Introduction

A guide to desire

This is a guide to help brand strategists consider what people really want in order to enhance their lives, and to think about the role of their brand in responding to these desires. It offers a new framework for understanding desire, based on some of the things that are really important to us: our family, friends and community; the desire to explore, learn and grow; how we experience the world through our senses; our appetite to live life to the full; and what we set out to achieve.

Why is this guide aimed at brand strategists in particular? Because they are the link between a commercial proposition and the lives it means to touch. They can talk to the people the company wants to reach and – more importantly – listen to them. They can start conversations that lead to new ideas for research and development. And they nurture a space for collaboration between the company’s operations and its wider context.

Why do brand strategists need a smarter approach to desire? Because consumerism in its current “shop until you drop” form rarely offers real satisfaction, and is facing a crisis: witness the failure of high-street chains such as music retailer HMV in the UK and clothing company American Apparel in the US. At the same time, collaborative consumption is moving from the niche to the mainstream, facilitated by online rental platforms from Airbnb to Zipcar. This creates an opportunity, and an incentive, to do things differently. Other pressures are also pushing companies to innovate – from constraints on key resources, such as water, commodities and land, to the disruption of established markets from innovative entrepreneurs. Think of the challenge to the music industry presented by the likes of YouTube and Spotify. The best way to avoid getting caught out is a clear understanding of what your audience wants, and how your company can offer it.
This guide will help brands get closer to what people desire, and rethink how it can help them to find it. A brand that both enhances people’s lives and nurtures the resources on which they depend will prove more resilient, win trust and achieve better results.

A brief note on need and desire

It is impossible to talk about desire without touching on Abraham Maslow, whose theory of a hierarchy of needs (beginning with physiological needs such as food and shelter, and moving ‘up’ through the needs for security and society towards self-actualization) has influenced many sociologists, economists, marketers and philosophers. Personally, I find such a hierarchy unconvincing in a maze of contrasting motivations – from social expectations, culture and politics, to the availability of resources and simply personal preference. “Need” is a word with gravitas: it seems to imply a compulsion related to survival. “Desire” could be taken to imply indulgence, but also suggests greater agency through the strength of mind to identify and pursue a goal. But both words mask a more complex truth. The apparent need to eat can be overridden by the desire to make a strong statement – to oneself or to others – through starvation. The impression of hunger can be awakened by the sensory pleasure of the scent of bread or bacon. Sleep can be overridden by the desire to stay up late with loved ones or finish watching a film. Similarly, the need to exercise can lose out to the desire to have a nap. As Oscar Wilde quipped, “Whenever I feel like exercise, I lie down until the feeling passes.”

My interest is in the distance between where people are and where they would like to be, and the resulting impulse to go and find something that lessens the gap. I talk about desire, rather than need, and use this word to encapsulate the momentum to change ourselves or our circumstances.

Desire for what?

The verb “to desire” comes from the Latin phrase “de sidere”, which means “from the stars”. If you’ve ever tipped your head back, looked to the skies and wished, you won’t find this etymology surprising.