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## Plonk and Placebos

The curious truth about strong brands;  
and why people are right to prefer them



*Jeremy Bullmore*

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*by Jeremy Bullmore*



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**P**ut the same red wine into two identical bottles. Then apply two different labels. The first label, on Bottle A, looks like this:



The second label, on Bottle B, looks like this:



Then ask a thousand experienced wine drinkers to taste each wine, conscientiously rotating the order in which the wines are sampled: 50% starting with a taste of Bottle A and 50% starting with a taste of Bottle B. Then invite them, without conferring, to declare their preference.

The wine in both bottles will have come from the same vines in the same vineyard. They will have been harvested at the same time and will have been part of the same batch when bottled. Were you to analyse them in a laboratory they would be found to be physically identical, as indeed they are.

Yet in any such test, every time, there will be a significant preference for the wine in Bottle B.

So what's going on here?

World-weary sceptics won't be surprised. It's well known that all wine drinkers are snobs and poseurs. Some will refer to themselves as oenophiles. By claiming to prefer the wine from the château label, they're parading their connoisseurship. It's simply a form of self-congratulation. Case closed.

An alternative explanation is rather more convincing – and a great deal more illuminating.

For decades, an essential stage in pharmaceutical research has been the double-blind, placebo-controlled clinical trial. You give one group of patients a compound you want to test, and another group a dummy pill that has no active ingredients. Neither the patients nor the researchers know who is getting which.

Typically, between 30% and 60% of patients who have received the placebo report a substantial improvement in their symptoms.

The placebo effect, though still in part mysterious, is clear evidence that there exists an amazing complexity of mind-body interaction. Placebo treatment, measurably, changes the function of the brain. Expectation can and does affect actual therapeutic performance. Furthermore, placebos branded with a widely recognised trademark are even more effective than generic placebos. This is not just 'in the mind': they actually contribute more, and measurably, to the reduction of pain or anxiety or whatever condition the placebo has been claimed to alleviate.

More than any other form of measurement, placebo experiments demonstrate the real power of The Brand.

As long ago as May 1981, the *British Medical Journal* published (after the mandatory scrupulous peer review) the results of a study conducted by Alan Branthwaite and Peter Cooper: *Analgesic effects of branding in treatment of headaches*.<sup>\*</sup> It was another classic double-blind trial comparing not only the effects of placebo versus active ingredient on the reduction of headache pain but also the functional effects of branded versus unbranded tablets – and even of packaging.

Their findings were clear, significant and have never been challenged. To the pain relief contributed by the active ingredient, Branding added over 30%. The packaging itself (widely advertised and extremely familiar) had a consistent and measurable beneficial effect, enhancing the performance of both the dummy pill and the active analgesic. The study confirmed what many suspected: when ordinary people claim to find widely publicised products more effective than generic equivalents, they're not being conned by snake-oil salesmen. They're right.

And so it is with wine. A fancy label won't make plonk acceptable. Bad stuff will always be bad stuff, however prettily presented. But wine that's known to have come from a French château will actually give more pleasure to most drinkers than will exactly the same wine poured from an anonymous bottle. Nobody's been deceived or duped; at little or no extra cost, more enjoyment has been delivered.

For everyone in marketing, and particularly in marketing communications, all this clearly has huge implications; half-understood, perhaps, but strangely under-recognised.

As Stephen King pointed out as long ago as 1970\*\*, all brands, whether products or services, deliver a blend of functional and non-functional satisfactions. And he went on to say ‘...there is still a puritan streak in us which says it is wicked for people to have non-functional values, that they ought to buy brands for function and performance only.’ Such views still exist: certainly in the minds of some academics and commentators but not, interestingly, in the minds of the great consuming public.

The important word here is ‘blend’. A brand is not just a product with lipstick on. A strong brand delivers a set of satisfactions as intertwined and interdependent as if they’d been whirled around together in a kitchen blender.

None of this is new; and none of it is evidence of a consumerist society corrupted by manipulative marketing. Several thousand years ago, axes were valued not just for their ability to fell trees and decapitate mammoths; from almost the beginning they were embellished and decorated and acquired symbolic value. And while the embellishments and decorations in no way improved an axe’s ability to fell or decapitate, they greatly enhanced its appeal to its user – and hence its worth.

The remarkable Steve Jobs could accurately have described himself as an executive, an entrepreneur, a technocrat, an inventor, a designer – or any number of other designations. Instead, he chose to see himself as a marketing man. But he saw himself, not as the kind of marketing man whose task it was to sell more stuff more often to more people; he saw himself as someone whose task it was to provide the greatest possible degree of pleasure, of enjoyment, of satisfaction, of reward to those who owned and used his products. And he clearly made absolutely no artificial distinction between the functional and the non-functional satisfactions that his products delivered. In the categories in which Jobs specialised, many of his competitors believed that function was everything; that if an attribute couldn’t be measured, it couldn’t have a value. So if you got the price right, and the size and weight and speed and capacity and battery life and reliability

right, then you've got a good product. And so, of course, you have; but as Steve Jobs proved, you haven't got a brand.

In thinking this way, Jobs was totally in line with his market; with his public. People have long believed that good tea tastes better when drunk from fine china. It probably does. And if you, personally, find that it does, then it certainly does; and that's the only thing that matters.

It's a pity that so much of the marketing lexicon implies a state of war between producers and consumers. We talk of target groups and campaigns and rifle shots; and think it makes us sound manly if we commit to pursuing all our objectives aggressively. The truth is so much more agreeable.

First to understand the complex set of satisfactions that make up a successful brand, and then to apply the technical wizardry and creative imagination to deliver them, implies a complete coincidence of interest between buyer and seller; between manufacturer and user. Everybody wins; except, of course, your less perceptive competitors. ■

*Jeremy Bullmore*

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## Acknowledgments

- \* *Analgesic effects of branding in treatment of headaches*,  
A. Branthwaite, P. Cooper, *British Medical Journal* 16 May 1981.
- \*\* *What is a Brand?* Stephen King, JWT London, 1971. Reproduced  
in *A Master Class in Brand Planning*, edited by Judie Lannon &  
Merry Baskin, John Wiley, 2007.

## **Jeremy Bullmore**

Jeremy Bullmore was born in 1929. His first job, in 1954, was as a trainee copywriter with J. Walter Thompson in London, where he stayed until retirement in 1987. He became successively writer/producer, creative group head and head of television; from 1964 to 1975, head of the creative department; from 1976 to 1987, chairman. From 1981 to 1987 he was a member of the JWT worldwide board and chairman of the Advertising Association.

From 1988 to 2001 he was non-executive director of the Guardian Media Group and, from 1988 to 2004, a non-executive director of WPP. He is past president of Nabs and past president of the Market Research Society. He is currently a member of the WPP Advisory Board and a columnist for *Campaign*, *Management Today*, *Market Leader* and *The Guardian*. He was awarded a CBE in 1985 and the Advertising Association's Mackintosh Medal in 2011.

His publications include: *Another Bad Day at the Office?* Penguin, 2001; *Behind the Scenes in Advertising Mark III (More Bull More)* WARC, 2003; *Ask Jeremy*, Haymarket, 2004; *Apples, Insights & Mad Inventors*, Wiley, 2006.

He has three grown-up children and lives with his wife Pamela in London and Wiltshire.



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