

Embracing the messiness of brand in 2023

 By [Dr Carla Enslin](#)

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Our world is a messy place. It's a proposition, with all its economic, political, social, and environmental complexities being explored by many expert analysts and futurists, including the authors of several 2023 trends reports shared on this very platform.



Dr Carla Enslin, head of postgraduate studies & research at The Independent Institute of Education's Vega School, says in a messy world, society deserves more brands that are real

This resonates as we gingerly step into the new year, and for me, a personal point of reflection on the state of brand and brand building arrived in the form of a recent thought-provoking research paper (*A solution to the problem of brand definition**), in a prominent international marketing journal.

No common shared definition of what brand means

The authors take issue with the state of 'messiness' in our field of brand practice and they find evidence for this by highlighting that there still does not exist any common or widely shared definition of what 'brand' means.

This is true and problematic, and one can understand why. If we don't have a shared understanding, we approach the issues from widely different perspectives, and could scupper or erode collective efforts.

Why wrestle with this view on a platform such as Bizcommunity?

Because 'what we mean by brand' is a healthy, if not critical conversation, as we reflect on 2022 and review how we will be leading and managing, launching, or renewing the 'brand' in 2023.

It presents a responsible point of departure - a super smart start to the year.

Does our organisation have a shared or collective understanding of what 'brand' means? Are we all fundamentally considering, planning, operating, tracking, measuring, and reporting on the same thing? Are we all accountable and recognise what we stand for when we use the term 'brand'?

A messy brand-scape

The research paper, firmly ensconced in a marketing perspective, lays bare many of the causes for our messy brand-scape and issues a warning that unless we create and support a universal understanding of brand in practice, our field may become increasingly more confusing to traverse.

In a nutshell, the authors are concerned that 'brand' has, since the early 90s, become loosely defined through an ever-expanding number of approaches (e.g. from management to psychology to religion), which, according to the authors, has resulted in an array of incompatible brand-related concepts, frequently pushing the 'brand' concept too far and enlarging to an 'unwieldy' scope (I read here: messy and challenging).

The authors propose that we all 'return' to a narrower scope: a 'label and association' definition of brand: a brand is a trade name/logo that identifies a product or firm, usage of which may be limited by legal structures and practice.

They also posit that we set some strategic boundaries: "As such, we would remind theorists that there is no brand entity that acts in the world, there are products and consumers purchase branded products from those firms".



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Brand as a social construct

For many of us, these could be considered controversial and retrograde views. But a strong incentive to reflect on your own professional views - and facilitate a team conversation to explore your shared perspectives.

How we define and approach 'brand' impacts on how we position, lead and manage firms and the products or services that we offer.

On a larger and more complex scale it directs how we position, lead and manage our countries, our cities, our political parties and social initiatives as brands.

My own brand-logic has evolved from a school of thought that views 'brand' as a social construct and brand strategy at its core as uncovering and delivering on that singularity.

From this perspective, a brand, strategised responsibly, represents and delivers a particular meaning that adds value to people's lives.

In its ideal state it serves, engages, and unites all its stakeholders or constituents in the sustained experience of its unique value. Therefore, the management of a brand involves its entire ecosystem and the motions of all its parts - it cannot be contained within marketing only.

To be fair, this approach to brand leadership and management certainly makes things vastly more complex and 'messier.'

Consider anew the Bullmore paradox, 'people build brands as birds build nests, from scraps and straws we chance upon'.

A brand comes into being as a promise, but it comes to life and grows in value as it serves purpose in all that it does. 'Messy' does not allow me to narrowly define roles and responsibilities.

Embracing the messiness

I connect with the brand practices that have evolved to embrace messiness and to plan and manage strategies accordingly - to maintain and manage, at the same time, inside-out and outside-in perspectives in strategic planning and management.

We have the right models and tools to engage with real and messy – from auditing touchpoint journeys to investing in brand experience planning. And conceptually messy may often be the origin of a remarkable brand-solution.

The creative strategic thinker will exploit the so-called messiness of things as an overlooked touchpoint is repurposed to become a pure experience of the brand's promise. These brand resonators make a real difference in everyday lives.

When these opportunities are seized, this is what the creative and corporate industries celebrate, year-on-year in local and global awards seasons.



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Defining brand is vital

This is my view: how we define brand is vital. It shapes our collective thinking and doing. It becomes part of culture and is remarkably difficult to fix if ill-conceived.

Before we deep-dive into the tactics of this year's business strategies or marketing plans, consider dedicating that first board meeting, exco meeting or unit meeting to 'just' talking 'brand.' Do we share a collective understanding of what 'brand' means? Are we all fundamentally considering, planning, operating, tracking, measuring and reporting on the same thing? Do we all recognise what we stand accountable for when we use the term 'brand'?

Finally, is our shared understanding of 'brand' documented, easily accessible, frequently discussed, and interrogated?

Yes, brand practice will benefit greatly from a clear and shared definition of brand. However, in a messy world, society also

deserves more brands that are real and responsible in their relations and in their performance.

(*Avis, M. and Henderson, I.L., 2022. A solution to the problem of brand definition. *European Journal of Marketing*. Volume 56 No. 2)

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