

Branding to youth: the forces at work

March 2003



JY&A Consulting **Live your vision.**

Introduction

JY&A Consulting is an international consulting group that specializes in brands. But unlike most brand consultancies, we have qualified business staff as well as creative team members. By business staff we do not mean merely MBAs, but the leaders in their fields, such as Profs Eugene Jaffe and Israel Nebenzahl, the world's foremost experts in country-of-origin branding. By creative personnel, we do not mean mere designers, but experienced branding directors, such as Demian Rosenblatt, who have proven expertise in translating business strategies into marketing materials. Then there are known management consultants—known for their clarity and not charging the earth. People such as Stefan Engeseth, author of *Detective Marketing*, whose creative vision and understanding of customer orientation are critical for companies today.

One of our major differences is that we were one of the world's first virtual companies, starting in 1987. To you, that means cost savings, because you're not paying for middle management, travel expenses or extra time. Being virtual, we have small project teams that come together when you need us. We work around the clock because we make use of international time zones. And if you do need to see us face to face, then some of us can travel, or better still, there's likely to be a consultant nearby.

If this history is still not persuasive enough, we come to our methods. Not only can we back up most of our theories with academic and privately commissioned studies, but we deliver our results in as plain a language as possible. We are confident enough of our work that we needn't hide them in jargon.

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My work

Some of you here are dedicated marketing experts for your institutions or companies. I focus on branding but I necessarily have to advise companies on marketing strategy. I started a virtual company when I was in my teens and found myself in this area after stints in design and marcom. These days we are in over 10 cities worldwide.

The reason I place so much emphasis on brands is this: they are the interface between consumer and organization. I know this is the post-Naomi Klein era and I'm the first to acknowledge the crap that the misuse of branding—or more specifically, what people call branding but is not—has created.

Yet branding should be humanitarian in its aims. If we realize that 51 of the world's largest economies are corporations, if we realize that the vertical integration of Wal-mart's coffee retailing potentially bankrupts Uganda, then we should argue convincingly for corporate social responsibility.¹

If you look at folks like Simon Anholt, who is coming to New Zealand in June to talk about brands and exports in June, or any member of the Medinge group, a.k.a. the Chief

Brand Officers' Association, you will find this common humanitarian cause in branding today. It is what has allowed my company to grow into many cities globally.

Then if you look at what the Chartered Accountants are doing in examining triple-bottom-line and re-evaluating the way corporations are valued (even if it is spin-off of the old methods), the ethical championing by Marjorie Kelly in Minneapolis and her *Business Ethics* magazines and this wave of post-Enron corporate responsibility calls and conferences, it's not something to be ignored. When Marjorie Kelly is involved, you know it is not a mere passing trend.

Last year, after our conference in Sweden, the Medinge group authored the Brand Manifesto, on what brands *should* be doing. Naomi kindly left that largely unsaid in *No Logo*,² so it was up to us here in branding. You can find the manifesto at the DNA-sponsored AllAboutBranding.com.³

I paint this picture first because you need to bear this in mind when I talk about our young people, because it is a valid force in our marketing world today. I also address what I am about to say in the realm of branding, because it is what I am familiar with.

They're not that different⁴

You're here to hear me talk about my findings when researching the youth market. This research has been ongoing, beginning last October and we're continuing it now with some youth opinion leaders, teenagers and twenty-somethings who are at the public eye, to see if they have much in common with our first sample. All of this research so far has been with 20 to 40 people, qualitative, but in-depth enough for me to make some solid statements about it and find common ground with existing research. You'll be able to find it in the spring in a new book I am co-authoring, edited by Nicholas Ind at Futurebrand Oslo and the man who wrote *The Corporate Image*⁵ and, more recently, *Living the Brand*.⁶

It's very easy to make some sweeping judgements about young people. We see fewer protests, for example, so we might make a judgement that they are not very passionate. But meanwhile, we notice the stuff they're in to and funnily enough, we wind up following them a lot. Baby boomers, for example, are Generation Y copycats when it comes to clothing.

So who are they? And how can we get them into perspective?

Let's consider that these folks were born between 1979 and 1994 and let's also limit our discussion to the western world (I tend to be the occidental tourist). Yes, there are some people born in the 1980s who are now adults. Their parents were, if you like, the estate kids. This is the generation who doesn't have a clue what we mean when we talk about Sir Robert Muldoon.

