

The Brand Expands: How the Logo Grabbed Center Stage

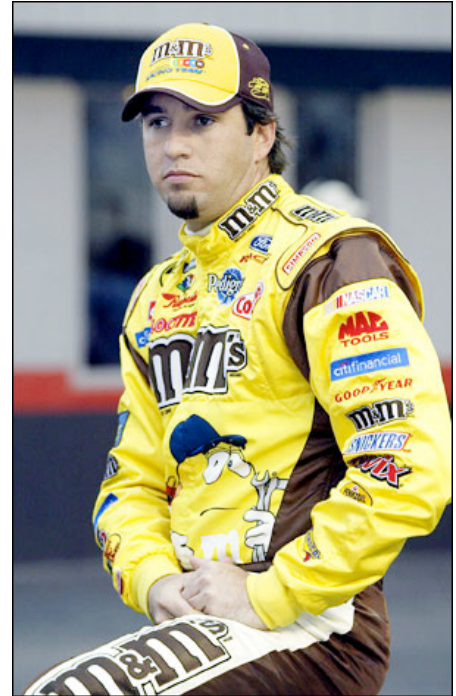
Excerpted and adapted from the book No Logo by Naomi Klein

Since the crocodile is the symbol of Lacoste, we thought they might be interested in sponsoring our crocodiles.

-Silvino Gomes, commercial director of the Lisbon Zoo, on the institution's creative corporate sponsorship program, March 1998

When Naomi Klein was in Grade 4 skintight designer jeans were extremely popular and everyone spent a lot of time checking out each other's bottoms for logos. One person in her class would wander from student to student turning back the collars on sweaters and polo shirts. It wasn't enough that there was an alligator or leaping horseman on the shirt – it could be a knockoff. She wanted to see the label behind the logo. They were only eight years old, but the reign of logo terror had begun.

Nine years later, when Naomi was working at an Esprit clothing store in Montreal, mothers would come in with their six-year-old daughters and ask to see only the shirts that said “Esprit” in the company's trademark bold block lettering. “She won't wear anything without a name,” the moms confided apologetically. It's no secret that branding has become far more widespread and intrusive by now. Labels like Baby Gap and Gap Newborn imprint brand awareness on toddlers and turn babies into mini-billboards. This is the age where a seven-year-old marks his homework not with checkmarks, but with little red Nike swooshes.



Can you spot the sponsors for Nascar driver Elliott Sadler?

Until the early seventies, logos on clothes were generally hidden from view, discreetly placed on the inside of the collar. Small designer emblems did appear on the outside of shirts in the first half of the century, but such sporty attire was pretty much restricted to the golf courses and tennis courts of the rich. In the late seventies, when the fashion world rebelled against Aquarian flamboyance, the country-club wear of the fifties became mass style for the newly conservative parents and their preppy kids. Ralph Lauren's Polo horseman and Izod Lacoste's alligator escaped from the golf course and scurried into the streets, dragging the logo decisively onto the outside of the shirt. These logos served the same social function as keeping the clothing's price tag on: everyone knew precisely what premium the wearer was willing to pay for style. By the mid-eighties, Lacoste and Ralph Lauren were joined by Calvin Klein, Esprit and, in Canada, Roots; gradually, the logo was transformed from an ostentatious affectation to an active fashion accessory. Most significantly, the logo itself was growing in size, ballooning from a three-quarter-inch emblem into a chest-sized marquee. This process of logo inflation is still progressing, and none is more bloated than Tommy Hilfiger, who has managed to pioneer a clothing style that transforms its faithful adherents into walking, talking, life-sized Tommy dolls, mummified in fully branded Tommy worlds.

This scaling-up of the logo's role has been so dramatic that it has become a change in substance. Over the past decade and a half, logos have grown so dominant that they have essentially transformed the clothing on which they appear into empty carriers for the brands they represent. The metaphorical alligator, in other words, has risen up and swallowed the literal shirt.

This trajectory mirrors the larger transformation our culture has undergone since Marlboro Friday, sparked by a stampede of manufacturers looking to replace their cumbersome product-production apparatus with transcendent brand names and to infuse their brands with deep, meaningful messages. By the mid-nineties, companies like Nike, Polo and Tommy Hilfiger were ready to take branding to the next level: no longer simply branding their own products, but branding the outside culture as well – by sponsoring cultural events, they could go out into the world and claim bits of it as brand-name outposts. For these companies, branding was not just a matter of adding value to a product. It was about thirstily soaking up cultural ideas and iconography that their brands could reflect by projecting these ideas and images back on the culture as “extensions” of their brands. Culture, in other words, would add value to their brands. For example, Onute

Miller, senior brand manager for Tequila Sauza, explains that her company sponsored a risqué photo exhibit by George Holz because “art was a natural synergy with our product.”

