiently and held stable enough for future use is effectively a brand. Typically, industrialized First-World terms and tools are used to articulate the most effective brands and, as a result, these are the highly commercialized brands that we know, love, and loathe.

What distinguishes commercial brands from others is that the type of value they trade in is flexible, easily transferred, and immediate. It should come as no surprise that these brands have the most power to affect change, so they get the most attention.

### The marks of experience

According to media theory, all experiences are mediated by terms: terms determine the conditions of environments and these terms direct behavior within those environments. This set of connected ideas plays a key role in understanding the experience of brands.

Established brands tend to provide a rich mix of media, becoming deeply immersive and, therefore, highly memorable experiences for consumers of their products and services. This is what makes the story of the role of brands in society so compelling, and also utterly unavoidable.

Brands are generally identified by their physical and practical attributes. Typically, these are the products and visual marks that most people recognize as logos, but this is the crudest and most basic definition of a brand. A brand is not just a logo or a product; a brand is the overall experience of a particular identity. This includes every aspect of an identity, from the most visceral and practical to the most cerebral and esoteric.

For an identity to be useful, it must be branded, it must be "marked out." Crucially, a branded identity enables the identity to be grasped and understood by consumers, but equally important, this also enables it to be managed effectively. The terms of the brand "mark out" the brand experience and these terms are themselves a type of mark worthy of further study. These are the marks of a brand; they are "brand marks" and these marks determine and mediate all brand experiences.

### Business is a brand strategy

Brands make it their business to become known for offering distinctive experiences. Established brands understand that business is all about experience, either experiences that relate directly to a brand's practical products and services or abstract experiences associated with the brand. Effective brands actively manage their brand strategies in order to bring their products and services to larger audiences. They continually adjust the terms of their brand to remain relevant to people's lives by becoming more effective and ensuring, as much as possible, that they become or remain the preferred choice.

The measure of the success of a strategy is the measure of the brand's effectiveness in the world. A brand has to be relevant to the

task at hand, a task that may be as transient and self-serving as elevating social status or as significant as highlighting the importance of an idea in a broader cultural context, such as the sustainability issues surrounding climate change. One such example is BP.

In the late '90s, following the merger with Amoco, the new company realized that it was worth retaining the BP brand, but the brand identity was no longer fit for purpose. To an increasingly environmentally conscious public, BP began to represent the petroleum age at its worst. A new story was needed to determine a brand identity to express a more relevant and sustainable long-term brand strategy.

As British Petroleum, the BP brand did not reflect the company's global citizenship and pointed at Britain's trouble-stricken imperialist history. This impression was reinforced by BP's old-fashioned and rather militaristic badge. A radical re-imagining of BP was necessary, and a new brand strategy was needed to ensure a sustainable future for the company.



To some degree, BP may be wearing a mask, but in time the features of the brand will take on the features of the mask. For die-hard eco-warriors, this kind of branding may appear as a superficial greenwash, a false mask, but in the realm of appropriately mediated brand experiences, BP has now become a breakaway brand, leading by example. BP's transformed brand identity represents a set of ideas that drives an internal and external business culture that envisions a future (B)eyond (P)etroleum.

Brand strategy and design are best understood as the articulation and coordination of brand marks to make a brand experience not only compelling to consumers, but more effective and graspable so as to also enable the brand to be properly maintained, managed, and steered into a future. Simply put, a brand identity is a brand strategy made experiential.

### Brand imperatives

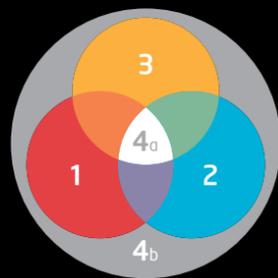
In brand consulting, the reason a brand exists is best handled as an imperative. A product or service is a manifestation of the imperative and usually provides the basis for a marketing strategy and brand identity. In combination, an imperative, strategy, and identity describe the major components of a brand. The brand strategy and identity can be dissected further into types of marks and configuration of those marks.

The brand experience is not only restricted to the customer as an end-user but represents the total experience of the brand identity, including the experience of the people responsible for creating and managing the brand. These people direct the imperatives of the brand; they are responsible for forming and shaping the brand—they are the brand's Imperative Directors.