When some of this Gen Y group turned five or six, they witnessed the stockmarket crash. They are realists because they are now watching the second recession of their lifetimes. They also see past a lot of the BS, say, of the stockmarket. Why do shares go up? Valuation of companies? No, they go up on the perceived valuation of companies.

They contended with the Gulf War. A mate of mine, sadly passed, was a high school teacher, who would have been my age now, and he told me that his kids had no idea of the Cold War and the nuclear threat.

But one of the things they desire is stability. They want to be in control. Some related research showed that teens and Gen Yers are people who want control over their environment, which means less getting pissed to the point of losing it.

Why have teen suicide rates not come down? Because, I reckon, young people cannot see a way out, they do not see how they can control their environment. A lot of it is our fault as adults, because we have done sweet Fanny Adams to give them that assurance.

I would say they are smart but how much smarter? They have a lot more to do. School days, at least in the US, have gotten longer. Flick open a school magazine today at any school and look at the clubs they are involved in. The public speaking, the IT classes, the problem-solving. They are forced to think laterally.

Until 9-11, their lives were about a progressive upward direction, for the most part. They are very rational, so if you told some that you could create Utopia now, they would counter with how long this would take.

Here are some other things that I uncovered. Email is second-nature. They see us more as a global community. That is obvious. They text and they find hobby groups.

But at the same time they want to work for respectable companies to pay the bills and indulge their passions. They want to volunteer for worthy causes. One professor at Princeton that I read about said, 'They work for Save the Children and Merrill Lynch and they don't see a contradiction.'⁷

There are some interesting remarks already with this generalization. The Gen Y group in the United States does not see us totally as a global community. They might have grown up with the positive idea of globalization instilled as a result of NAFTA, the rise of the dot com era, mergers founded more on serendipity than the claimed synergy and the Clintonian promise of a better world beyond the 1990s, but then we had 9-11 and a wake-up call.

In fact, their whole lives have seen wake-up calls: politicians tell them about nice things with little foundation in reality and then we get a hangover.

Now in the post-9-11 era, they have had the biggest wake-up call of all.

While before they were willing to look at things in a gradual sense, there seems to be more activism now. A better world spiritually. The emailed anti-war movement. The reliance on certain sites like Corpwatch.org or Nologo.org to inform them of the bad stuff. They trust NGOs more than political organizations, because they see NGOs as part of the smaller teams that create activism and real change. They have loyal communities at sites such as TakingITGlobal, whose founders I interviewed for this presentation.

However, while young people are predisposed to companies that have some form of corporate responsibility, they are not always going to search for them, nor is volunteerism as prevalent as others have made out. Again, this is being realistic, not being lazy or hypocritical. Those that don't tell me that they have work or school but they try to do what they can. Those who go further argue that they do research companies and value real, visible activism.

Think: why does the Green Party in New Zealand get 25 per cent of the vote from 19- and 20-year-olds while Labour and National score six each?⁸

In other words, Gen Y has a far better tuned BS meter than we think. They have already seen how companies don't live up to promises. Or politicians. At least when Muldoon and Rowling were debating you knew they meant it; never mind if they were able to realize it, they would damn well find a way. Do you believe Bill English, as nice a chap as he is? What did someone once say about Jim Bolger? 'A nice guy you'd trust to milk the cows but you wouldn't let him run the farm.' Clark talks straight, sure, but where is the new idea that only someone in her position can inspire, lead and realize? They are going for Green not because they are marijuana-smoking lefty, woolly liberals. For some, it is because Green presents an idea.

They have become immune to the crap. As one Gen Yer told me, 'We're more aware of what's going on. We see more products and we perceive how [these companies] have acted.'

The two-way exchange

This is a two-way exchange though. Their rebellion is about dressing in our uniform and changing things from the inside. If you dressed up as a hippie now and preached peace, what influence are you going to have? But if you got into a suit and presented at the J'burg summit or went to Davos, wouldn't you look more credible? In fact, they have learned from the gay movement, which I say managed to get into the power structures in just this fashion.

So where are we, and now what can we do?

1. Gen Yers are realists.
2. Gen Yers admire companies with humanitarian agenda, accountability, honour and responsibility, and will buy from them when possible.
3. Not all Gen Yers research the backgrounds of companies but have a preference to those that do "extracurricular" activities.
4. Gen Yers have a built-in BS meter.
5. Gen Yers desire control within their environment.
6. Gen Yers create change more subtly because they do not think overt activism works, but getting in to the power structure does.
7. Gen Yers do not necessarily believe in the global community. A large proportion in the US think the world should be a better place, but there are still borders and nations. In New Zealand, Gen Yers believe in the global community and are environmentally and ecologically conscious. Non-American, western Gen Yers tend more toward the latter.
8. Gen Yers respect a dialogue.

