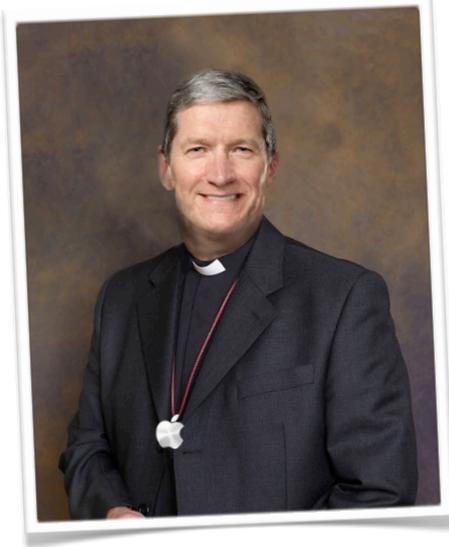


Apple Worship



Pity Richard Dawkins. As if it were not hard enough to persuade the world not to worship a supernatural God, a large part of it seems to be enraptured by artificial ones. These man-made, virtual gods, intangible yet curiously powerful, are what we call brands.

If, as it has been popularly claimed by various recent studies, 'brands are the new religion', then Apple has probably come closer than most in generating a neo-religious sense of affiliation, devotion and expectation from its admirers. Its iconic products are displayed, like glorious artefacts, in glittering retail cathedrals throughout the world. The brand's deification has come through the unswerving adoration and worship of its users, whose little white ear buds are worn with pride, like symbols of commitment. Apple does, after all, offer life changing experiences: iPod changed the way the world listened to music, iPhone revolutionised the global smart phone market while iPad carved-out a huge new category all of its own. Devoted followers watch, spellbound, as each new product launch reveals 'incredible, ground-breaking innovations' and 'awesome performance enhancements'

before setting-off on their next pilgrimage, where they will wait in-line for hours to be among the first blessed with the latest product by the Apple priest or, rather, 'Genius'. Of course, I am exaggerating, slightly, to make a point, but it can look strangely ritualistic to the uninitiated. The truth is, when a brand starts to emulate what we might traditional call 'religion', it transitions from being a product to a lifestyle choice and what it *says* about you matters more than what its products *do* for you. Are you in or out? Do you get it or not? Believer or agnostic? Have you 'seen the light'?

As more established religions have found to their cost, problems can arise when faith is blind. When believers forget (or perhaps never really understood) what, or why, they believe; icons become more important than meanings and reasoned commitment gives way to unquestioning dogma. Then, when a crack appears in the brand's seemingly infallible facade (say, an underwhelming product or a bad service experience), it would initially be met with denial from the believer (too much trust has been invested, there must be some mistake) countered by self-righteous glee from the unbeliever (always looking for an excuse to puncture the illusion). Unchecked rumours spread, discontentment gains momentum and denial turns into disillusionment. Thanks to the wonders of social media, that tipping point can come more quickly than ever. Apple's recent Google Maps fiasco was a taste of such behavioural dynamics.

When a brand like Apple generates a devoted neo-religious following it might do well to learn from longstanding experts in the field. For example, if it were to ensure that its followers genuinely understood its credo and articles of faith (let us call them brand definition and guiding principles), they might be less likely to stray, disillusioned, when their brand's omnipotence wobbles from time-to-time (which it inevitably will - it is, after all, only man-made pretender). We all need the arguments on which to base our rational judgements, even if they are merely to justify the irrational ones we have already made. We need to appreciate what a brand can and, more importantly, what it cannot do. This is, after all, the essence of what sets it apart and makes it unique from any of its potential competitors. Yet Apple currently offers nothing more than a vague allusion to 'detail-orientation', 'creativity' and 'simplicity' (which, incidentally, it buries it in the recruitment section of its global website). Maybe it thinks a formal declaration of principles would feel countercultural or unfashionably restrictive? Or maybe the universally-appealing spirit of Apple is so well understood it need not be articulated? My guess is that Apple has never really thought seriously about its brand strategy, let alone its status as a quasi world religion, because there appear to be some diverging theologies emerging, as attempts to define Apple's core values seems leave experts floundering in contradiction. Some claim, for instance, that the essence of the Apple brand is "innovation", others insist it is "usability", some say it is about being "friendly and approachable" or "design-led", still others

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suggest it is about being “the ultimate” even “indispensable”. No doubt some wag will claim that the essence of Apple is about being “Reassuring Expensive”, unfortunately that line has already been spent. While many of these perceptions may be correct, they cannot *all* be *equally* correct or we will be left with an vaguely-defined, amorphous catch-all - hardly the makings of a robust brand, let alone a lasting deity!