Perhaps the most well-known and spectacularly successful contemporary example of an Imperative Director is Apple's founder and

## The structure of a brand

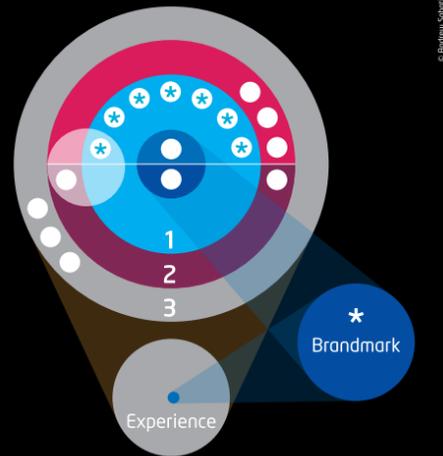
Major components



- 1. Imperative**  
Reason brand exists  
Substance of brand
- 2. Strategy**  
Market positioning
- 3. Identity**  
Brand marks  
Marks to cue and handle brand
- 4. Experience**  
a. Consumer  
b. Imperative director as consumer

## Anatomy of a brand identity

Non-linguistic  
Linguistic



**1** Form  
**2** Configuration  
**3** Content

- Symbol
- Wordmark
- Texture
- Image
- Sound
- Smell / taste
- Color
- Material
- Typeface
- Typography
- Strategy
- Environment
- Layout
- Tone
- Market
- Product
- Service



CEO, Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs' company creates products he believes should be available on the market for not only his personal use but also for the benefit of those around him. As the Imperative Director of Apple, Steve Jobs actively determines the attributes of the Apple brand. This means he influences, fundamentally, the formation and coordination of the brand marks that determine the experience of the Apple brand: a brand experience, at the core of which are the Apple products we know and love.

Perhaps the ultimate Imperative Director, although faced with less tangible marks to coordinate but with perhaps the most pragmatic impact on people's daily lives, is the most powerful man on the planet, President Barack Obama. He is arguably the most effectively branded president in history, leading the most thoroughly branded country in the world, the United States of America.

### The language of brands

As the marks of a brand mediate the experience of a brand, it's worth having a closer look at what qualifies as a brand mark.

The easiest way to understand the nature of a brand mark is to start with physical marks. These are all the physical marks that relate to bodily sensations: sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. Besides the brand name, the way a brand looks is often taken to be the full extent of a brand. For most people, the way a brand looks is the easiest way to understand what constitutes a brand. Visual recognition tends to guarantee the most stable and consistent cues that enable people to recall and promote a particular product or service. This is usually in conjunction with the reason the brand exists (the imperative as described above), and this is probably the reason a person becomes aware of a brand in the first instance. Most likely, in some way, the brand enabled the person to intervene in an activity more effectively than using a competitor's product or a previous model, or perhaps there were no such previous products at all. The latter typically forms a new type of brand experience and often creates whole new categories of products and services, and brand experiences. Think, for example, of life before the Internet; what the Internet now means and what role brands such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter perform in people's daily lives.

Brand marks that are more challenging to grasp are those presented in language. Brands try to consciously own a "language-space" so that the brand is cued without the need for a visual reference such as a logo, a specific physical context, or the product itself. In this way brands get to share a more flexible and intimate

social space, where people tend to be less guarded against the coercive promotion of brands in the media.

In traditional media, brands are often seen to be staking a claim to a particular territory, where clearly they demand attention for their own commercial ends. For this reason, advertisers rely on entertainment to lower the natural resistance to artificial, hyped-up, and interruptive brand promotion. However, as brands are media themselves (determined by the environment created by their various types of marks), they also tend to evolve with developments in communications media, and as a result of the digital media revolution taking place online, brands are becoming more consumer-centric.

Brands are now all about you, the consumer. Digital media have enabled mass personalization and customization previously unimaginable. Consumers now get to realize aspects of themselves within the environment of these new types of brand experiences. This represents a rich and potent mix of brand experience and personal identity on a massive scale at an unprecedented level of complexity.

### Brandmarks versus logos

All the various types of marks that describe and orchestrate the overall brand experience support and make meaningful a primary brand mark. Most people know what a logo is, but the term logo is not suitable for evoking an entire brand experience. This is particularly the case in brand experiences understood and managed as nested sets of inter-related and interconnected brand marks.

