This book is another polished offering from Interbrand, self-proclaimed as the world’s leading branding consultancy. Within the pages of *branding@thedigitalage*, 12 authoritative contributors give their take on the implications for branding of the phenomenal growth of e-trade that has occurred over recent years. Each contributor has been well chosen, combining an in-depth knowledge of a specific area and an ability to convey their ideas with clarity and enthusiasm. Bojana Fazarinc (Hewlett-Packard), Frederick J. Horowitz (NetGrocer.com), Vivienne Lee Bechtold (Procter & Gamble) and Rudy Nadilo (Greenfield Online) offer particularly insightful visions of how the techniques of brand management can embrace the digital age.

Editors of *branding@thedigitalage*, Herbert Meyers (founding partner, Interbrand Gerstman+Meyers) and Richard Gerstman (Chairman, Interbrand US), place the book’s subject into an historical perspective by noting that the growth of e-trade during the past few years is the most formidable development in the history of commerce, and that not since the 19th century has a development so dramatically altered the path of human behaviour. While acknowledging that e-trade has undergone an initial roller-coaster course, with many untried and inexperienced e-businesses collapsing under the burden of financial responsibilities, the editors maintain that e-commerce will survive and prosper. They define the scope of the book as exploring the online potential of brands to: build communities of consumers who can gather and discuss information about brands; give consumers control of pricing and purchasing as never before; become global without the need for international shops and offices; save advertising costs through being able to target specific audiences; gather valuable consumer information through online research; provide the most effective combination of online and offline marketing; develop brands and brand strategies specifically for online business; and protect against the online misuse of trademarks and brand names.

Bojana Fazarinc, formerly Director of Global Marketing Services and Brand Management at Hewlett-Packard, kicks off proceedings with an excellent chapter assessing the extent to which the fundamentals of branding have and have not changed in light of the Internet explosion. She believes that instead of a branding revolution, the Internet has created a stimulating rapid evolution of branding’s basic concepts, strengthening and expanding their relevance to business and customers. The brand promise for an
expected customer experience remains, but what has changed is that today the brand promise has many more possible moments of truth than ever before. Fazarinc’s conclusion is that the brand promise must, therefore, be more intricately interwoven with business strategy and all its supporting functions. This does not, she warns, mean using the Internet as a content repository — throwing pre-existing content on the Internet, coding it to HTML, and letting customers try to sort through it all, is not a compelling way for customers to appreciate the company and the brand.

Another Internet-enabled evolution for branding observed by Fazarinc concerns the changing nature of the brand experience. Whereas, before, the brand experience spanned the period between a customer’s awareness and purchase of a product, now the brand experience is increasingly the beginning of an ongoing relationship including an array of after-market loyalty services that include, but overshadow, the physical product. A word of warning is sounded, though, regarding the false economy of cutting out the salesperson in order to gain cost efficiencies, leaving the customers on their own to navigate through websites to make a purchase — Fazarinc claims that 65 per cent of the sales transactions across all industries that are initiated online are abandoned because, generally at the last moment, there is a question or navigation issue that has not been appropriately designed or executed to make it easy for the customer to get the last-minute reassurance to close the sale.

In a chapter titled, ‘From retailing to e-tailing’, David B. Green, Senior Vice President of Marketing at McDonald’s International, outlines how his company has started to use the Internet to capitalise on its many locations. Jack Kerouac would probably turn in his grave to learn that McDonald’s customers ‘can even print out a trip map listing all of the McDonald’s restaurants along the way on their local or cross-country travels’. Echoing the observations made in the previous chapter by Bojana Fazarinc, Green believes that the rules of branding have not changed because of the Internet, it is just that the pace has picked up as e-tailing is incorporated into retailing.

The editors of branding@thedigitalage exercise good judgment by giving an early chapter of the book to Frederick J. Horowitz, co-founder of netgrocer.com. While the other contributors focus specifically on the techniques and power of branding, Horowitz delivers a few home truths on the realities of e-tailing, emphasising that branding is no substitute for great merchandising or providing real value to manufacturers. This represents a welcome challenge to the familiar mantra that a customer focus is the be-all and end-all of marketing. Horowitz states that great retail brands are not built through advertising but through store use, through being in front of your customers, and by being at the right place with the right product at the right time. Another pertinent observation is that ‘most of the failures of e-tailers during the past were caused by brand managers who were brought in to run the e-tailers and confused brand building (great for cookies) with successful merchandising (the core to building a retailer)’. Horowitz also makes a concise statement of how to create a successful e-retail brand: you must create real
value through an extraordinarily broad selection of products along with better prices, and/or through an incredible information-rich shopping experience built around a narrower product selection.

