

Tekst 5

It's hard work trying to escape from the gooey corporate hug

Opinion

Naomi Klein, critical as ever towards superbrands

When I was 17, I worked after school at an Esprit clothing store in Montreal. It was a pleasant job, mostly involving folding cotton garments into little squares so sharp their corners could have taken your eye out. But for some reason corporate HQ didn't consider our T-shirt origami sufficiently profitable. One day our calm world was turned upside down by a regional supervisor who swooped in to indoctrinate us in the culture of the Esprit brand – and increase our productivity.

“Esprit”, she told us, “is like a good friend.” I was sceptical, and I let it be known. Sceptical, I quickly 11, is not considered an asset in the low-wage service sector. Two weeks later the supervisor fired me for being in possession of that most loathed workplace character trait: “bad attitude”.

I guess that was one of my first lessons in why large multinational corporations are not “like a good friend”, since good friends, while they may do many horrible and hurtful things, rarely 12 you.

So I was interested when, last month, advertising agency TBWA Chiat-Day rolled out the new “brand identity” for the north American retail giant Shoppers Drugmart. (Rebranding launches are, in corporate terms, like 13). It turns out that the chain is no longer “everything you want in a drugstore”, ie a place where you can buy things you need, but

is now advertised as a “caring friend”. This is a caring friend that takes earthly form in a chain of 800 drugstores, with a \$22m ad budget.

Shoppers' new slogan is “take care of yourself”, selected, according to campaign creator Pat Pirisi, because it “echoes what a caring friend would say”. Get ready for it to be said thousands of times a day by young cashiers as they hand you plastic bags filled with razors, dental floss and diet pills. “We believe this is a position Shoppers can own,” Mr Pirisi explains.

Leaving aside the somewhat unsettling idea of “owning” friendship, asking clerks to adopt this particular phrase as their mantra seems 14 in this age of casual, insecure, underpaid McLabour. Service sector workers are often told to take care of themselves – since no one, least of all their mega-employers, is going to take care of them. Yet it's one of the ironies of our branded age that, as corporations become more remote by cutting lasting ties with us as employees, they are increasingly sidling up to us as 15.

It's not just Shoppers: Wal-Mart ads tell stories about clerks who, in a pinch, lend customers their wedding gowns, and Saturn's ads portray car dealers who offer counseling when customers lose their jobs. You see, according to the new marketing book, Values Added, modern marketers have to “make your brand a cause and your cause a brand”.

Maybe I still have 16, but this collective corporate hug feels about as empty today as it did

when I was a 17-year-old about-to-be-unemployed T-shirt folder. Particularly when you stop to consider the cause of all this mass-produced warmth.

Explaining Shoppers' new brand identity to Canada's Financial Post, Mr Pirisi said that “in an age when people are becoming more and more 17 corporations – the World Trade Organisation protests will attest to that – and at a time when the health care system isn't what it used to be, we realised we had to send consumers a message about partnership.”

Ever since large corporations such as Nike, Shell and Monsanto began facing increased scrutiny from civil society – mostly for putting short-term profits far ahead of environmental responsibility and job security – an industry has ballooned to help these companies 18. But it seems clear that many in the corporate world remain convinced that all they have is a “messaging problem” that can be neatly solved by settling on the right, socially minded brand identity.

As evidence of the state of corporate confusion, I am frequently asked to give presentations to individual corporations. Fearing that my words will end up in some gooey ad campaign, I always refuse. But this advice I can offer without reservation: nothing will change until corporations realise that they don't have a 19 problem. They have a reality problem.

The Washington Post

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Kies bij iedere open plek in de tekst het juiste antwoord uit de gegeven mogelijkheden.

1p 11 ■

- A discovered
- B lied
- C pointed out

1p 12 ■

- A exploit
- B fire
- C forget
- D lecture

1p 13 ■

- A being born again
- B falling in love
- C visiting an old friend

1p 14 ■

- A a bit heartless
- B quite smart
- C too modest

1p 15 ■

- A consumers
- B employers
- C job seekers

1p 16 ■

- A a bad attitude
- B a communication problem
- C a naïve mind
- D little self-confidence

1p 17 ■

- A dependent on
- B distrustful of
- C familiar with

1p 18 ■

- A expand
- B improve efficiency
- C recruit staff
- D respond

1p 19 ■

- A communication
- B financial
- C labour
- D political