



## Debbie Millman Provides the History of Branding in Just 20 Minutes

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Imagine trying to give the complete history of branding in 20 minutes? That's exactly what Debbie Millman did Thursday at the Promax Conference 2019 in Los Angeles.

"50,000 years ago," Millman began, "homo sapiens brains went through a major change that allowed us to step into being the modern species we are today. Our brain reorganized into three parts - reptilian, limbic or mammalian, and neocortex."

As Millman described, this helped to develop cultural universals. Debbie explained: "language, art, music, cooking, self-decoration - everyone all over the planet used these behaviors shortly after the great leap forward and started to use these to improve our lives."

Not long after this, humans used their new-found knowledge to craft physical elements.

"We started to craft stone tools and used those tools to paint our reality on the walls of caves," Millman said as an image of a cave painting rolled up on the screen. "These are the walls of the caves in France where we first started to create symbols to document our reality. We used stone tools to craft environments so that we could stay safer in weather that was unpredictable."

As time went on, humans' actions took on deeper meaning.

"10,000 years ago, we started to array ourselves with makeup - we weren't doing it for beautification purposes but to make ourselves more beautiful to God. This is when everything changed - it was the beginning of all modern branding."

As different opinions about who this higher power was started to abound, humans created symbols to designate their specific beliefs. "We started to manufacture meaning around those symbols and then we all agreed that they meant something and we agreed on what they meant. That mutual agreement fostered a sense of pride and connection. We as humans are happiest when our brains are resonating harmoniously with others-when we feel seen, when we feel got."

After that, humans started to choose sides, and create items that helped signify what side everyone was on.

"We started fighting to signify that our beliefs were more valid than those of others. We did that with war. First, flags were created on the battlefield to signify what side of the battlefield you actually belonged on."

Humans extended those symbols of unification even more when they designed uniforms, which signified armies and fighting units.

In 1876, another major shift took place when the U.S. government voted the Trademark Registration Act into law.

"The first brand marketed by a trademark is Bass Ale, which is not an American brand and it was an alcoholic beverage. I think that first brand says a lot about who we are as humans, Millman said.

That led neatly into the first example of product placement, in which several bottles of Bass Ale were include in an 1888 Edouard Manet painting."

Soon after, brands became marks that created a sense of social status among different groups.

"Anthropomorphism of brands starts with characters such as Rice Crispies' Snap, Crackle and Pop, Aunt Jemima maple syrup and pancake mix, and Betty Crocker baking mixes. Brands begin to create a sense of social status and of cache - suddenly, it means as much about you as it does the brand. Brands become a cultural badge and that's seen in cars, jeans, sneakers - at this point, branding turns into belonging. Branding demonstrated that sense of belonging for people who were part of that group as well as people who were excluded."

Moving into the modern era, things start to evolve rapidly.

"25 years ago, our world changed through the advent of the introduction to the Internet. At one time, it was the coolest thing in the world to have an AOL email address. Now, probably the least cool thing on the planet is to have an AOL email address," Millman said.

"18 years ago, six weeks after 9/11, the iPod happened. That wasn't important just because of the connection between iTunes and iPod - people felt cool because they had these white earbuds. iPods were so ubiquitous that people in tribal costume were seen holding them."

"From 2001-04, what we were doing online? AOLing, looking at porn, playing games, reading email. iPod ushered in a specific time for cultural

anthropologists - now, the iPod was beginning to cultivate a period of severe isolation. The iPod era is an era of personal media turning us into a nation of socially isolated people."

The culture tried to combat that isolation by devising social media.

"In 2005, MySpace was created. MySpace gave you an opportunity for the first time ever to be able to connect through the device. In the fourteen years since, we've seen the evolution of these brands moved to lots of other arenas. There was an intense need to connect. Remember, humans are happiest when our brains are harmoniously happening with others."

Millman encouraged attendees to consider their connection to their phones in a different way.

"I contend that we are not addicted to our smartphones. We're addicted to the feelings that we have to the connections that we have through our smartphones."

Just like the pace of technological evolution, so too has the pace of branding sped up.

"The discipline of branding changed more in the past two years than ever before," said Millman. "For the first time since humanity created those symbols 10,000 years ago, branding is no longer the purview of the corporation pushed down into culture. Now, brands can be created by anyone and shared by everyone. They are created by the people for the people. Brands like this: Black Lives Matter and #MeToo."

"It took 35 years for 150 million consumers to own a black-and-white television set. It took seven years for 150 million people to own a smartphone. In 2016, a brand was created-the pink pussy hat-that six weeks after the election signified a protest that took only three months for 150 million people to adopt. We're living in a day and age where branding has become a profound manifestation of the human spirit."

Looking ahead to the future of branding, Millman quoted Malcolm Gladwell: "Never before have we had these kinds of communications technologies in the hands of those who have the greatest desire to innovate."

[Images courtesy of Memoryscape]