This experiential dimension of the Internet, referred to by Horowitz, is touched upon by Hilary Billings, Chairman and Chief Marketing Officer of RedEnvelope Gifts Online, who points out that there is always a tremendous amount of emotion tied to a brand, but getting people to really fall in love with an e-brand within an environment of a very small laptop screen represents a significant challenge. Billings predicts, however, that three years from now that challenge will radically change, and that many homes will have a huge screen on their wall that will be fully interactive, allowing consumers to see a fashion show, for example, and point and click to buy a featured dress. The attraction of interactivity is also addressed by Deborah Chae (President, Interbrand Interactive) and Andy Bateman (Managing Director, Interbrand Interactive) in their chapter on the strategic role of e-branding. They highlight the fact that after sending out volumes of direct mail with 1 per cent response rates, marketers were finding that interested customers wanted to interact with their websites, page after hyper-linked page. The online trading marketplace is no longer about real-time online transactions, they note, it is about advice and guidance, analysis and insight. Seven best practices are outlined by Chae and Bateman for e-brands and e-branding:

1. cede some control to the customer in terms of the product, price, place and promotion configuration
2. encourage community participation
3. foster dialogue with users
4. focus on the core competency
5. deliver good ideas
6. keep your content current
7. make the experience engaging

Perhaps the outstanding contribution to branding@thedigitalage is made by Vivienne Lee Bechtold, Director of I-Knowledge at Procter & Gamble, in a tremendous chapter full of insight into current trends in e-branding, and vision regarding future possibilities. Her chapter focuses upon the dynamics for package goods on the Internet, with a particularly interesting section on using the Internet for new product launches. Bechtold also stresses that package goods brands spend a lot of money on consumer research, and it can often be done faster, better and cheaper through the Internet; by leveraging web-based research, package goods manufacturers can get their products into the market faster, hopefully meet consumer needs better, and provide more real-time responsiveness.

The theme of web-based research is developed in more detail by Rudy Nadilo (President and Chief Executive Officer, Greenfield Online, Inc.) in his chapter on interactive brand design research. Nadilo’s expertise lies in online marketing research, consumer panel behavioural information, database marketing, the use of retail scanner information to support the marketing services industry, and the application of computer technology in these fields. His main contention is that online research has changed the scope of gathering information through its immediacy, anonymity, and speed. The practical benefits of online research are
clearly stated — for example the way in which, with focus groups now being conducted online, there is no need for anyone to travel ‘or eat the bad food in the focus group facility’. Online research also offers great potential for the testing of product packaging, as a design can be taken, put in a JPEG file, three-dimensional modelling can be obtained, and the file can then be attached to a questionnaire that at the press of a button is sent out to as many respondents as required. Respondents see the design from all sides and answer some questions, and within a few hours a read is obtained on how consumers rate the new package design. Nadilo does not, however, get carried away with his enthusiasm for online research, and he acknowledges that offline research is set to remain important in the future, and that offline focus groups, mall intercepts and in-home product placements will still be done.

After reading through branding@thedigitalage, the main message that recurs throughout this absorbing and inspiring book is that basically a brand is a brand is a brand, whether it exists online or offline, or, as is the case for the majority of brands today, both online and offline simultaneously. David Green, in his chapter, suggests that the basic elements of branding are the same whether they are applied to the retail environment, in-store merchandising, e-commerce or websites, and that the art of branding today in this time of high technology is no different than it has been over the past 100 years. This view is supported by Charles Brymer (Group Chief Executive, Interbrand Group), whose view is that a majority of people have a misconception that brands on the Internet are different from other brands that have existed for decades; in reality, the difference lies only in the medium itself and the opportunities that the Internet provides to create a much more interpersonal brand relationship. Most succinct of all is Rudy Nadilo, who bluntly declares that there is no real difference between an e-brand and an offline brand. A brand is still a brand. With a helpful chapter near the end of the book on the legal aspects of online trade mark ownership and enforcement, preceded by several excellent contributions on various issues surrounding the place of brands in e-trade, branding@thedigitalage is an illuminating and highly readable evaluation of current trends and future horizons for online branding.

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