These days, there isn’t much that can’t be branded. Our country is a brand (imaginatively named Brand Australia); government legislation is judged in terms of brand value (the recent renaming of the Work Choices legislation due to damage to the “Work Choices brand” for example); even schools, art galleries and charities are branded. Discussion within the graphic design industry about branding these traditionally non-commercial activities reveals a host of professional concerns about the role graphic designers play in, and the broader implications of, brand work. Many of us feel deeply uncomfortable with our contribution to this seemingly unstoppable force and its relentless encroachment into territory close to our hearts. This discomfort is only compounded by the central role of graphic design in the application of brand strategy. The profession’s dependence on the sheer volume of design work generated by branding and re-branding renders us not just dirty by association; we find ourselves to be rolling around in the trough. This distasteful observation is dependent upon assumptions about branding and graphic design's role within it that are worth closer inspection.

A frequent claim against brand work is that it is hopelessly superficial, that it is pseudo-scientific window dressing. A branding expert may argue that what is referred to here as superficial is actually bad branding; that good branding has depth, continuity and provides a two-way dialogue with its audience. To the graphic designer applying, for months at a time, the same logo, colour palette, image treatment and strap line to our clients’ every communication in the name of a consistent, ‘good’ brand message this explanation is unconvincing. We get to know the workings of their businesses from however blurred and distant a perspective, and even from our faraway view we can see they are far more complex, dynamic and intricate than the brand message communicates. Even so, this is unlikely to ruffle our social consciences when it is applied to old school commerce; the well-worn example of branding washing up powder to increase sales, for instance. The mantra that we are just providing a service, or that graphic design is borne of commerce and thus, as graphic designers, we are in no position to judge is usually enough to quell, for the time being at least, any latent uneasiness about our participation in the process. But as commerce seeps into our most personal and emotional realms, into territory long considered sacred and above being bought, so too does branding, and in this stark confrontation — between our deeply-held personal beliefs and the apparent dumbing down requisite of our day jobs — our convenient logic is understandably shaken.
Compounding the unease brought on by this realisation is the loss of control over our own work that branding represents (graphic designers are, after all, a predominantly perfectionist and mildly obsessive bunch). As branding has mushroomed into an apparently autonomous industry, mixing what has traditionally been graphic design knowledge with that from the murky world of public relations, its influence has been increasingly felt in our everyday work. What was once the preserve of the art director and the graphic designer is now intolerably influenced by the brand manager’s mandate to ensure the design stays ‘on brand’. Such unwelcome outside direction represents a sacrifice of the message it is our job to communicate to the higher purpose of the overarching brand.

And so branding of traditionally non-commercial areas offends us on several levels: we are bored by its sameness; it confronts us with the truth that almost all of the values and institutions that contribute to our personal identity are being traded like any other commodity; and it represents a loss of professional control. And yet what it is about branding exactly that makes it so pervasive escapes us. We have a functional knowledge of what application of brand strategy entails, and we know the textbook definitions — altering perception of an entity to align it with that entity’s present reality, or, more simply, reputation management — but this is not sufficient to explain its omnipresence. The rapidly expanding nature of branding as a discipline only makes reaching an understanding more difficult. As it incorporates new knowledge from fields ever more distant from our own (like consumer psychology), branding becomes increasingly less familiar to us; it is only natural that in the face of this we become suspicious. Branding has taken what we know and seemingly twisted it for ends that, although they are not obvious, foster a sense of foreboding. It is increasingly hard for us to differentiate, sometimes even in our own work, between what is representative of our client’s considered business strategy and what is a cynical attempt to manipulate the audience’s perception. Even more disconcerting is the distinct possibility that with their newfound branding zeal, our client’s considered business strategy could well be to cynically manipulate their audience. The possibility that all this can be in a design of our own making without us being conscious of the extent of our complicity is perhaps the most sinister of all observations about brand related design work. We like to think that, when it comes to our clients’ accounts, we run the show, that we are the experts guiding them through a minefield of typographical faux pas and unnecessary drop shadow. But with brand work, this is less and less the case.
In light of these many professional and personal reservations about branding, it is only natural that the profession should become defensive against its eroding influence. The most persistent claim we use to defend ourselves against branding is that we should have nothing to do with it, that it is not a worthy application of our skills. Because the vast proportion of branding is focussed on encouraging consumption (of goods, events, services and, lately, even experiences and culture) many designers have a suspicion that there are more significant issues we could, or even should, be addressing. This is a sound argument; that as professionals expertly trained to communicate meaning we have a professional and social responsibility to communicate messages with significantly more substance than ‘The evolution starts here’ (the University of Melbourne’s latest brand message). When contrasted with honest work on briefs related to social marketing campaigns and charitable causes — to draw two examples from the contentious First Things First Manifesto — applying blandly consistent brand messages seems not only an oversimplification but also an irresponsible way to earn a living. And yet even in this treatise against consumerism there is the acknowledgement, front and centre, that “commercial work has always paid the bills”. Again, graphic design is torn between higher aspirations and practical concerns.

