

Not Nobody: A Brand-Name Approach to Identity

by Theodore Plantinga

During my youth, brand names and company names were associated with reliability. People thought in terms of such factors as quality in manufacturing and willingness to stand behind one's products. Discerning consumers looked upon brand names as a good thing. You made a point of shopping regularly in certain stores and buying reliable brands of the products that were needed on a regular basis.

In those days items of clothing had labels, usually fairly discreet ones. I recall that some of my friends set a good deal of store by the prestige associated with a respected label, but I never much cared. But then, I was a boy.

Naomi Klein was a girl (I suppose she's a woman now). During her youth she *did* value having the proper labels on her clothing, partly as a way of rebelling against her counterculture parents. As a teenager she worked at an Esprit clothing store in Montreal. Mothers would come in with six-year-old daughters who *insisted* on clothes with the right labels. The mothers would tell Klein: "She won't wear anything without a name" (see p. 27 of her book).

Years later Klein's thinking changed, and she developed a ferocious critique of our North American preoccupation with labels and brand names. She has voiced that critique especially in her outstanding book *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000). Klein and her many allies are now a major vexation for all kinds of companies (not just clothing manufacturers) that rely very heavily on brand names as vehicles for marketing their merchandise.

In Klein's entertaining -- but also distressing -- book, there are many valuable insights and ideas that I will ignore in this brief essay. Many reprehensible business practices are discussed, but I will not review them here or try to add my own comments. I urge you to read the book for yourself, especially if you

work in manufacturing or retailing. In this essay I will instead concern myself with part of what Klein has opened up for discussion, namely, the connection between brand name and identity.

Klein makes much of the uncoupling of retailing from manufacturing that has lately become the highest wisdom in some business circles. She mentions Tom Peters in this regard. The idea, in brief, is that life is much simpler for your corporation if you get out of the business of manufacturing the stuff you sell (e.g. athletic footwear). Get someone else to make it for you -- preferably a company that keeps a very low profile. Then people won't be able to reproach you for exploiting workers in third-world countries and subjecting them to sweatshop conditions. (Warning: this won't get you off the hook altogether -- not with Naomi Klein, at least).

What is then left for you, as a North American, high-profile company, to do? Promote, promote, promote (yes, repetition is warranted to make the point). Promote what? The merchandise you sell? Yes, but only secondarily. What you ultimately need to promote is the brand name and logo of your company. Get people to love your company and want to be associated with it.

Nike is Klein's favorite example. And while Nike's practices in these respects were certainly no secret before *No Logo* came out, many buyers of Nike products don't realize what was going on. Many still don't know.

So what are you buying when you purchase Nike's athletic footwear? It's not like buying a German car and then having a license to extol German engineering and standards of workmanship and so forth, thereby one-upping your conversation partner who was so foolish as to buy an inferior North American car. After all, Nikes are not made by Nike. So what does Nike, as a company, do? It links the you, the customer, with glamour, prestige, success, good feelings, and so forth. After all, *Michael Jordan* endorses Nike. Wouldn't you want to be associated with him? Isn't he cool? And he's not the only cool person with whom you are linked when you slip on those Nike shoes. The process of "co-branding" links all sorts of celebrity people and celebrity brands.

Now, Klein's book is substantial (almost 500 pages), heavily documented, and laden with anecdotes that point to its origin in her work as a journalist. Many dimensions of the brand-name problem are explored, but not all of them. One area that does not get much commentary is the social-psychological angle, which is what I propose to discuss here. What is it that gives us, as human beings, an identity? How can the mall help us here?

The problem of identity as we face it today is in good measure a modern preoccupation. In the middle ages people did not think much about identity. You knew who you were -- in the manner and to the extent that was thought appropriate in those days, which is not to say that you were likely to ask yourself all the identity-related questions that we moderns ask ourselves or put to our shrinks. More than that, you knew what your place in your village was. Between your family and the kind of work you did (and you had scant choice in either area), what later ages would call your identity was fixed. You didn't even have a last name if you were among the ordinary folk.

Think also of traditional Chinese society, where identity was much less of a preoccupation than it is among us. One's last name comes first among the Chinese, almost as though the name that makes you unique and distinguishes you from your brothers and sisters is an afterthought. The main thing is that you are a member of the such-and-such family. And if people confuse you with your brother, whose name begins with the same surname as yours, well, at least you can effortlessly distinguish yourself from him. You know who you are.

As Western society became more individualistic and afforded people more opportunity to become alienated from their family and community (perhaps by emigrating to a new land) and to move from one line of work to another, the possibility arose that your sense of self might become weakened to the point that you came to wonder who you were. The problem would be even greater in case your birth mother had given you up for adoption: you would not even know from which ethnic stock you had sprung. Eventually, adoptees began to demand, as part of their quest for their identity, to be told how they had come into this world, and who their natural parents were. For many such people, establishing and maintaining an identity is quite an undertaking.

The disadvantaged in our society tend to have more problem with this business of maintaining an identity than those who are well off and have a good deal of control over their life circumstances. One of the saddest things in the tale told by Klein is that many of the customers who are most tenaciously wedded to the brand-name mania she assails are underprivileged youngsters in our ghettos. These children, with weak or nonexistent family support to bolster their sense of self and provide them with self-esteem, turn to television and the mall for existential help. And so it's not just spoiled rich kids who refuse to wear anything without a label: there are also a great many poor kids who pay countless dollars they really can't spare to deck themselves out with logos and brand names that will prove to others in their impoverished social world that they are cool.