Written as a single word, the term "brandmark" denotes the primary brand mark's status. The brandmark is the most concentrated representation of a complete brand identity. It is for this reason that brand consultancies have declared the death of the logo. Logos are no longer important, and a new type of language constructed of brand marks is taking center stage in brand consulting.

The personalization of brands in combination with a more open and collective approach to managing brands also reflects the changing nature of the products and services offered. A brand that presents an excellent case for establishing a certain type of visual mark to cue an entire brand experience without relying on a single (and solitary) logo is the Symbian Foundation ([www.symbian.org](http://www.symbian.org)). A set of distinctive illustrations serve as the brand marks of the Symbian Foundation



brand identity. This is a set of marks that demonstrate the unlimited creative possibilities of open-source software development. The brand marks are so distinctive in form as well as content that only a single illustration is required to cue the entire Symbian Foundation brand.

### The rise, and rise of brand consulting

Logos are also very much a product of the efforts of the advertising and design consultancies that helped bring capitalism to the masses in the 20th century. No longer restricted to marginal in-house departments, marketing as a profession has emerged as a commercial entity to be reckoned with. Marketers quickly realized that joining forces with what were previously known as below-the-line design consultancies, as opposed to above-the-line advertising agencies, would enable them to realize their ambitions more expediently. The rise of the brand consultancy has since become unstoppable. Design consultancies and advertising agencies are now considered relatively ineffective and old-fashioned in brand management.

There may still be bigger budgets in advertising but it's the slower moving, deeper thinking, and more meticulous brand consultancies that are best positioned to determine long-term brand strategy and identity. Brand consulting is now a highly specialized field that draws deeply on human experience in the broadest sense, combining business acumen, marketing knowledge, psychology, media theory, sociology, philosophy, science, art, and in more esoteric-oriented consultancies, lessons learned from organized religion. Brand identity has a direct correlation to individual as well as collective identity and as such requires complex and robust existential frameworks to navigate effectively. From this position, the marks of brands can be formed and coordinated to harness all types of experience and even to imagine new types of brand experiences.

These may seem like grand claims of brand consulting. No single brand consultancy is likely to offer a clearly defined system that demonstrates all these areas of expertise in a neat system. However, the caliber of experience embodied in the people who direct and operate the world's top brand consultancies is often extensive and profound, drawing on all types of human experience and understanding. Academic credentials combined with worldly experi-

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ence and social sensibilities of consultants ensure brands are not only credible but, whenever possible, exceed expectations. Landor Associates use a model they call the Brand Driver Platform™, and guiding all strategic and creative work are ideas such as "relevant and different" and "transform and transcend." These form part of a creative methodology that covers most types of experience and helps determine new possibilities for brands.

Brand consulting is a rich and complex process. Some aspects of it are the products of calculation and analysis and some aspects are born of intuition and insights available from novel information provided by specialized sources and already successful clients.

### How to convince your clients that they need a brand and not just a logo

1. Explain that you should be employed to find a brand idea that will form the basis of all the company's branding (and perhaps even future business decisions) of which a logo should only be one expression, an idea that is likely to form the basis of the brand's overall approach.
2. Point out other brands your client admires that can be identified by branding elements that are not the logo. Some well-branded businesses can be identified by their color, typeface, photographic, illustration, or even copywriting style alone, or (more commonly) a carefully selected combination of these elements.
3. Your client's success is your success. Sell a process to your client; a process you'll guide them through and that will enable you to decide on a brand identity solution together. This will help you to establish a long-term relationship with your client.
4. Avoid references to the word "logo," rather talk about the marks of a brand of which there should be a primary "brand mark" (two words). Replace "logo" with "brandmark" (one word). This will help you and your client to think about the overall experience of the brand and not just the logo in isolation. Logos are only meaningful in context and they should be seen to add value to that context. It is unlikely that a logo alone will be able to add sufficient value to a business.
5. Avoid logo beauty parades. Don't only show different logos; logos are usually abstract expressions of an idea. Show how the logo idea relates to other brand expressions of the same idea. Show how an idea works in other situations, not just on stationary. The better the idea, the more unique, adaptable, and valuable it will be, and the higher the fees you can justifiably charge. Brand identity designers offer far more value than logo designers and often dramatically improve business for their clients.