Do they forgive us?

There has been some research from Research International that conflicts with my findings.⁹ The RIO study reckons people forgive global brands like Nike. I've gone on record to say the opposite in the Swedish trade press.¹⁰

The RIO study wasn't just about Gen Yers, but all consumers. Isolate Gen Y and you'll see the same anomaly that you saw at the last General Election in New Zealand.

Brands are increasingly politicized now, and this segment will respond to issues.

And doing good is something that you have to build in to a brand now, well beyond corporate fluff. While Gen Y might change in the next 10 years, the eight rules I gave earlier will still form their foundation.

The activist brand

Consumer behaviour has not changed that much, so even Gen Y expects differentiation and trust. But they also expect some form of activism tied to their brands.

Let's address these issues.

The realist

Fluff is not enough, to be sure. Enron had policies on climate change and anti-corruption but we all know what happened to it. A lot of companies are still diseased like that, while they keep rating people as liabilities and not assets. Klein's belief is that consumers would demand brands behave themselves, eventually, otherwise it'd be the end of this profession. In some ways, this is true, but it is overkill to say it would be the end of branding—without brands, the interface goes.

In the brand manifesto, we said: 'Good brands deliver what they promise.'

Every brand should have, by now, some vision, some unifying factor. *What does your brand stand for?*

We all know that brands appeal to the psychographic side of consumers. There are brand "attitudes", for example. What attitude does your brand hold? There is a Virgin attitude, a Caterpillar attitude, which holds consumers together. *What's your attitude?*

Once you figure that out, there is something logical that extends from that that shows you aren't just BSing Gen Yers. You mean it. If you have policies on climate change like our old friend Ken Lay, then what are you doing about it? The environment is an easy one. Just last month I spoke to a 19-year-old designer in Dunedin—Dunedin, Fla.—who is putting all the proceeds of his fashion show to teenage pregnancy prevention

because that's what he feels he stands for: doing right by his fellow human beings. I did a similar talk in Europe last year and before I left, I heard that one of the TV networks was considering doing something to help the homeless off the streets.

What are you going to bring to the table so these cynical Gen Yers don't reject you when they get into a stronger fiscal or power position?

The BS meter

If you fake it, look out. Gen Yers access information more readily than we ever dreamed. Anyone ever used LEXIS-NEXIS and the Reuter Textline databases in the 1980s and early 1990s, before there was much on the web? That was special stuff.

Kids can do searches on the 'net that give them more references than those databases ever could. In *Maid in Manhattan*, Jennifer Lopez tells her son to Google a question. And in that search they can find if you've slipped up. Go to Corpwatch.org and pray they don't find your name and associated bad news. It travels quickly and we all know the power of viral marketing, even hoax emails. You don't want to be a Microsoft and have computer geeks send out emails about abuse of power, which is what happened during the antitrust trials.

This sort of treatment is not reserved for big names. Anyone recall an email attacking One Red Dog here in Wellington? Never mind that I, too, have been ill the day after I have eaten there—twice—that sort of stuff is something you don't need.

Now, if you BS, look forward to those emails. Recognize your weaknesses and don't allow the bad press to get out.

*Be authentic.*¹¹ Examples might include Richard Branson, flamboyant in action but not the greatest speaker. It's what folks want.

And: apologize if you screw up, like John Lampe at Bridgestone did to a rollover victim. Lose the euphemisms. Acknowledge the difficulties. Don't fudge your financials: no one in this country needs to do the Wall Street quarterly panic, which is increasingly unreliable anyway—at least if you look at a company without analysing its brand.

Where are B-school kids looking to these days for inspiration? Smaller companies where bosses have a reputation for honour and integrity.¹² If Gen Y is disillusioned about business today, then do something about yours.

The control

By extension, if you do something that contributes to a cause, they can see that you are aligning yourselves to them. They seek to control and better their environment. *You create affinity.*

How many of us vote for governments that say they will help people? Consumers vote with their dollars for organizations that say the same. This trend is not going to decrease, it is going to increase.

