

Muslim Futurism and Islamic Branding

Speech by Miles Young at the Inaugural Oxford Global Islamic Branding and Marketing Forum,

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Thank you so much, Linda. It is a pleasure indeed to be here. The venue – in this marvellous business school but also particularly in Oxford – seems particularly appropriate to the importance of the subject we are discussing. It was in Oxford, of course, that the commerce between East and West led in the 1630s to the first ever Chair of Arabic in England, and, for a while, at least, a period of relative interest in, and tolerance for, the culture and context of the primary trading partner, the then Ottoman Empire. In the parlance of today, at least two of its successor states would be classified as 'N-11' markets, new growth engines for the global economy. The world is re-balancing, but it might be fair to say that the business of marketing and branding is only just beginning to acknowledge this, and catch up.

But, numbers talk; and big numbers talk loudly. In fact, it was when we sent out a mailer recently, describing Muslim consumers conservatively as the 'third one billion' that the bells started finally to ring in the global HQs of some of our clients. Yes, this is a market bigger than India or China is, and yet it receives a tiny fraction of the attention. And it is not just that the numbers are there, but the value is also. The GDP of the five large Middle Eastern countries is the same size as India, but on a population which is one-third of it. Most global enterprises, whether from the West or the East, have a BRIC strategy, and many are starting to look at N-11 in the same way. 53% of the population of the N-11 are Muslim. Finally, Muslim countries are some of the youngest in the world. There are more than 750 million Muslims under the age of 25, representing 43% of the global Muslim population, and 11% of the world's.

But the numbers alone do not tell the whole story. From the 1970s on we have witnessed an Islamic Renaissance, perhaps as profound as its European counterpart of the 16th century. The reassertion of thought and culture which this has produced, at a time of technological change, means that this is an active, creative and innovative constituency, and one which is on the move. It is also one which we in the West can learn from.

There are two challenges which Western marketers face when contemplating this opportunity.

The first is that global enterprises still operate within matrix structures in which the primary axis is geographic. However, the Islamic world is a powerful vertical segment which unifies attitudes and behaviours, but not always by geography. This causes significant issues of sponsorship within organisations. Where does the Islamic conscience rest? If I may venture an answer, I suspect it will increasingly be with global product management, another vertical function; whereas, if at all, it lies currently within local markets in product management. In other words, the big transition needs to be from a local/ tactical function to a global/ strategic one.

And the second is the tendency of the marketing and advertising industry to see it as just another interesting segment. In this mindset, it becomes equated with 'greys', or the 'Pink Dollar; or Latinos in the US. Of course, all these are very valid targets for segmentation strategies, but the Islamic opportunity surely differs qualitatively. We are not looking here at a segment which is qualified by one primary difference, be it age, orientation, language or skin colour, and then whether attitudes and behaviour vary from a norm in accordance with that. Rather, we are looking at an alternative norm, one where the starting point is Islamic identity, and everything else fits into it. An American Muslim is a Muslim first and an American second. An American grey is an American first, and grey is a qualifier. In other words, much of the conventional marketing canon, the textbook thinking of Kotler and others, does not really cope intellectually with the Islamic opportunity.

Despite the heterogeneity of the Muslim populations with majority and significant minority populations in some 57 countries around the world, Islam constantly bonds together their daily lives and influences their consumption habits, through the centrality of faith. Muslims' own belief in the significance of Islam in their lives is pervasive. In the mammoth Gallup survey conducted from 2001 to 2007 in over 35 countries the number one response for over 90,000 Muslims when asked what they most admired about the Islamic world was 'peoples' sincere adherence to Islam'. As Hajja Samira, a Cairene correspondent of ours says, 'our sight, dress, food and drink should be for God and out of love for Him'. It is this word 'sincerity' which needs to be added to the traditional lexicon of marketing practice.

At Ogilvy & Mather, we have created a branding consultancy, called Ogilvy Noor, staffed by Muslims from our offices around the world, to help global clients do exactly that. We define Islamic Branding as "branding that's empathetic to *Shariah* values, in order to appeal to the Muslim consumer, ranging from basic *Shariah* friendliness to full *Shariah* compliance in all aspects of a brand's identity, behaviour and communications". In the West, *Shariah* has become narrowly associated with *Shariah* law (or *fiqh*). But it is *Shariah* values which I believe we need to start with. Some of these values are: honesty, respect, consideration, kindness, peacefulness, authenticity, purity, patience, discipline, transparency, modesty, community, dignity. This is not at all an exhaustive list. I have mentioned sincerity; and underpinning the working of *Shariah* in daily life is 'sincerity of intention'. This is a key message for the global CMO. As one of the Islamic scholars we talked to reminded us, 'it does all come down to our intentions.'

