

Making Your Brand Human: Four Lessons Learned

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What do you want to be remembered for? How will you tell your story? Why do you exist?

This is the type of introspection expected, not of humans, but of brands in today's marketing landscape. A deeper understanding of how your brand fits into the human experience is necessary to thrive, and this includes understanding the effect of appearance and color on people's perceptions and resulting behavior.

After recently attending FUSE design conference in Miami, I was impressed by the ways that brands are being brought to life through human connection and storytelling. It was a privilege to also share my own presentation among this stellar lineup of industry experts and pioneers.

While the sessions were planned around the theme "Thriving in the New Brand Reality," I noticed another persistent idea – the human factor – and advice on incorporating it into your branding. To bond and thrive, brands must form human-like relationships with people. With that in mind, here are four lessons learned at FUSE:

Rely on What Makes Us Human

Cheryl Swanson, FUSE Co-Chair and Partner and Managing Director at Toniq LLC, explained how the human body processes the information marketers are delivering in her presentation Decode and Conquer. She outlined the difference between the brain's neocortex, responsible for sensory perception and language, and its limbic system, responsible for emotions and behavior. It is the latter subliminal recesses that designers should seek to engage, using visuals (which are processed 6,000 times faster than language) to evoke emotional and behavioral responses.

Swanson also cited that 84.7 percent of consumers say color is the primary reason they buy a certain product, which makes sense since, of the 80 percent of the human experience filtered through the eyes, color is retained first and foremost. Humans also apply emotion to color, making it a strong mechanism for marketers.

What an important insight for designers to consider as they attract and win the attention of the buyer. Our team works tirelessly to support designers' ability to appeal to the innate color-dependency of human emotions and decision-making.

Only humans have the unique ability to articulate themselves so specifically as to establish languages, codes, and standards of reference that make our intentions portable. Designers can rely on this ability to be specific about color and appearance as they seek to realize their creative visions in collaboration with others and beyond the scope of their immediate control.

Keep Your Brand True to Yourself

Ron Burrage, senior director & head of global design at The Hershey Company, encouraged the audience in his talk, *Design Fearlessly*, to “be yourself. Do your homework. Add originality and knowledge and you get fearlessness.” Session speakers urged attendees to ask introspective questions, to determine who their brands are in the market and what stories they have to tell. Maria Gustafson shared a beautiful history and the specific “non-negotiables” that define brand equity for Kiehl’s. Authentic brand stories hinge on specific details. How do you safeguard yours?

Make Moments Extraordinary

Vince Voron, vice president & executive creative director at Dolby, asked attendees to “look for ordinary moments, and make them extraordinary” in his session on *Leveraging In-House Creatives*. Vince’s words resonated with me as he shared how [empowering creatives can inspire innovation](#) and lead to the production of these extraordinary moments for people (not consumers).

Act It Out, Now

In order for our brands to be naturally selected in this marketing evolution, we must examine the human experience we are creating or the experience we would like to create. You can make your brand more human by getting to know the people who buy your products and demonstrating respect for their interests. As Peter Horst, former CMO at The Hershey Company, put it in his session *Marketing in the Trump Age: New Rules for a New Reality*, “Do as I say, not as I do” doesn’t work anymore.”

Lifestyle brand Icon, Martha Stewart, spoke directly to this idea of evolving to survive in this age of disruption in her session. She divulged a key survival tactic: adapting and adopting early, coming from a place of deep understanding for a target audience’s wants and needs, even loves.

So, as brand owners migrate communications and design to incorporate more of the human factor, they will necessarily wield the power of color over biological human emotions. Because color is so powerful and difficult to control, it needs to be supported by technology, seamlessly integrated into the product innovation and execution workflow.

FUSE certainly made one thing abundantly clear: Marketing now requires existential thinking.

Stephen Webster, vice president of brand & design at Mary Kay, Inc. described in *Beyond Beauty is the Brand*, brands are now faced with a population saying, “make me care.” We need to focus our business approach on human (not consumer) decision psychology, or, to put it simply, the human factor.

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