Another defence against branding, not only used by graphic designers, is that of nostalgia. Many of us imagine happy times when the practical considerations and higher ideals of the graphic designer were in harmony with one another, allowing them to produce beautiful objects and improve society at the same time. While it is commendable to lament an apparent loss of graphic diversity and nuance that branding is sometimes said to represent, such angst is dependent upon graphic design actually having this rosy, noble and egalitarian past. Although there were movements with progressive aims early on in graphic design history — the Bauhaus and the Swiss School come to mind — their early output was experienced by a privileged few (it took the happy boon of post-war mass consumerism to bring such delights as Tschichold’s Penguin paperbacks into widespread currency). In truth, the vast majority of design work experienced by most people in the pre-WWII period was either plain old advertising or government-sponsored propaganda. There is no question that some of the advertisements of yesteryear are beautiful examples of craftsmanship, but they were inspired by the same base motivation to sell (often unnecessary) products as is at the root of branding today. As for government-sponsored propaganda, though it deals with weightier issues — nationhood, defence of political ideologies and of cultural values — and so is perhaps more worthy of our toils, what it makes up for in quantity of meaning, it lacks in
noble intent. Examples of such propaganda are often beautiful too, but with a sinister edge: although the promotion is ostensibly in aid of defending a country, it most often does this by dehumanising representations of ‘the enemy’ and either legitimising or inciting violence.

These misgivings about branding are not laid out here to discount outright. While some, like the nostalgia angle, do not hold up to scrutiny, others are worthy of fuller exploration. What is important to bear in mind though in any critical analysis, are the compelling societal reasons prompting our clients’ to brand and repeatedly re-brand. For all its reductionist appearance, it stands to reason that for branding to have become so pervasive, it must also have advantages, and not just the ones listed in slick Olins textbooks. Beyond the tired old line about brands giving consumers control over products (presumably through wielding of their collective purchasing power) there are several concepts that hold more water. Some argue that branding gives a modern day voice to ancient mythologies; that through re-telling of old, common stories, brands link us to our past and fulfil the basic human desire for storytelling. It is even claimed that it is to these mythologies that enduring brands owe their success. A simpler argument along similar lines is that brands allow us to make sense of a world far more visually complex than our primitive brains are used to. By routinely buying trusted brands, the reasoning goes, consumers simplify their world and thus experience a sense of security. Others understand reality to be dependent upon and shaped by perception; therefore by managing perceptions, brands present consumers with a range of realities to choose as they see fit. Whatever the reasons, brands certainly sate some desire within us, otherwise they would not be so compelling or so prevalent. When it comes to brand work we have to, eventually, acknowledge our clients’ wisdom and trust their intent is not as grim as it may at times seem from our narrow perspective.

A group of clients whose motivations are often misunderstood and thus railed against is governments. The efforts of many governments to brand their countries have received much critical attention in the graphic design press. However, branding is not so divergent from the usual activities of government as our limited knowledge would lead us to believe. Governments have been doing something very like branding for hundreds of years and their main branding tool has been us! Since the creation of the nation state in the 15th century — the nation state being the model for all countries in existence today — governments have, for their own ends, imbued their citizens with a strong sense of national identity. In a
roundabout way, this fulfils the main object of government; that is to provide security for its subjects. With the creation of the nation state, this necessity of providing security for its citizens was linked to the concept of ‘nation’, that is, a group of people sharing similar cultural, moral and sometimes religious beliefs, and usually occupying a particular physical space. In order to maintain their legitimacy of rule over a particular physical area and group of people (and so to reduce the risk of invasion by other countries or worse, revolt by their citizens), governments became dependent upon their citizens considering themselves as one cohesive group, with strong associations with the land. Having fostered these feelings of nationhood, through state-sanctioned religion, teaching of a conveniently unifying national history in schools, promotion of ethnic dress, traditions and cuisine as national standards, the government then positions itself as the only true leaders of the newly-formed nation state, because of its uncanny similarity of views to its subjects (remember, the government in question has spent considerable time and money bringing the people to view themselves in a way that is convenient for itself). Modern day countries, Australia for instance, have far more heterogeneous populations than this simplified model explains, but the basic premise still holds true. Indeed, in Australia our varied cultural backgrounds are just as much a part of our national identity as are egalitarianism and the much-abused notion of ‘mateship’.

