


by Derek Morrison

 I struggle hard to understand
My obsession with the leading brand
A transient boost to needy pride
Makes this the only one to ride
Reassuringly expensive the price I paid
To project the image I wish conveyed
Pursuing quality is what I claim
Not tacit value in branded name
But lesser brands are just as viable
And many are much more reliable
But Mondeo class would never do
To align with my peers or crew
Dressed in my ersatz sponsored attire
Cueing lifestyle ... or perhaps desire
Quality of life is what I sought
And be admired for what I've bought
For brand monsters lie within my head
It's id and ego who must be fed.

[To listen to this verse select below]

<http://www.cyberstanza.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Branded.mp3>

Commentary

Brand may be only a small word but it's actually a big container that can encapsulate a whole lot of explicit and tacit meanings and messages including: exclusive; inclusive; quality (of products and - or services); value-for-money; cheap; expensive; membership, belonging, association with (or desire for).

Putative brand developers work extraordinary hard to get their particular brand established because they know with that comes a critical mass of loyal followers or repeat purchasers of whatever products or services they are offering. These loyal followers may buy into the

message being promulgated by the brand owner but may also inject some of their own which can sometimes [become problematic](#), e.g. premium clothing brands becoming associated with one or other antisocial sub-culture.

So called premium brands are perhaps the most interesting because they are not just about quality. My poem alludes to this in its hint that there may actually be better value for money and more reliable alternatives to the premium offerings but 'investing' in these transcends a simple focus on quality because such investment is as much social and psychological, about identity and belonging (or an aspiration to do so).

Cycling like other sports is brand heaven. The brand is invariably plastered all over the cycle and clothing will usually be shouting out one or more brand. And the ultimate irony being that with the exception of the sponsored elite most of us have the privilege of paying for promoting the brand to other potential promoters, i.e. customers.

The role of cycling's elite heroes and heroines is also worth contemplating. On the one hand they can both 'brands' in their own right but they are also promoters of the brands of their sponsors. This has a number of impacts. It can indulge our unspoken fantasies of enhancements to our physical performance and endurance magically arising from buying the same or similar model to that rode by 'xyz' elite cyclist during the Tour de France, or whatever. Our logical brains know this to be a nonsense, we are not elite athletes, we will never be elite athletes and the best we can hope for is to be "quite good". So, for most of us, riding the same cycle as 'xyz' will not improve our performance. It is our emotional brains that makes such purchases and we have a whole advertising industry now supplemented by the echo chambers of social media to encourage us to do so.

When a cycling hero 'brand' makes the transition to an actual physical product it can get even more interesting, e.g. [Boardman Bikes](#) whose web site states.

[quote]"My promise to you is that every single bike will adhere to our three fundamental values. I work closely with the team at every single stage to ensure that all bikes offer the highest level of performance, utilise great design and are of a superior quality - the result is a truly world-class product throughout the range." Chris Boardman, Director of R&D, CBoardman Bikes [end quote]

Early on its development Boardman Bikes struck an agreement with the UK Halfords chain of stores, i.e. brand Boardman became firmly associated with brand Halfords. Despite its many positive attributes Halfords has never been seen as the port of first call for the 'serious' cyclist and so it was courageous of Boardman Bikes to so firmly tie their branding to a high street retailer better known for car parts or accessories and low end cycles. From Halfords' perspective of course it could be viewed as part of building a profile more appealing to the 'serious cyclist' although their [published strategy](#) (accessed 22 February 2015) perhaps needs sharpening if that is the case:

[quote]Our second strategic pillar seeks to extend our position in the fast-growing Cycling market, driven by sporting heroes, health benefits, environmental concerns and pure enjoyment. Inspiring Cyclists Of Every Age means offering the most comprehensive ranges at the most attractive price points, backed up by our unique build & service scale and expertise and a comprehensive range of parts, accessories and clothing.[end quote]

Halfords actually [acquired Boardman Bikes in 2014](#) and so now finds itself in the unusual situation of being the owner of a cycle designer/manufacturer which doesn't just sell through its own stores but through other [independent retailers](#) as well.

Just as an aside before I opted for brand Cannondale I seriously considered purchasing one of the Boardman carbon cycles from Halfords, but I was put off by several things. Firstly, uncertainty over the consistency of after sales service and support - different faces each time I went in. Secondly, most of the sales/service people didn't appear to be serious road cyclists themselves - a few were MTB focused. Thirdly, a refusal to replace the rear cassette to something more suited to the hills surrounding Bath without me buying a new cassette - so for me it was "sans unique build and service scale" as per their strategy. Fourthly, a sales rather than service orientation. That was circa two years ago and so my experience may have been different now.

But my near Boardman cycle purchase gives a cue about brands. There was actually two brands involved here. Buying a branded artefact was insufficient. What also mattered was the brand I bought the brand from. Was it willing and able to provide what I wanted? Did I know who was looking after me? Did I have confidence in the information I was being given? Was the brand a specialist or was this just another product in a wider range? In the absence of a tick in each of these boxes I could either seek a source locally elsewhere or alternatively I

might as well have purchased from an online retailer and take the responsibility for finding my own local source of post purchase support.

In my poem I have the line “But Mondeo class would never do”. The Ford Mondeo is a perfectly respectable vehicle much loved by sales reps because of its cavernous storage capacity; but it not a vehicle considered high in the ‘image’ stakes. Personally, if its petrol engined fuel efficiency was better I wouldn’t care as it would make an excellent cycle transporter. Mondeo class, however, is sometimes better than more prestigious offerings. For example, I’ve found cycle clothing purchased from Aldi or Lidl to be perfectly good alternatives to considerably more expensive ‘branded’ attire. I also have found a pair of £20 cycling shoes from the discount chain Sports Direct to be considerably lighter, robuster, and more comfortable than my considerably more expensive Mavic shoes.

But in the end since entering the cycling world I’ve found myself slowly progressing up the brand tree with each new bike somehow being ‘better’ than the last. Nevertheless, I should constantly read my other poem ‘[New Toy](#)’ to keep myself more grounded (VeloScience, 30 January 2015).

The final four lines of the verse highlight the futility of seeking a “quality of life” from buying things. Quality of life lives in the head – not in whatever artefacts we purchase; no matter how expensive.

[qrcode]<http://www.veloscience.org/?p=4092>[/qrcode]