Broadly, brand consulting either consciously directs or “intuits” work through four types of thinking: (1) The art of branding ensures new experiences are uncovered and created, (2) the science of branding ensures an empirical basis for practical value in products and services, (3) the philosophy of branding ensures that all propositions are meaningfully directed, and (4) the religion of branding ensures that people are encouraged to reach beyond their known frameworks of experience and embrace visions of collectively effective strategies.

A recent brand transformation that demonstrates highly effective brand consulting drawing on all these areas of experience is Pick n Pay ([www.picknpay.co.za](http://www.picknpay.co.za)), a South African superbrand with a growing global reputation. Deeply loved and highly regarded during the troubled history of South Africa, Pick n Pay has championed the consumer for more than 40 years in openly credible and verifiable corporate social responsibility practices. Landor Associates directed and created the brand transformation, furnishing it with an internal brand driver of “Fresh Thinking” and a public-facing brandline “Inspired by you.” The company now makes it their business to be customer-centric and openly holds itself accountable to “you, the consumer” in South Africa and parts of Australia. Pick n Pay is now a major supermarket in tune with its customers and equipped with a robust brand identity in a mutually dependent brand experience.

Also, in the context of digital media, the demands placed on brands to become more participatory and interactive have seen the emergence of the digital consultancy. These digital consultancies usually have either an advertising or branding orientation but both are subject to brand consulting. Most of the larger brand consultancies now have a digital offering not only to better serve clients but also to promote themselves as brands.

Think: Landor Associates ([www.landor.com](http://www.landor.com)), Interbrand ([www.interbrand.com](http://www.interbrand.com)), Saffron (<http://saffron-consultants.com>), Venture Three ([www.venturethree.com](http://www.venturethree.com)), The Arnell Group (<http://arnell.com>), Siegel+Gale ([www.siegelgale.com](http://www.siegelgale.com)), and Wolff Olins ([www.wolffolins.com](http://www.wolffolins.com))

## HONDA

The Power of Dreams



### Brand ideas and reality

The ideas with which brands align themselves profoundly influence the experienced reality of a brand. These ideas relate to the total value they offer with no specific visual marks required to be present at the point of recall. The subtlest cues in presentation enable powerful imagery to be recalled instantly—imagery that reflects the experienced reality of the brand, and much more. If a brand successfully aligns itself with an idea, a philosophy, or way of life, the value of the brand becomes priceless. Brands that achieve this often become deeply enmeshed in personal identity and often develop fanatical followers. This status is hard won by brands and is considered by brand owners and consultants as the holy grail of brand identity.

Think: Tiffany, Nike, The Olympics, Nokia, David Beckham, Armani, Avatar, and Audi

Multiple readings of a single idea that cue the richest experience of a brand make for the most effective brand ideas, sometimes evoking the esoteric (and even the sublime), enabling people access to a transcendent experience in a highly quantified and commercialized environment. If the idea also works as a public-facing brandline, then the idea forms the most compelling and evocative type of brand mark that underwrites an entire brand experience.

Honda’s “The power of dreams” is one such example of a very successful and highly desirable set of language-based brand marks. The interpretation of the brand idea in the brandline goes something like: Honda’s products are dreams; they are the products of dreams; they power dreams; Honda is imaginative; Honda is powerful; with Honda people can realize their dreams (powerfully); and so on. Most people dream, most people imagine, and most people need powered mobility. The poetic value of the brand idea in Honda’s brandline is self-evident. It evokes what Honda can do for people beyond the high-quality (and for many of Honda’s customers the “dream-like”) mobility products the company brings into the world.

A few other examples of notable brand ideas of a similar richness in meaning and conceptual depth include: GE’s “Imagination at work,” Apple’s “Think different,” Intelsat’s “Closer, by far” and “Zero degrees of separation,” O2’s “We’re better, connected,” Seagate’s “We turn on ideas,” Cotswold’s “We get outdoors,” Sony’s “Make. Believe,” and Disney’s “Imagineering” to illustrate the power of language-based brand marks.

Some successful brand ideas are built directly into the primary brand mark. Amazon’s brandmark succinctly expresses the type of value it offers. The dot com indicates that Amazon is an online brand and evokes imagery of an abundant digital rainforest delivering an A to Z list of products. Not only is this expressed literally in the brandmark using a functional arrow but the arrow is also tweaked into a pleased smile; a smile that has a very good reason to exist. This is not a self-satisfied smile slapped onto a brand devoid of ideas; this is a smile that delivers an emotional experience relevant to the category defining brand experience that is Amazon.

