

CHANGING BRANDS: A CONVERSATION WITH VERONIQUE

The brand I worked for can't be found, now, at the business I worked for.

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I was sitting with Veronique in one of these hotel bars where the television is always on. It was crowded, and we ended up sitting closer to the TV than I otherwise might have chosen. We were at a NASPL Professional Development meeting. Veronique, the lead on the lottery account, had come from her advertising agency.

Veronique was trying to ask me something about the evolution of the "lottery brand" over time. I must confess that "brand" has seemed a pretty vague concept to me. However, she seemed to treat it as if it stood for something precise, but formable. I gathered that the brand could change, and that some changes might be more controllable than others.

I don't watch TV at home; I see it only in public places. Generally I give it only the flicker of attention needed to recognize what sort of thing is being shown. However, while this idea of changeable brands was in play, I realized that the screen had taken on a sudden relevance. It was showing an advertisement for the lingerie company that Veronique, as a young model in the nineteen-eighties, had helped raise to commercial success. I realized that we were both watching the commercial, that we both knew this, and that I was somehow slightly embarrassed.

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Then suddenly the screen was all about something else, and our focus went back to us.

I tried to tie the chance interruption into what we had been talking about.

"Veronique – you worked for that brand in the eighties, and here it is still around, thirty years later. It's about as old

as many lotteries. How has that brand changed?"

"Did you know the brand in the eighties?"

"I was a big fan! I got things for my girlfriend there."

"And do you shop there now?"

"No. "

"What has changed? You, or the brand?"

"Well, I'm sure I have changed. Although I still have the same girlfriend - I married her years ago. But you know, back in the day I think she was pleased and flattered when I would buy her something from there, but now I don't think she would be."

"Have the clothes changed?"

"I have no idea. I would never have been able to tell you about that. I guess I was never really buying the 'products'; I was buying ... a message. A token, maybe."

Something I like about Veronique is that she knows how to move a conversation along by attentive silence. She

waited for me to go on. I was emboldened by the thought that she probably knew very well what the message was. She may have even gotten it across to me back then. I ventured further:

"What I remember getting from the advertising was something like: 'I expect your respect and your best attention. Even though my beauty may distract you.' I mean, that's what the model seemed to be saying. As she sat there in her lovely underwear, reading aloud from a book."

"You were buying that message?"

"I was agreeing with it. I guess that was it: I thought the advertising was saying something that I wanted to agree with, and so I bought the product. To express my agreement. And to present as a token to my girlfriend, as if I were agreeing with her."

"And this worked for you?"

"I think all those gifts were received as intended."

"So, in the ad we just saw - a different message?"

"Well, yes. Gorgeous girls playing beach volleyball? That one was more like 'You will appreciate us as spectacularly

beautiful objects.' And I guess I didn't want to agree."

Veronique smiled mischievously. "Didn't agree, or didn't want to agree?"

"Didn't want to."

I realized then that she had uncovered the source of my mild embarrassment. We both smiled at that, but then she went on:

"Well, that brand has definitely changed. And not only because of their advertising. Actually, I think it's a little silly to think that what your advertising says about the brand really drives things. It's what the customers say that really counts. And what the customers say depends on who they are."

"The biggest change in the brand I worked for is: they went from being sort of exclusive and catalog-first, to having a store in every shopping mall. They broadened their customer base. Once it was sort of like, 'People who would read the *New York Times*,' then it was more like 'people who would look at *USA Today*,' and now I'm not sure whether they read, at all."

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“So I would say: the brand is not the business. The business may be thriving; I don’t know. It’s not like I had stock options, or anything. But the brand I worked for can’t be found, now, at the business I worked for.”

She paused while I absorbed this. She did not seem at all bitter about the change. At length I asked, “Did the brand you worked for get transformed somehow, or did it die?”