The starting point for marketing and branding must be a consideration of the role which *Shariah* compliance plays in the lives of modern Muslim consumers, and what they have come to expect from brands in terms of it. It is not to identify along a spectrum of devoutness the many different behaviours in Islam today: it is to understand how their devoutness, regardless of its level of intensity, affects their lives as ordinary people who work, play and consumer just like everyone else.

So we have come to a critical point. We do not believe that there is such a thing as a Muslim brand. Nor is it particularly helpful to think of brands as having religious beliefs. The classic case, of course, was that of the 'Mecca Colas' – post 9/11, which wore religion on their sleeves and on their cans. They failed on two counts. First, because they were not actually that sincere. As Shelina Janmohamed has remarked, 'What was Islamic about them except their name? They cashed in on a moment of political history'. And secondly, because they misunderstood what it was to be a brand: what brand equity is, and what is the relationship between it and what the category benefits and the

consumer needs are. These brands did not touch the complete consumer value system which needs to be sustained by big ideals not just by superficial badges.

On the other hand it is very helpful for brands to align to the values of religion in order to appeal to the Ummah. As the Islamic world explodes economically, the appetite for value-empathetic brands suddenly faces exponential increase. The requirement for us as professionals is to ensure that we understand what our consumers are actually thinking. To that end, Ogilvy Noor has just completed the first phase of a major qualitative and quantitative study. The primary findings I will quote from emerge from four majority Muslim markets – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan and Malaysia, however, they have been qualified and sense checked in other both majority and minority markets.

The research was conducted by our partner TNS, and is one part of a much larger study and report led by my colleague, Nazia Hussain, entitled 'Brands, Islam and the New Muslim Consumer', which we are formally launching this week.

So, what did we learn?

While segmentations of Muslim consumers have been attempted before, they have often tended to merge into relatively simple scales of devoutness in terms adherence to Islam on a scale of liberal to conservative. It seems more profound to look instead through the lens of the role that religion plays in their lives. On this level there are indeed six segments.

There are the 'Connected', 27% of the sample, who see themselves as part of the web-like network of the Ummah (and who, therefore, tend to view technology as a positive enabler). Compassion ranks highly as a value with them. They would say, 'religion connects me'. Next are the 'Grounded': Islam is their anchor, religion and culture are inseparable. They were 23% of the sample. They seek peace in all their thoughts by being close to Allah. They would say 'religion centres me'. Next are the 'Immaculates'. They seek disciplined perfection in religion, and many (not all) consistently reject the impure. At 11% of the sample, they tend to have a younger skew. They would say 'religion purifies me'. Then, we have the 'Identifiers' – Islam is a uniform they wear with pride – 'religion identifies me'. They want to see it strengthened and defended. They are 27% of the sample. Next are the 'Movers': successful change agents. For them, religion is what you do with it- 'religion enables me'. They're internet-savvy, for instance. They are 6% of the sample. Finally, there is a segment we call the 'Synthesizers', also at 6%. They are pragmatic, and adapt religious practice to their needs. As one said, 'travelling by camel is *Sunnah* but we need to travel by plane'. They would say 'religion individuates me'.

So we have six rather different and nuanced statements about the role of faith. But, they cohere within two rather different macro-groups. The first three – the Connected, the Grounded and the Immaculate, represent a more traditionalist mindset. They have an overarching desire for harmony; they are collectivists, seeking a sense of belonging. They tend to be more strongly aligned with the *Shariah* values of tolerance and compassion. They are proud of their faith, in a quiet way.

By contrast, the second group, a younger group, which we call the Futurists are more fiercely proud still. It is this group (statistically smaller at 40%) , the sum of the Identifiers, the Movers and the Sythesizers, who as practitioners of marketing and branding we should be fascinated in and focussed upon. At the start, it is very important to avoid the Western journalistic temptation to see these as

just another version of Gen Y or Millennials. The Futurists are differentiated by the degree to which they see themselves as steadfast followers of Islam in a modern world. They are driven by a purpose, a purpose very different from their peers. Herein lies the danger of glib segmentations along the lines of 'impoverished religious conservatives' or 'affluent modern liberals'. The critical lesson is that global brands need to avoid seeing these consumers through Western eyes; rather they have an amazing opportunity to empathise with the cultural mores which mainstream journalism tends to at best mis-represent or at worst stigmatize.

