



A brave new world of non-Western brands

by John Grant, 11.09.2013

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John Grant: author of Made With: The emerging alternative to Western brands

Brands are made out of culture. With new cultures taking the centre of the world stage new types of brand are almost bound to emerge,

writes John Grant.

My new book *Made With: The emerging alternative to Western brands* charts the rise of brands from the Muslim Majority region, from Istanbul to Indonesia. Cultured, dynamic and increasingly confident, these countries are starting to produce brands with a very distinctive global appeal.

Western brands are a reflection of our core cultural myths. Whether it is the famous founder, the celebrity endorser, the 'in crowd' early adopters or the skydiver crazy enough to attempt a free fall from space... our brands often seem to have something to do with heroic individual personality.

We use terms like brand personality so readily it is easy to forget that this was once a 'hot' new theory, promoted by the likes of David Ogilvy and Pierre Martineau. This drew credibility from psychoanalysis (the "behavioural economics" of that era). But it also had a lot to do with the creative trends of the time.

Leo Burnett was one leading proponent of giving the brand a metaphorical personality: his Marlboro Cowboy and Jolly Green Giant being classic examples.

By the 1990s things got more confused, as media literacy and new media forced us to focus more on what the brand did and less on empty imagery. But as the dust settled this led to a genre of branding you could define as (authentic) character, rather than (fake, stuck-on) personality. And whether it's Dove, Nando's or *Helpful Banking* (Natwest) it's hard to argue that personality values aren't still key.

This style of brand appeal is so pervasive it is tempting to see it as actually what a brand is. It's only in the light of looking at brands from different cultures that we can start to see that it is only one way (most relevant to Anglo Saxon cultures with their runaway individualism).

One such contrast was provided between the 1960s and 1990s by brands from Japan. These were thoroughly modern and globally successful. But drawn from a different traditional set of traditions. Resulting in brands like Honda, Sony, Issey Miyake and Muji that were recognizably non-Western.

Muslim majority countries

The region whose lifestyles and ideals seem most obviously opposed to that of the West are the Muslim majority countries. When you travel this region and meet people as I did researching my book, you find this 'opposition' is more of a Western view than a local one.

While this region has a thriving design culture and passion for worldly goods, they don't share our obsession with personality, ego, identification and icons.

Many of those I met had experience or education in the West and saw themselves as in-between; having the best of both worlds. That's a long established self-image of the Silk Road countries; seeing themselves between Europe on the one side, and China and India on the other.

What's fascinating from the point of view brands is that while this region has a thriving design culture and passion for worldly goods, they don't share our obsession with personality, ego, identification and icons. Quite the reverse. In traditional Islamic culture you will find no statues or portraits, very few pictures of people (and these in books, not on public display). Instead there is a rich tradition of the spoken word, storytelling, invention and craft, together with a commitment first and foremost to family and community, rather than the individual.

Among his lifetime of work teasing out this contrast, Nobel Prize winning Turkish author Orhan Pamuk wrote *My Name is Red* exploring the highly charged moment when Western style portraits first came to the Ottoman Empire.

Most of Pamuk's work is charting the lives of his contemporaries in Istanbul who he describes as "a new generation of humanity, both modern and non Western." Pamuk's work is rooted in everyday objects, the self-expressive trivia of culture (so much so he has even opened a museum to such objects). And of course this is also the level at which so many brands operate.

While brands don't often make great art, they do embroider everyday life with meaningful cues, helping us to fashion our ways of life, helping to give them meaning and texture.

What I found in my research was an explosion of brand creativity at this level – in home furnishings, food ordering websites, fashionable scarves, television dramas – that created brands in a different vein to the Western one. I call this type of brand 'Made With' (focused on craft or invention, community and fusion) as opposed to Western brands being 'Made By'.

Time will tell, but given the economic and cultural momentum, and the fact that the Muslim populations account for the biggest, youngest and fastest growing population on earth, it's hard not to see *Made With* brands becoming global

challengers in the next 10 years.

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