“I think it’s the customers talking among themselves that define the brand. And when you buy the “thing”- when you become a customer- you get a slice of the conversation. Which may please you, or not. Now, advertising can come in and influence the conversation, take it in a particular direction, or introduce a new word, or tell a story. But if the advertising works, it’s because it resonates with people, it lines up with what they were already saying to themselves, if not to each other. And the conversations that were part of the early success just got overwhelmed by the buzz of the later arrivals. My brand just stopped being part of the conversation in that set.”

It was easy for me to picture Veronique, as the standard-bearer of the brand, just stepping away from a conversation that was no longer interesting.

“You know, the company I modeled for might have been able to maintain the brand I was part of. They have become a much bigger business by becoming a shopping mall fixture, though.”

With a smile, she said “I guess now you have to buy your tokens somewhere else.”

“I think we’ve gotten past that, somehow. So your brand was a brief stage, for that company?”

“I think they became something less subtle, more mass-market, more objectifying... I can’t imagine I would be as comfortable with it now, if I were of an age to be doing that.”

“So,” I said, “you don’t really like them anymore; neither do I; but they have grown their business. We can fault them on aesthetic grounds.”

Veronique raised her glass to that and after we drank, she continued:

“Now, as you say, the lotteries were creating their brands at about the same time. I wasn’t paying attention. I

was too busy trying to succeed by applying myself. I imagine you were, too.”

“Yes, I think we come into that story much later. But since you say it’s a conversation, here’s how I imagine the original brand conversation: ‘Let’s all throw some money together to be packaged by some trusted party and awarded on a strictly random basis. It doesn’t matter who you know, or what you know, it doesn’t matter where you come from, or how long you’ve been here, it doesn’t matter whether you’re rich or poor. We are all equal before the Lottery.’ ”

Lottery.’ ”

“I think the Lottery may be the most trusted arm of government,” she said. “We had better hold onto that part”.

“Right! It’s a mindless process administered by a disinterested central authority. I may, by dumb luck, win. And that would be fine.”

“That must have been really refreshing as an alternative to ‘it’s not what you know, it’s who you know’ on the one hand, and the work ethic in general on the other. I’m sure it was seen as decadent by some, at the time.”

“It’s seen as decadent by a few even now.”

“But after 30-plus years, no longer so refreshing.”

“With no one fighting it, it’s not ‘alternative.’ It’s ‘old establishment.’”

“So if that’s the original brand,” she said, “how is that different from the brand we have today? My point is, it probably needs to be changing, and I’m not sure it is.”

“Changing how?”

“To track the player base, I would hope. After all, we’re trying to maintain the business, not necessarily the brand, right? And we hope the player base is changing, not just aging.”

“Well, I like the old lottery brand, but I think there has been some movement on the “dumb luck” front. A lot of people who play VLT poker think that they are winning by skill. After all, they get to do something with the cards, and they don’t see the outcome until after they do. So if they win, they think it was because of something they did. People love that.”

“So, the lottery brand of the future: less about mere luck, more about perceived skill?”

“That surely seems to work.”

“How about the mindless, disinterested central authority? He doesn’t sound like much fun to play with.”

“Which part of “mindless, disinterested, central author-

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ity” would you change?”

“I would maybe just emphasize “fair” rather than those other things. Fairly determined outcomes. In the future, less about the central authority, more about the players. I mean, when you have a drawing in a Lotto game, what do we tell people? Just what numbers the central authority drew. Maybe how many winners at each of the prize levels. But there have got to be some other stories there. How many people had multiple wins on one ticket? Where did the winners buy? People are used to getting all sorts of information just by asking for it. Never mind that it’s probably useless; they feel more engaged when they can ask and get answers. Especially about what other people did.”

“So again, the lottery brand of the future: less about the process, more about the outcomes?”

“Maybe,” she said, “But I think it’s more like: less about us, a lot more about you. People nowadays are gluttons for information. Why wouldn’t we serve it to them?”

“I think you’re right. Less about us and our procedures;

more about them and their perceived skill. Actually, even though I like the original lottery brand, that sounds like a positive change to me.”

At this point we were joined by another colleague, and we left our speculations. Later that evening Veronique fascinated me with a perspective on her favorite kind of advertising, but that is a story for another time. ■

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