But it was not always thus. There was a time when Apple boldly claimed to “Think Different” and its followers adored the vibrant, revolutionary, anti-establishment approach of the brand. Being an Apple-user (or, more particularly, a Mac-user) meant joining an alternative tribe of ‘enlightened’ geeks and designers, who cooed over the operating system, drooled over the aesthetics and would sooner have than swallowed their perspex mouse whole than regress back to ‘Windoze’. Their unwavering belief was based on a fundamental understanding of what Apple was about, and they understood it as intimately as its Californian creators. Today, though vastly out-numbered and out-spent by the majority of Apple-users, they remain the most committed and loyal followers. It is they who will still be there after a shinier new god has charmed away the newbies. Importantly, they know why they are there and, as long as Apple stays true to itself, they too will stay true.



But is Apple staying true to itself? If it were, you might think it would cherish and reward these committed, long-standing users and encourage them to evangelise the Apple brand (like a car owners’ club, a university alumni group or even a retail loyalty programme)? Unfortunately, Apple seems to have become so preoccupied with commercial expansion that it has forgotten the importance of maintaining brand values and customer advocacy. Despite its reticence in declaring what its brand actually stands for, it seems to have had no problem declaring who its brand should be targeting commercially, it is what it calls the ‘post-PC generation’. In other words, Apple now intends to focus on creating accessible devices for the masses, many of whom have never used a computer, and perhaps never will. There are, after all, considerably fewer geeks and designers than potential Apple-struck consumers in the world and fewer still willing to bear the fulsome price-tags and ever-shorter replacement cycles needed to keep the brand’s share price rolling heavenward. Even so, it is tantamount to announcing that anyone who owns a high-spec Mac is Apple history. Would it be so difficult to maintain a foothold in its former heartland while continuing its mission to domination global handheld devices? It seems that Apple’s inability to focus on more than a couple of tasks at once is becoming a major handicap (perhaps it needs a few more female leaders in Cupertino?).

It would be ironic to see the cracks of disappointment appearing first among the enlightened and dedicated few who can actually see beyond Apple’s glossy modern facade. Regrettable? Yes. Unavoidable? Hardly. Could it be that Apple has become so hell-bent on chasing dollars that it has forgotten its spiritual values? Maybe its slogan “Think Different” (which, incidentally, it has not used for over ten years) should now be “Think Dollars”?

Still, the world’s richest company, led by the world best-paid directors, must surely know what it’s doing? Well you would think so, wouldn’t you? The trouble is, power can be intoxicating and before you know it you can start to believe that you really can make up your own rules and walk on water... the illusion of infallibility usually ends in tears though, as Sony, Palm, Nokia, Blackberry, et al. will bear witness.

In conclusion, few would argue that Apple has skilfully produced raft after raft of glorious products. Its brand has, consequently, been propelled to heady peaks that transcend anything that Apple might have planned. For all its product development skills, though, Apple seems to have little grip on the neo-religious zeal that has grown-up around its brand nor on the potential liability that it represents.

With due respect to Prof. Dawkins, as long as Apple enjoys its current cult status, there seems little point in proclaiming that there is probably no God. And, with due respect to Apple, the day it actually believes it *is* God is the day its sense of reality has flown and its ignominious fall from grace begins.

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Keith Lucas

Founder and Managing Director of Lucasbrand, a UK-based strategic brand consultancy with a diverse international client base. Lucasbrand typically connects at a senior level with firms looking for a fresh perspective on reputation, corporate personality or brand strategy. Its professional expertise and proprietary skills have added significant value to the businesses of many clients.

Lucasbrand has created, developed and repositioned brands across many sectors including broadcast, publishing, airlines, airports, luxury goods, perfumery, telecoms, cars, energy, consumer electronics, professional services and banking.

Brands with which Keith Lucas has personally been engaged include: BBC, Rolex, BAA, Discovery Channel, Firmenich, Farrer & Company, Reed Elsevier, BT Global Services, Ford, Jaguar, Citroën, BP, McKinsey & Company, Goldman Sachs, Towers Watson, Hitachi, Samsung and Motorola.

To find-out more, contact Keith Lucas directly:

Website: <http://www.lucasbrand.com>
Email: keith.lucas@lucasbrand.com
Telephone: +44 1494 442 122 / +44 7747 756 116
Blog: <http://www.blog.lucasbrand.com>
LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/keithlucas>
Skype: keithlucas
Twitter: keithlucas