In contrast to the Traditionalists, the Futurists are more individualistic. Their religion is their own choice, not just imposed on them. Their pride is intense, regardless of the extent to which they would be categorized as 'devout'. In the broadest sense they believe in 'struggle' – the struggle to remain true to their faith while carving out success in life. They believe in education, and with it, the right to ask questions - typically deeper and more probing about the intentions of businesses than the Traditionalists. They want to get ahead: as activists they see Islam as an enabler. They seek to integrate a more globalised lifestyle with their own culture, but do so without fundamental compromise. They value creativity, and they're global. Muslim youth in Lahore exchange Ramadan tips with youth in Dhaka and in Jakarta at the click of a keyboard: it's a flatter, wider *Ummah* they are creating. But one in which they feel strong responsibility to an Islam to help change things for the better. In the words of a famous StyleIslam T-shirt, 'Keep smiling, it's Sunnah'.

One of the implications for us of Futurists is their attitude to *halal*, especially in majority Muslim markets. The Futurists are increasingly prone to question the details behind what they buy. Where *Shariah* compliance is assumed to be a given, any maladroit behaviour or slip-up will get headline status – and the Futurists will be particularly unforgiving. Global marketers need to be acutely aware of this, and also that the ground rules are becoming more demanding. The scepticism of Futurists in particular means that a simple *halal* logo is no longer enough. In the words of one respondent, 'we need to look at the *halal* logo, yes, but also at the ingredients'. Or, again, 'TGI today ... they have the *halal* logos, but some of the food is quite doubtful. Let's say we order grilled chicken – the chicken will obviously be *halal*, but what about the utensils. They may be used for non-*halal* cooking as well'.

In our research, Malaysian respondents tended to be the most discerning, being the most developed consumer market in relation to *Shariah*, and where Muslims live alongside non-Muslims. Increasingly, though, we believe Futurists everywhere will seek pure choices. In the frequent absence of facts, corporate reputation – and the apparent or not *Shariah*-friendliness of the corporate brand – assumes a critical importance.

In the research, we have derived a ranking of the relative importance of *Shariah*-compliance by product categories. At the top, food, dairy, beverages and oral care scored highest. In the second tier, consumers ranked fashion, personal care and 'regular' finance. In the third tier were airlines, resorts, financial and insurance products. The essential continuum is from body-sensitive to less so. At the extreme end, Muslim consumers will tend to identify *halal/haram* as irrelevant to some categories, for instance software, or even to imply a '*halal* usage effect' which makes it in effect compliant if the ultimate benefit of its usage is positive development for the community. So 'justification of desires', by any psychological means necessary, becomes a marketing enabler. 'If we use it for a good purpose then it is Islamic, and if we use it for an evil purpose, then it is not Islamic', said one of our Pakistani respondents.

From all of this we can deduce a very specific role for branding in the Islamic future. Brands must inform, educate, reassure the consumer about the highest levels of product quality through innovation; and also demonstrate a proactive anticipation of their informational needs – the surest way of garnering trust. In other words, techniques which may be regarded as marginal in the non-Muslim world need to be used or developed.

But that doesn't by itself make a brand. A brand is a relationship at an emotional level. And the Muslim Futurists are also an extremely emotional consumer group who want to be talked to on their own terms. 'They see us only as a market', we heard of a certain global brand in Saudi Arabia. Rather they want the brand to be their friend. David Ogilvy indeed once said that people choose brands like they choose friends. A friend in need: when we asked our Saudi Arabian respondents to create a fictional bank brand, they said their first feeling was the need to 'feel safe'.

One finding which may seem surprising in terms of traditional media stereotyping is that that we have seen no clear-cut preference in terms of global = bad, local = good, or the other way round. Global brands, for instance, are seen clearly as leaders in quality and innovation, and are appreciated for their values. They have heritage and longevity. On the other hand the lurking fear is that they are 'ticking the boxes' – the clear opportunity is for global brands to communicate their genuine *Shariah*-friendliness.