Branding’s current state of cultural expansionism is about much more than traditional corporate sponsorships: the classic arrangement in which a company donates money to an event in exchange for seeing its logo on a banner or in a program. Rather, this is the Tommy Hilfiger approach of full-frontal branding, applied now to cityscapes, music, art, films, community events, magazines, sports and schools. This ambitious project makes the logo the central focus of everything it touches- not an add-on or a happy association, but the main attraction.

Advertising and sponsorship have always been about using imagery to equate products with positive cultural or social experiences. What makes current branding different is that it increasingly seeks to take these associations out of the representational realm and make them a lived reality. So the goal is not merely to have child actors drinking Coke in a TV commercial, but for students to brainstorm concepts for Coke’s next ad campaign in English class. It transcends logo-festooned Roots clothing designed to conjure memories of summer camp and reaches out to build an actual Roots country lodge that becomes a 3D manifestation of the Roots brand concept. Disney transcends its sports network ESPN, a channel for guys who like to sit around in sports bars screaming at the TV, and launches a line of ESPN Sports Bars, complete with giant-screen TVs. The branding process reaches beyond heavily marketed Swatch watches and launches “Internet time,” a new venture for the Swatch Group, which divides the day into one thousand “Swatch beats.” The Swiss company is now attempting to convince the on-line world to abandon the traditional clock and switch to its time-zone-free, branded time.

The effect, if not always the original intent, of advance branding is to nudge the hosting culture into the background and make the brand the star. It is not to sponsor culture but to be the culture. And why shouldn’t it be? If brands are not products but ideas, attitudes, values and experiences, why can’t they be culture too? As we will see later in this article, this project has been so successful that the lines between corporate sponsors and sponsored culture have entirely disappeared. But this conflation has not been a one-way process, with passive artists allowing themselves to be shoved into the background by aggressive multinational corporations. Rather, many artists, media personalities, film directors and sports stars have been racing to meet the corporations halfway in the branding game. Michael Jordan, Puff Daddy, Martha Stewart, Austin Powers, Brandy and Star Wars now mirror the corporate structure of corporations like Nike and the Gap, and they are just as captivated by the prospect of developing and leveraging their own branding potential as the product-based manufacturers. So what was once a process of selling culture to a sponsor for a price has been supplanted by the logic of “co-branding” – a fluid partnership between celebrity people and celebrity brands.

The project of transforming culture into little more than a collections of brand extensions-in-waiting would not have been possible without the deregulation and privatization policies of the past three decades. In Canada under Brian Mulroney, in the U.S. under Ronald Reagan and in Britain under Margaret Thatcher (and in many other parts of the world as well), corporate taxes were dramatically lowered, a move that eroded the tax base and gradually starved out the public sector. As government spending dwindled, schools, museums and broadcasters were desperate to make up their budget shortfalls and thus ripe for partnerships with private corporations. It also didn’t hurt that the political climate during this time ensured that there was almost no vocabulary to speak passionately about the value of a non-commercialized public sphere. This was the time of the Big Government bogeyman and deficit hysteria, when any political move that was not overtly designed to increase the freedom of corporations was vilified as an endorsement of national bankruptcy. It was against this backdrop that, in rapid order, sponsorship went from being a rare occurrence (in the 1970s) to an exploding growth industry (by the mid-eighties), picking up momentum in 1984 at the Los Angeles Olympics.

At first, these arrangements seemed win-win: the cultural or educational institution in question received much-needed funds and the sponsoring corporation was compensated with some modest form of public acknowledgement and a tax break. And, in fact, many of these new public-private arrangements were just that simple, successfully retaining a balance between the cultural event or institution’s independence and the sponsor’s desire for credit, often helping to foster a revival of arts accessible to the general public. Successes like these are frequently overlooked by critics of commercialization, among whom there is an unfortunate tendency to tar all sponsorship with the same brush, as if any contact with a corporate logo infects the natural integrity of an otherwise pristine public event or cause. Writing in The Commercialization of American Culture, advertising critic Matthew McAllister labels corporate sponsorship “control behind a philanthropic façade.” He states that the corporation is elevated with

sponsorship and the sponsor is devalued in the long run because, in the sponsor's mind and in the symbolism of the event, the events exist to promote the corporation. "It is not Art for Art's Sake as much as Art for Ad's Sake." The art is taken over by the commercial. "Every time the commercial intrudes on the culture, the integrity of the public sphere is weakened because of the obvious encroachment of corporate promotion."

