

BRANDS AND BELIEFS

Mark Di Somma talks with Tom Asacker

For me, brands, and more particularly the cultures that support them, should be seen as belief systems rather than pure-play marketing systems. Purpose, values and ethics are the oxygen of successful marques because they inspire consumers to see qualities in the brands they choose that make them feel more human, more real and more desirable.

This year, one of my favorite thinkers, Tom Asacker, published a new book, his fifth, titled **The Business of Beliefs**. It's an examination of how and why we assimilate beliefs and what we do with them. And of course it's a discussion that is highly pertinent to all marketers because not only are brands today in the business of belief, but they only work if the people in the business believe in what they are there to achieve.

I caught up with Tom recently and asked him to tell me more. Here's my "greatest hits" from what he had to say:

1. WISHES DRIVE BELIEFS

Tom: The word "belief" comes from the Middle English "lief," which means to wish. Belief is simply a working assumption about something or someone ... driven by what we would **wish** something to be.

2. PEOPLE FORGE MEANING OUT OF PARTIAL INFORMATION

Tom: Stories are powerful because they express our beliefs. We make meaning out of partial information ... We have past experiences, which we spin into a coherent story, and revise when necessary, to rationalize previous actions and make us feel good about ourselves, our associations and decisions. I refer to this as "connecting the dots".

Some brands are very good at presenting us with "dots" — through their varied and evolving

communications and behaviors — such that we create a coherent and motivating whole. Apple is the classic example. People wanted to believe in the exclusive and unique quality of the Apple brand, so much so that they were willing to pay a premium and evangelize the brand. So Steve Jobs orchestrated every single touch point, including something as seemingly insignificant as the product packaging, to communicate and enhance that belief.

3. BRANDS ARE ACTUALLY IN THE BUSINESS OF GENERATING MEANING

Tom: People's expectations change, because their experiences in the marketplace change and their desires evolve. Great brands lead [that] change. It's a process of continuous learning, discovery and creation of new meaning, which drives profitable growth and adds value to the lives of customers, employees, owners, partners, and the community. [Brands work for us because] it's impossible to consciously evaluate all

of our daily choices and decisions. However, when the choices we make are not giving us the outcomes we desire, it's time to pay very close attention to [our] beliefs.

4. FINANCES MEASURE OPINIONS

Tom: [Brands] need to be very opinionated today, especially about what they are in business to accomplish, beyond making money. Financial measurement is simply a way to gauge how well a brand is executing on its opinions, on its theories about how the marketplace is evolving and its unique role in that evolution.

5. YOU ARE NOT YOUR HISTORY

Tom: We all become the stories we tell ourselves. Changes in belief are always prompted by experiences, feelings and thoughts. Great designers are in tune with our present beliefs and design new ones that make it easy for us to adopt and evangelize.

6. IDENTITY IS NOT THE SAME AS NARRATIVE

Tom: Narrative is something the mind invents from past experiences. Identity is the result of what someone does and creates in the here and now. What's Nokia's identity? They were a manufacturer of paper, then cables, then rubber boots. They were also the world's

leading manufacturer of mobile phones. Those were their identities. Their identity today is much different. You are what you do, not who you were.

7. BRANDS DIE BECAUSE THEY FORGET HOW TO DREAM

Tom: Expectations evolve, therefore so do beliefs. If established brands

won't, or can't, innovate to satisfy these emerging beliefs and desires, others will step in to make it happen. Customers lose belief when their desires are not being met, or when something or someone else is better at stimulating and satisfying those latent desires. When brands forget how to dream, the passion for the possible and for the customer typically goes with it.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mark Di Somma is a creative strategist. He works with senior corporate decision makers and communication agencies at critical moments of change. Through his blog [Upheavals](#), he writes about creative strategies for brands in a shifting and social world. To find out more, you can subscribe to his [newsletter](#) or follow him on Twitter at [@markdisomma](#).

Tom Asacker writes and teaches about radically new practices and ideas for marketplace success in times of uncertainty and change. *The Business of Belief* is his fifth book. You can purchase his book [here](#), subscribe to [his blog](#) or [follow him on Twitter](#).

This interview first appeared on [Branding Strategy Insider](#).