Last June, Volkswagen launched a workers' charter, that gave its employees the same rights internationally.¹³ They got good press for it. Anyone following them will be accused of me-tooism and not get as much mileage. But VW understands that this is going to get them consumer votes. (They've had good practice, having begun this track in 1990 with a European works' council. When you have 320,000 employees, it's a big deal.)

They believe in subtle change, but if you're going to announce something major, back it up.

The global community

This is a tricky one, because outside the United States, there's a sense of the global community. Inside the US, I only really hear Kofi Annan talk about it. So do you appeal to it or don't you?

The answer is to think of who your community is: global or local?

Make positive community change. Even if your programme is local, show how doing your part helps the "community" with which you are involved. Some companies have a global community, so you have to act globally. Other companies have a local one, so make sure it makes real change locally.

As a side note, globalization isn't dead. Capital flows are still fairly free in prosperous countries and it'll go to emerging markets. I reckon watch out for its comeback, but be prepared to do it in a far more honest and caring way if you're going to impress Gen Y. Even American Gen Yers understand that there are other countries that aren't as well off and we should do right by them. If you don't, corporate governance is that much stronger now, *so make a positive move with an upward social shift before you're forced to do it.*¹⁴

Who they like

Here are some brands that are doing well according to some of our Gen Yers.

- Candie's, with the Candie's Foundation
- Avon, with its Crusade for Cancer
- *Havoc and Newsboy*, willing to reveal the problems with teen pregnancy and a battery hen factory in New Zealand
- DesignTorget of Sweden, helping independent designers and craftspeople get their work into their swish retail stores
- Carlos Miele, a Brazilian fashion designer who hit New York Fashion Week catwalks for spring 2003 and helps artisans in a Rio shanty-town make money from his designs

A+ brands

As told by Jack Yan, James De Torre and Prof Kevin Keller to CNN. Excerpted from Botelho: 'The brand name game', CNN.com, December 5, 2002.

Experts cited several examples of companies who have excelled at the brand name game—creating a coherent vision, engaging consumers and expanding their customer base. The best of the best include:

- Ikea: the Swedish-based furniture behemoth has expanded rapidly thanks to its stylish yet inexpensive designs.
- Intel: how to measure Intel's success? Today, people who don't know a hard drive from a hardhat know Intel.
- H&M: this clothing retailer is on the rise, combining the best in cutting-edge tastes with cost-effective prices.
- Starbucks: a decade ago, Starbucks wasn't even on the menu. Today it's everywhere, with uniform quality and a warm feel.
- Palm: despite an onslaught of competitors, Palm has held its own thanks to sound research and smart strategy.
- Dell: Dell bridged the gap between technophobes and geeks with quality customer service and an engaging public image to match its corporate atmosphere.

The dialogue

This is in the other parts of the manifesto: 'Brands bring humanity to the organization.' 'Brands create community.' Gen Yers expect a dialogue. That means write back to them. It's not just common courtesy, it's good business. I've been waiting two years for Telstra to correct my name on its bills. I've been waiting two years for American Express to respond to my queries about my credit history.

Siding with the consumer makes sense. I'd say most of you are marketing professionals who've had formal training. That means you understand market orientation. Why don't consumers feel one with us? We need to make them feel "one", unified with us.

What can we do? Dialogue is one method. Getting them to feed back to us to help new-product development via the web is another. In my software business, we have developed products since 1996 based on web feedback.

Look at the file-sharing services like Napster. They create a community: they are one with the consumer. Gen Y is loyal to these services. Can you give up some power in order to retain your customers and win new ones?

My colleague Stefan Engeseth wrote:¹⁵

Some companies have more customers than the population of small countries. Letting the customer into the company is a way of utilizing this power. In a changing world, where both literal and figurative borders are constantly changing, a new world order is slowly taking form. ... Today, customers sometimes know more than the company representatives that serve them. Why not use this know-how and enthusiasm to teach employees to follow rather than lead[?]

Look at the independent media on the web and other decentralization that suggest a revolt of the masses. Or how Marillion started a fan revolution using the internet after being pronounced a dead rock band, through viral marketing and getting fans themselves to pay the advance so they could make new music.¹⁶

What can you do in your companies? Transparency is one: use the web so customers can see what makes you tick and suggest improvements. Then, build in feedback mechanisms so that these suggestions are carried through. Reward the customer—let them take credit. *Listen, learn and give graciously.* The secret of parenting. Why should it be different anywhere else?

