

# The Future Of Branding Is Debranding

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**Branded content camouflages what companies have been trying to do since time immemorial: Sell you stuff. Here's a better idea.**

As **digital** media [blunts the impact of advertising](#), **brands** are looking for new ways to lure consumers. The latest, buzziest effort has been to publish stories that look and feel journalistic. The key strategy of **branded** content or "native **advertising**" is to hide the commercial imperative, and even the **brand** altogether, so that readers think they're consuming a familiar newspaper or magazine. This is supposed to make **brands** seem more reliable, familiar, and indispensable. But it's a sham—a shortsighted attempt to trick consumers into opening their wallets.

Instead of **brands**, real people and real tones of voice will become the interface between consumers and products.

What businesses need to do is **debrand**.

## HOW WE GOT HERE

Since the '90s, there has been a significant backlash against overt **advertising**—resistance to Coca-Cola sponsoring sports events at schools; to children **designing** Nike shoes in class; to toddlers singing along with Bumba, a clown who also happens to sell industrial cookies and cheap plastic toys. **Social** media has only made it more treacherous for **brands** that try too hard. Just ask [DiGiorno Pizza](#).

So **brands** started to adopt subtler tactics. With native **advertising**, **brands** tell stories on popular platforms—and tell them in a way that is nearly indistinguishable from the stories readers already consume. By matching the message to the platform, **brands** can draw loyal customers and maybe even make their content go viral. Or so the thinking goes.



## BRANDED CONTENT: A SHORTSIGHTED CON

But **branded** content isn't a long game. There are several reasons why. The first issue is intent. The essence of **branded** content is deliberately blurring the line between editorial content and **advertising**. Hiding your true colors is never a good idea. Another issue is the logic behind **branded** content itself. It's misleading to use a totally different set of qualities—good stories—to sell a product that has intrinsically nothing to do with these qualities. Hiring a top filmmaker won't improve the quality of your energy drink. **Brands** cannot deliver what they advertise. Shoes or coffee can never live up to their **brands'** promises—they are just shoes and coffee. You could even say that the better the stories, the more dishonest the companies are being.

A camouflage strategy also complicates an already too complex world driven by hidden agendas. Even well-informed people who are able to both enjoy **branded** content and take it with a grain of salt will subliminally become accustomed to the new **branded** content standard—not to mention more vulnerable groups such as kids and adolescents. And what about the stories no one wants to hear, stories incapable of selling something? People are more likely to follow a happy, undemanding **brand** instead of bonding with real people and real-world problems. A **brand** will never ask you for help. It won't confront you with difficulties or opposing views.



## A MOVE TO NETWORK THINKING

The only way to be truly subversive is to buy less stuff. Turn purchasing power into the power to leave untouched what you don't need. We've reached the saturation point, we are unhappy—we are suffocated. But just as consumption became a way of life, so too can non-consumption.

Here's where **debranding** comes into play.

As **branding** is, fundamentally, just a form of communication, it will never disappear. And it shouldn't. But the focus will shift. It will shift from **branded** products to **branded** places: stores and their owners who select and sell the products they like. Many of these places—take the Berlin-based store [Original Unverpackt](#)—will eschew packaging and **advertising**. Back to the traditional shopkeeper responsible for measuring bulk food and acting as an advocate for his products. Back to the real Dr. Browns, Uncle Bens, and Aunt Jemimas. Instead of **brands**, real people and real tones of voice will become the interface between consumers and products again. That's the heart of **debranding**.

And it is totally in line with today's networked society. Traditionally, **branding** is based on the idea of what differentiates a company from competitors. A **brand** grows by billing itself as different, by isolating itself from others (Apple took that quite literally with "Think different" to great success). But increasingly in the Internet age, consumers are comfortable with the idea that everything is interconnected. So what distinguishes **brands** is less important than what brings things and people together—whether your iPhone can talk to your Prius, for instance, or whether you can read articles from disparate sources in one place, like on Facebook. The



**brand** that screams the loudest no longer commands the most attention; the one that offers something genuinely useful does.



## THE FUTURE OF DEBRANDING

In our de**branded** future, consumers won't necessarily spend less—but they will buy less. They will buy fewer throwaway clones and spend more on only a few quality essentials against a fair-trade price. The shift among **brands** from investing in **marketing** to investing in product development should also allow less fortunate people to buy pure, simple, quality products. Prices will reflect real value, not the conceptual value **branding** magically bestows. Products will be stripped of **branding** codes and constructed imaginary worlds. The only information on packaging will be features such as origin, the intentions of the maker, the production process, and the environmental impact. Maybe makers will find a way to subtly **brand** their product by adding their signature to the product itself, omitting packaging altogether. All of this will of course be a kind of **branding** as well, but stripped to its core.



**Debranding** shouldn't be confused with visual **debranding**, something Comme des Garçons did years ago, and Viceland does nowadays. Such visual identities could be the result of **debranding**, but they are not the end goal. The real goal is a well-made product.

So if you're a company, take heed: Instead of throwing money at yet another **branded** content campaign, go back to the original notion of a **brand**. Fine-tune your product's quality, **design**, and its durability. Become a producer of shoes again instead of surrogate spirituality. It will make your life, and consumers' lives, simpler. Don't throw a new product on the market if it's not intrinsically better and more durable than what already exists. We don't need more **branding**; we need fewer, better-quality products. People will find you.

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