At the deepest level of my being, I find these things hard to understand, and so I needed some help from Klein's book. I suppose the main reason why such a quest for identity perplexes me is that it is so contrary to my own inclinations. Now, I should explain that I grew up in a time when the trends noted by Klein were barely on the horizon. Throughout my life I have paid scant attention to brand names and labels -- not even on cars (usually a male preoccupation). Unlike many of the men I know, I cannot easily tell from looking at a car what make it is (unless, of course, it is the same make and year as my own). To me a car is just transportation, and if I sometimes wax enthusiastic about a certain manufacturer (no free plug here), it's only because its products have proven reliable in my own history of car use.

Existentialism, which I studied at some length during my university days, also plays a role in my inability to understand ghetto boys who get their identity from Michael Jordan and Nike athletic gear. Part of the existentialist credo, rooted partially in Romanticism, is rebellion against expectations and imposed identities. Man has no nature, proclaimed Ortega y Gasset -- only a history. People were supposed to "make themselves," deciding at each moment what they wished to be, even while maintaining full freedom to alter their course and, as it were, turn into someone or even something radically different from who or what they used to be. In short, your identity was entirely under your own control. You didn't pick it out at the mall. Proving that you were cool was not on life's agenda.

Now, existentialism may have been a fine working philosophy for a few solitary Cartesian types, but it never turned into a vehicle used by masses of people to drive through life. Sartrean directives to shape up and quit slipping into bad faith and inauthenticity did not generally penetrate the consciousness of the folks who spend too much time at the mall. Sartre told us: "You are free - - therefore choose." But Erich Fromm reminded us that we tend to fear our freedom and that we even flee from it. And so, in the domain of the social sciences, there were astute observer and commentators who were quite familiar with the pathetic desire on the part of so many to wrest some drops of identity from conformist behavior by wearing the right clothing with the right labels, and so forth. Sartre, that supreme individualist, might not have understood it, but the sociologists did.

Part of the existentialist ethos is a fierce opposition to labels, which are quickly dismissed as stereotypes that limit our freedom., We see this theme developed especially in feminists who are influenced by existentialism. The practical upshot, of course, is that one should not plaster oneself with labels and logos, or agree to become a human signboard. Although I am not eligible to be a

feminist, I thoroughly agree and am not often seen wearing a T-shirt or jacket bearing the name of the college at which I teach. Neither does my car serve as a repository for bumper stickers and decals. If you drive behind me, you won't have anything more to read than my license plate.

Part of the logic of the existentialists and also some other thinkers, of course, is that the logo and brand name approach to identity is reductionistic. I would like people to realize that there is a good deal more to the human being known officially as Theodore Plantinga than can be communicated in a few phrases. To get to know TP would take some time: labels and logos would create a false impression in this regard. I would not want people to conclude quickly that I'm just "one of those." I like to think I'm unique, and that my life history has gradually made me more unique with the passing of the years. I have an identity, which embraces my history, my convictions, and a web of relationships in which my own life is embedded, but it's not easily summed up. I hope the same is true of you.

Yet, having read Klein, I can now understand, to some degree, why certain young people, having not much history behind them as yet, and not much in the way of stable, abiding relationships, to say nothing of mature convictions, are grasping at straws when it comes to identity. If people who size you up will think that you're just like the other kids you hang out with, you'll have a start, at least, when it comes to establishing and maintaining an identity. The logos on your clothes might not suffice to make you a somebody, but at least you won't be a nobody, wearing no-name or no-brand clothes. At the very least, you be "not nobody." That's a start. And now, if you can just make a little history (perhaps you could conquer Gaul), you'll be able to build on that start and work your way up to being a somebody. And so, as an insecure kid, you put on the uniform -- clothes of a certain sort, and the right labels on those clothes. That's where those overpriced running shoes -- maddening to so many parents -- come into the picture. I still think it's ill-advised to buy those shoes and to worship the celebrities who endorse them, but I don't call it stupid.

Is there anything more constructive to be done about the identity problem that Nike offers to solve for us? I think there is, but longer-term solutions are not easily explained, let alone implemented. The dimension that I would like to comment on in conclusion is the religious aspect of our existence. If our identity has much to do with a web of relationships, as I affirmed above, a connection to transcendent reality (which I, as a Christian, would name God) cannot be left out of the picture. In the Manitoba prairie landscapes with which I was familiar as a youth, you could always get your bearings and have an idea where you were if you could keep an eye on some landmark in the distance,

like a grain elevator clearly visible from miles away because the prairie was so flat. It was the opposite of being lost in a dense forest of tall trees where you lost all sense of direction. An abiding sense of connectedness to God is like that grain elevator in the distance: it gives you a sense of who and where you are in the midst of the stream of life. And so, when it comes to those boys in the ghetto who cherish their Nike sneakers and their posters of Michael Jordan, I would like to give them religious -- or more specifically, Christian -- instruction and encouragement instead, thereby connecting them with the deepest of all realities, from which they can gain an orientation and sense of identity and belonging that will leave them immune to the steady drumbeat of the ads spewed forth by the corporations.

Klein uses the term "ad-resistant roaches" (p. 307). I love that term, and I'd like to think I'm one of them. This world would surely be a better place if those boys in the ghettos could become "ad-resistant roaches" as well.