When delivering your [brand] new message

You already know from mass-market magazines what it takes to get their attention. Ads that don't talk down. Don't try to be trendy to them. It's like dressing up Helen Clark in a Britney Spears outfit. Don't make things look techno because that is like talking down—make things look *appropriate* instead.¹⁷

And respect privacy laws. While there's no one in New Zealand (pending the Ministry of Consumer Affairs' reply to me on this) who can really investigate spamming—not even the Attorney-General, unlike her counterparts in the United States—it doesn't give you the right, or the ACT Party for that matter, to invade Gen Y privacy. They are email-savvy and they know how spammers get addresses. You don't want to be seen as unethical.

Summary

1. Understand what you and your brand stand for.
2. Unify your team with a brand focus.
3. What socially responsible programme can you bring to the table that extends your brand attitude? If you don't do it, Gen Y is going to reject you.
4. Keep your brand promise.
5. Create affinity with Gen Y, but do it authentically and appropriately. Do not talk down to this segment.
6. Make positive community change. Even if your programme is local, show how doing your part helps the "community" with which you are involved.
7. Bring humanity to your organization: this is what's really "kewl".
8. Create community. Don't be scared of giving away power to do this: consumer empowerment can also build affinity and loyalty.
9. Listen, learn and give (or reward) graciously. Governments don't listen to Gen Y, so you have to fill the void in the private sector.
10. Be one with Gen Y: end the "us and them" mentality.

Notes

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12. Byrne: 'After Enron: the ideal corporation', *Business Week*, August 26, 2002, pp. 40–3.
13. 'VW signs workers' charter', *The Dominion*, June 10, 2002, p. 19.
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15. Engeseth: *Detective Marketing: Creating Common Sense in Business*. Stockholm: Stefan Engeseth Publishing 2001, p. 82. It is a logical development of those that Olins spoke of, namely with companies and countries swapping places in people's minds. Olins: *Trading Identities: Why Countries and Companies Are Taking on Each Other's Roles*. London: Foreign Policy Centre, 1999.
16. Lewis: *Next: the Future Just Happened*. New York: W. W. Norton 2001, pp. 138–49.
17. Khermouch: 'Didja C that kewl ad?', *Business Week*, August 26, 2002, pp. 100–1.

About the author

Jack Yan, LLB, BCA (Hons.), MCA

Specialities: Global marketing strategy, emerging business movements

Jack Yan founded Jack Yan & Associates, JY&A Consulting's parent company, as a virtual firm in 1987. A graduate of Scots College (where he was *Proxime Accessit*) and Victoria University of Wellington (BCA, LLB, BCA (Hons., 1st class), MCA), Jack is regarded as an authority in the areas of branding, identity, typography and cross-media branding, speaking and writing worldwide on these topics.

At JY&A Consulting, Jack's focus is examining branding and global business, including how smaller firms can leverage their intellectual capital applying an international marketing strategy. His master's thesis proved a connection between organizational vision and business performance through best-practice methods, which are now applied to many JY&AC clients. Recent research includes an examination of the success factors for online firms in Australasia, touching on cross-media concerns.

Client firms include insurance brokerage Willis, UNICEF, Electricity Corp. of New Zealand, Colgate-Palmolive, SANE Australia, Deutsche Bank, Knight Ridder, Victoria University of Wellington, and numerous non-profit organizations. He developed the *Lucire* brand from 1997, now one of the world's leading pure-play online fashion titles.