Culture hasn't always been the pure public symbol of integrity as McAllister seems to suggest. Powerful people and organizations for thousands of years have hired creative people to create what we now consider culture.

Of course there are some forms of corporate sponsorship that are inherently insidious – the tobacco industry's corralling of the arts springs to mind. But not all sponsorship deals should be so easily dismissed. Not only are such broad strokes unfair to worthy projects but, perhaps more important, they can prevent us from seeing changes in the field. If all corporate sponsorship arrangements are regarded as equally compromised, it becomes easy not to notice when the role of the corporate sponsor begins to expand and change – which is precisely what happened in the nineties as global corporate sponsorship ballooned from a \$7 billion-a-year industry in 1991 to a \$19.2 billion one in 1999.

When sponsorship took off as a stand-in for public funds in the mid-eighties, many corporations that had been experimenting with the practice ceased to see sponsorship as a hybrid of philanthropy and image promotion and began to treat it more purely as a marketing tool, and a highly effective one at that. As its promotional value grew – and as dependency on sponsorship revenue increased in the cultural industries – the delicate dynamic between sponsors and the sponsored began to shift, with many corporations becoming more ambitious in their demands for grander acknowledgments and control even buying events outright. Molson and Miller beer are no longer satisfied with having their logos on banners at rock concerts. Instead, they have pioneered a new kind of sponsored concert in which the blue-chip stars who perform are entirely upstaged by their hosting brand. And while corporate sponsorship has long been a mainstay in museums and galleries, when Philip Morris – owned Altoids mints decided in January 1999 that it wanted to get into the game, it cut out the middleman. Rather than sponsoring an existing show, the company spent \$259,000 to buy works by twenty emerging artists and launch its own Curiously Strong Collection, a traveling art exhibition that plays on the Altoids marketing slogan, "Curiously strong mints," Chris Peddy, Altoids brand manager, said, "We decided to take it to the next level."

These companies are part of a larger phenomenon where companies are buying properties and creating their own events. This is not because they want to get into the business. It's because proposals sponsors receive don't fit their requirements or because they've had negative experiences buying into someone else's gig. There is a certain logic to this progression: first, a select group of manufacturers transcend their connection to their earthbound products, then, with marketing elevated as the pinnacle of their businesses, they attempt to alter marketing's social status as a commercial interruption and replace it with seamless integration. The most insidious effect of this shift is that after a few years of Molson concerts, Pepsi-sponsored papal visits, Izod zoos and Nike after-school basketball programs, everything from small community events to large religious gatherings are believed to "need a sponsor" to get off the ground; August 1999, for instance,

saw the first-ever private wedding with corporate sponsorship. This is what Leslie Savan, author of *The Sponsored Life*, describes as symptom number one of the sponsored mindset: we become collectively convinced not that corporations are hitching a ride on our cultural and communal activities, but that creativity and congregation would be impossible without their generosity.



Two massive corporately sponsored buildings dominate Toronto's skyline: the CN (Canadian National) Tower and the Roger's Centre (formerly Skydome). Just down the road is the Air Canada Centre where the Maple Leafs play hockey.

Read the article **THE BRAND EXPANDS** from No Logo by Naomi Klein.

Read the questions carefully to understand what you are looking for.

Answer each question on a lined piece of paper to be included with the article when you hand it in.

Part A: Comprehension

1. What are a couple of examples of “branding” of children that Naomi Klein points out early in her article?
2. Before the Early seventies, how were logos on clothing displayed?
3. What functions did logos play on clothing AFTER the late seventies?
4. Physically, what was happening to logos on clothing?
5. What major problem does Klein see with corporations (such as Tommy Hilfiger) sponsoring events?
6. Please explain how Coke, Roots, Disney and Swatch have moved their marketing from the world of media into the “real world”?
7. What did Mulroney and Reagan and Thatcher do that has allowed corporations to sponsor schools, museums and broadcasters as never before?
8. What is a historical example Klein uses when discussing sponsorship of cultural products?
9. Instead of simply sponsoring cultural events corporations are running their own cultural events like Molson and Miller rock concerts or Altoids art displays. Klein has a difficult time explaining clearly why this is a problem. In your own words, based on the information in the article, explain why this trend threatens our cultural events.

Part B: Media Concepts

1. How are the following media being manipulated by corporations through sponsorship and branding (Print media, Electronic Media, Popular Culture)?
2. Find an example for each of the four key concepts of media from the article and explain how the example illustrates the concept so well. (1) media constructs reality 2) The media have their own forms, codes and conventions (language) 3) The media present ideologies and value messages 4) The media are businesses that have commercial interests
3. “Celebrities today are “living logos”” Explain and defend the statement with a really good example from current Popular Culture.