On the other hand, local brands evoke national pride, are seen as less profit-oriented, and are often formed on deep local insights. But quality worries persist, innovation is questioned, the information can be woefully inadequate, they are sometimes seen to be opaque – and their advertising is clearly recognised as not being of a 'global standard'. For local brands, quality, innovation and transparency are critical hills to climb.

So, perseverance is key. In the words of a respondent, 'I think of Nokia as an Egyptian company. They did research and produced products that suit the Egyptian consumer. They have Islamic values and they know how to deal with Egyptians.'

One of the exciting outputs of our research is that we have been able to derive what we call the Noor Brand Index, a quantified ranking of brands' perceived *Shariah*-friendliness. All these brands are within the compliance zone, i.e., none are *haraam*. At the top of the index are Lipton, Nestle, Nescafe, Nido and Kraft, two corporate brands and three product brands. Hot drinks and juice brands do well, reflecting their role in communal consumption. In each local market, of course, local brands such as Boh Tea, Maaza, Al Rabie, Juhayna, all fare well. The two poorest performing brands are HSBC and RBS. Global brands in particular suffer from a belief that they cannot in principle be *Shariah*-friendly, that in spite of heavy investment in arms such as Amanah, they are contaminated by behaviours in non-Muslim markets. While *Shariah*-compliance is much vaunted, it has not created friendliness. Brands like Nescafe and Lipton though, represent a gold standard which any aspiring global player in this area would do well to study carefully. At its roots lie a holistic understanding of the consumers, and an active engagement with Islamic values throughout every element of the marketing mix, and beyond. 'It is not just the products, but it's how the employees are treated too', is just one message from our consumers to which we should pay heed.

With the theme set for the session to follow, I hope it is clear from what I have been saying that I do not believe it is credible for us to say that Muslims are the same the world over. Rather, it is the nature of Islam to provide a constant belief system against which there are different roles for religion in different lives. Today, I have sought to highlight its role in the lives of the Futurists in majority markets, as I believe that they are where the future purchasing power is. But I believe that the principles are as applicable in the minority markets of the US or the UK, though the additional issue of 'inclusion'- of not excluding overtly from the host community – is something which needs great care and sensitivity.

Overall, from a global perspective, I think we can hypothesize some important principles for the development of a robust Islamic marketing and branding sector.

Firstly, while rules matter, they are not the whole picture. Intention matters more. In this light, the role of Muslims within global workforces in helping create intention becomes, in my view, very important. The *Ummah* within Ogilvy is enabling our work on the subject; and one very positive effect has been the huge surge of pride amongst our Muslim employees around the world. It follows that a corporation's embrace of this opportunity cannot be half-hearted, or quarter-hearted, or less. The commitment has to come from the CEO of the corporation, no one less. And it has to be carried out in a rigorous way through many parts of the organisation before the marketing and branding process can even begin.

And secondly, the branding, when eventually the conditions for it are right, needs to make no compromises in sophistication. There are twin dangers here. One is that Islamic branding is seen as something worthy but fundamentally second-rate. It does not matter if it is something which is never creatively showcased. But our Muslim Futurists, whether they be in Bangladesh or California, will not allow us to get away with that. It goes without saying that implicit in this is a sense of neo-orientalism, that the 'other' doesn't need the best advertising. Another is the view which comes up in the writings of some Islamic academics, which argues that any emotion in advertising is wrong. It is difficult to discern the theological justification for this, or indeed to see how it could be policed. It surely contains a misunderstanding of what 'emotion' is, and of our ability to use emotion in a way which conforms to the ethical responsibilities of the seller. A minority view it may be, but it is important that it does not advance or gain credibility. No emotion, no brand!

With these two principles met, I believe that the subject of our conference – Islamic marketing and branding – should play a very important role in the future. In the vicious links between othering, de-humanizing, and demonizing, Islamic branding can quite literally help break the chain. It 'de-others'; it re-humanizes; it gives respect. More than that, it should in time begin to show that the flow of ideas and creative capital can be two-way, and that the Islamic world is not so much a target as a resource, a well-spring, of all things which the new Muslim Futurists hold dear and have pride in.

Let us hope that in a few years' time a counterpart of this conference will be one of Islamic marketers and brand experts purely considering how to sell Islamic brands to the non-Islamic world. There should be much worth buying.