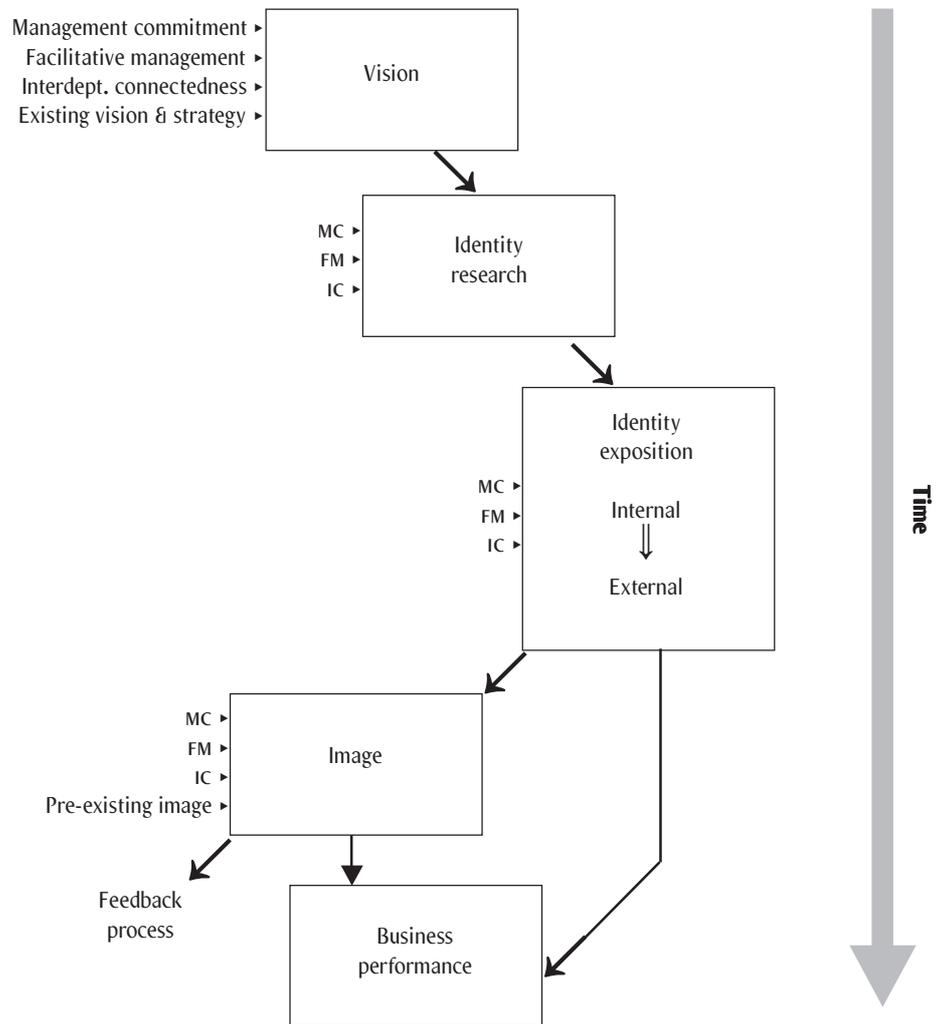
Jack Yan has a reputation of taking all his firms to leadership positions.

His interests include the application of Confucianism in the context of global harmony and business, automotive design and international cultures.

He regularly travels and currently divides his year between the US, Europe and New Zealand.

Jack's personal site can be found at www.jackyan.com.

Appendix 1 The branding model



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Our basic model is shown above, developed after research of all identity and branding literature in major journals from the 1950s onwards. We do not follow it religiously, as each client has its own demands. Often, some of the elements highlighted above are already in place. Our research helped us define the best practice for organizations, which we now deliver.

Our methods combine the conventional with the novel. The points below are intended as a general indication.

1. *Understanding the vision.* Finding out the direction and strategy of the organization in the long term through interviews and meetings with directors and top management.

2. *Internal research.* By researching internal audiences, we find out the gap between current and desired perceptions, and any areas where management needs to improve itself.

3. *External research.* A similar study is done to see what gaps need to be bridged for external audiences.

4. *Fine-tuning the vision.* Findings are presented to management to create or formalize a vision.

5. Creating the experience.

Introducing a programme to internal audiences to inform them of any changes to the organization and getting them to “buy in” to the vision. This would consist of items such as update meetings with the original cross-functional groups, newsletters, intranet communications, internal launch—this is highly dependent on the organization.

6. Let the world know. The branding programme. Design, campaigns, launching to external audiences.

7. Tracking. Tracking brand equity (goodwill, associations, etc.) in internal and external audiences and recommending adjustments where necessary.

8. Business performance. If 1–7 have gone to plan, the organization should experience improved business performance.

Appendix 2 Further reading

This paper is based on Jack Yan's 'Corporate responsibility and the brands of tomorrow', which will appear this coming quarter in the *Journal of Brand Management*, vol. 10, nos. 4–5.

For more information on the *Journal*, visit www.henrystewart.co.uk/journals/hspindex.htm.

A related chapter will appear in a new book to be edited by Nicholas Ind appearing in the southern spring of 2003.

Reading list

Kelly: *The Divine Right of Capital: Dethroning the Corporate Aristocracy*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler 2002.

Anholt: *Brand New Justice: the Upside of Global Branding*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann 2003.

Lewis: *Next: the Future Just Happened*. New York: W. W. Norton 2001.

Khermouch: 'Didja C that kewl ad?', *Business Week*, August 26, 2002, pp. 100–1.

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