### Some brands just don’t get ideas

In contrast to Amazon’s smile, Pepsi’s recent brand transformation idea appears as a comical, witless, and cheesy grin, crowbarred into a recognizable but mechanical and creatively vacuous brand identity. Unlike Amazon’s smile, the Pepsi smile has no obvious reason to exist.



IMAGE ©AMAZON.COM, INC.

IMAGE FROM THE FILM LOGORAMA WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY H5 (FRANÇOIS ALAUX, HÉRVÉ DE CRÉCY, LUDOVIC HOULPLAIN)



Other established heavyweight brands such as Panasonic don’t really grasp brand ideas properly. The brandline “Ideas for life” may make sense in an internal company culture—it may suggest that ideas from Panasonic will last a lifetime—but the overt idea is a claim beyond the remit of the brand. If Panasonic produced medical products that had a direct impact on the life in people, the brand idea would prove compelling. Audio/visual and other electronic products may improve lifestyles and may indeed last a lifetime, but they cannot claim to offer life itself.

The most obvious casualty, but through no fault of the brand consultants involved, has been Tropicana’s recent packaging debacle. The new brand ideas were a step forward with an appropriate brand idea but a reactionary market pushed back to demand the familiarity of the visually rich but old-fashioned and over-worked brand identity.

### The rules of branding and measuring success

There is a maxim in design declaring that in order to break the rules you must first know the rules. In branding the only rules that are relevant are the rules governing common sense, consistency, and creativity.

Everyone consumes brands, including the designers who design them and, of course, the marketers who define marketing strategies. As consumers, designers and marketers are well placed to recognize trends and innovations, and tend to be in touch with leading brands making a difference.

All brands are ultimately subject to the dominant narratives in culture, and this largely determines a common sense. In order to gain preference over competitors, brands need to align themselves with desirable outcomes relative to these narratives. If brands don’t behave sustainably, they become marginalized, lose market share, and fade from memory. Fashion trends and hype drummed up by advertisers may enable short-term success but consumers are invariably reminded of long-term issues in the media and these artificial advertising strategies become short-lived. Brands who align themselves with long-term objectives are the brands most likely to become successful by gaining trust and respect from consumers. These are the brands we rely on to intervene meaningfully in the world.

What varies between consumers is what stories they expect their brands to tell. Brands that tell the most compelling stories gain and maintain the most social currency. These are the brands that not only consistently deliver on their promises but continually surprise consum-

ers with new, creative, and relevant experiences aimed at improving the quality of their lives.

There is no right or wrong in branding, there is only what works and what doesn’t, what sells and what doesn’t. Consumers aren’t easily fooled. Consumers understand intuitively which brands really matter. ■

### Additional resources

Here are some books and online resources to elevate your branding strategies.

#### Books:

- Marks of Excellence by Per Mollerup
- Branding: From Brief to Finished Solution by Mono
- Designing Brand Identity: A Complete Guide to Creating, Building, and Maintaining Strong Brands by Alina Wheeler
- The Dictionary of Brand by Marty Neumeier
- Logo Design Love: A Guide to Creating Iconic Brand Identities by David Airey
- Graphic Design, Referenced: A Visual Guide to the Language, Applications, and History of Graphic Design by Bryony Gomez-Palacio and Armin Vit

#### Blogs:

- Brand New: [www.underconsideration.com/brandnew](http://www.underconsideration.com/brandnew)
- Brand Strategy Insider: [www.brandingstrategy-insider.com](http://www.brandingstrategy-insider.com)

#### Reviews:

- Identityworks: [www.identityworks.com](http://www.identityworks.com)

#### Forums:

- Wireality: <http://wireality.com>
- Identity Forum: [www.identityworks.com/forum](http://www.identityworks.com/forum)

### Top five global brand consultancies:

- Interbrand: [www.interbrand.com](http://www.interbrand.com)
- Saffron: <http://saffron-consultants.com>
- Landor Associates: [www.landor.com](http://www.landor.com)
- Siegel+Gale: [www.siegelgale.com](http://www.siegelgale.com)
- Wolff Olins: [www.wolffolins.com](http://www.wolffolins.com)