The point of explaining all this is that the nation building activity described above sounds remarkably similar to construction of a brand dialogue. This in itself is not necessarily surprising; that branding as a discipline owes a debt to early government ‘reputation management’ techniques is widely acknowledged within the field of brand management. Where this observation becomes interesting is when it is considered next to the reaction generated by the relatively new activity of country branding. What we see in the outcry against branding countries is the battle of one ideology against another in the minds and hearts of the citizens of that country. For generations we have been taught — through our education, public galleries and our dealings with government departments themselves — to consider ourselves in relation to one overarching set of beliefs. We may position ourselves against them, but our sense of personal identity is framed within the context of the larger, dominant national identity. For example, many countries assert the dominance of one religion; a person may practise a minority religion but still consider herself a citizen of that country. When a country is branded what we experience, in a very personal way, is the displacement or, at the very least, the challenging of this shared national identity.
with another one staking claim to the same territory in our minds. Ironically, the new message is from the same source, but is an updated version of the identity, employing the relatively new tools of branding to the good old-fashioned activity of governing the mind.

An interesting local defence against the dirty association with branding, is to deny that we, in Australia, are doing it. A not uncommon view is that American multinational corporations brand; whereas we, Australian residents employed in Australian businesses, implement sophisticated identity and reputation management strategies. By this reasoning it could also be said that the United States government is ruthlessly propagandist in its incitement of human rights violations at home and abroad, while our government encourages appropriate and measured behaviour toward immigrants and indigenous Australians. If the latter statement sits uncomfortably, so too must the former. Branding in this way has come to be used as something of an accusation by a small but vocal number of the profession; it is what ‘they’ do and ‘we’ do not. Branding, like propaganda, is one of those fundamentally ideologically driven pursuits that, although we see distinct advantages to, we are reluctant to own any connection with whatsoever. Clearly neither the branding or the propaganda statement holds true; all that is needed to dispel this argument is the plain observation that the graphic design skills used when working ‘on brand’ for an in-house studio in a multinational, for a US-based design studio and in an Australian graphic design studio (no matter how small or alternative) are essentially the same. The size or motivations of their clients are no doubt different, but the designer plays the same role in each.

Solid evidence disproving this last defence lies in FutureBrand’s Country Brand Index (CBI) results of last year. This is a ranking whereby countries are measured in terms of their value as brands. Surprisingly to some (though, presumably, not to Tourism Australia staff, who have been developing the brand for over six years), Australia was recognised as having the single most valuable country brand in 2006. Where many other countries ranked in the survey had not overtly branded themselves before the CBI assessment, Australia’s top ranking was due to a lengthy branding and fine-tuning process. The Australian government first attempted to establish a brand presence in the lead up to the Sydney Olympics with its ‘Brand Australia’; a brand based around a symbol incorporating a kangaroo and a blazing sun. This initial campaign was moderately successful; it met one of its aims, heightening international awareness of Australia, but did not achieve the other, that of shaking off the ‘Crocodile
Dundee’ image associated with Australia abroad. Enter the 2004 re-brand and the latest branding strategy, 'Australia, A Different Light'; this is the strategy that included the "Where the bloody hell are you?" tourism campaign. This campaign was, as the ranking shows, far more successful. While Australia having this success as a brand does not necessarily mean branding is widespread within the country, it certainly questions the legitimacy of our reluctance to own up to our professional brand dependence.

That branding presents graphic designers with significant professional concerns is without doubt. However, as practical considerations constantly remind us, rejecting branding work outright is not a realistic solution to our moral dilemma, especially with its steady encroachment into ever more areas of public and private life. For better or worse, we need branding as much as it needs us. It has been my intention here to demonstrate that in relation to country branding at least, this is not such a bad thing. Yes, on country branding jobs we are helping governments direct the identities and values of their citizens, which on the face of it appears less than ideal. But all governments (and so too, ultimately, their citizens) have relied on such techniques for centuries, and where they have not been implemented successfully, the countries in question have soon been subject to war, economic ruin or both. Perhaps with some investigation employing knowledge from relevant fields (for example, drawing on theories on governance to put country branding in context) the use of branding in other non-commercial areas will prove not to be so sinister either. In order to understand the effects of branding more fully, and so to maintain a real and current understanding of our role in its expansion, it is important that we look outside of our profession’s own history and draw on that of other disciplines.

Words: 3,000