the commodity t

The Pretty Good Problem is even more acute at Magic than it is in the pages of *Consumer Reports* or, possibly, the picturesque pastures of France. The more narrow the range of actual differences in commodity attributes, the more important it becomes to create a different kind of value—one that transcends the merely material. This is the goal of branding.

It's easy to think of branding as a transparent and almost pointless process: Huge companies buying TV ads to shout their trademarked names at us is pretty much the opposite of honest and authentic expression, let alone novelty. A mere logo, then, seems an unlikely way to achieve Godin's state of purpleness. But there is more to branding than that. Branding is really a process of attaching an idea to a product. A hundred years ago or more—when consumers started to choose (for instance) factory-sealed containers of flour marked Pillsbury, rather than buying flour of unknown provenance and quality out of open vats—that idea might have been strictly utilitarian and rational: trustworthy, effective, a bargain. Over time, and thanks in part to the sprawling abundance that production improvements offered, the ideas attached to products have by necessity become more elaborate and ambitious. This is why, for example, a widely discussed and award-winning campaign for Dove skin cleansers—featuring women who were decidedly less svelte than the models traditionally used in advertising images—took the form of a grandiose statement on the nature of beauty itself.

If a product is successfully tied to an idea, branding persuades people—whether they admit it to pollsters or even fully understand it themselves—to consume the idea by consuming the product. Even companies like Apple and Nike, while celebrated for the tangible attributes of their products, work hard to associate themselves with abstract notions of nonconformity or achievement. A potent brand becomes a form of identity in shorthand. It solves the Pretty Good Problem.

Here is one tool for understanding how this plays out in the market: the T-shirt. The T-shirt, really, is nothing. A former undergarment popularized as outerwear by World War II veterans who enjoyed their "skivvy" shirts on the often balmy Pacific front, it is today the plain brown cow of clothing, the sartorial equivalent of tap water. On a functional level, T-shirt innovation has not been radical compared with, say, the evolution in music-listening products. A time traveler from the 1930s might not know how to operate an iPod but could still figure out how to use the twenty-first-century T-shirt.

But speaking of music: Band logos stood out as one popular strategy for adding value to a commodity in my safari through the Magic wilderness. A dozen or more companies offered T-shirts for the Clash, Slayer, Iron Maiden, Afrika Bambaataa, Melle Mel, and a seemingly endless variety of others, from the well-known to the obscure. At least three companies were selling rock T-shirts for toddlers—two had Ramones offerings. Maybe the bands who turned CBGB into the birthplace of American punk did not sell branded merch at the time, but thirty years later, Ramones T-shirts have outsold Ramones albums ten to one. And CB's itself had a sizable Magic booth; in fact, its clothing line grossed $2 million in 2004, double the revenue of the actual music club, which later shut down.

Of course, music-related T-shirts were only one category. A sizable percentage of the apparel on sale at Magic really exists solely as a carrier for symbolic meanings developed elsewhere in the marketplace. *Playboy* had a huge display of its branded apparel, and *Hustler* was there, too. *American Chopper*, the television show, had a big space, as did Fender guitars and *Lowrider* magazine—one of several brands that offered a working bar, live events, and DJs. *Lowrider*, as far as I knew, was just some specialty publication for fanatics of a particular style of car, but now sold apparel as well.

Kung Fu Inc. had shirts promoting the scabrous antiauthority clip-art comic *Get Your War On* and the indie-chick pornography brand SuicideGirls. Old Varsity sold college-wear. An endless number of television shows and movie properties were represented, from

Adult Swim to ESPN to *Redneck Comedy Roundup*. One of the biggest booths was stuffed with T-shirts and other apparel carrying the symbol of John Deere, the maker of heavy farm equipment. Then there was X-Lab, distributor of shirts that say things like "Fuck the Fucking Fucks." Now *that's* purple.

Finally, there were T-shirts that simply advertised consumer products. Coastal Concepts had Burger King and Reese's Cup shirts. Logotel had shirts for Kellogg's, Hostess, M&M's. There were Moon Pie shirts. Others had Ford, Dodge, and Chevy shirts. And if you are still imagining that you are thirsty, there were shirts for 7UP, Mountain Dew, RC, Dr Pepper, A&W root beer, Miller High Life, Corona, Guinness, Budweiser, even Hamm's and Mickey's. A company called Brew City offered up the "subversive" versions that assumed brand literacy in order to mock it, by way of emblems like Schitt, in the style of the Schlitz logo.

Eventually, I turned a corner and was confronted with the Che booth. Here, in a fairly large and lavish display, a company called Fashion Victim was peddling to interested retailers a huge array of shirts, banners, and other items featuring the iconic image of Che Guevara. It also offered Lenin shirts, Mao shirts, Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and Geronimo shirts. Fashion Victim's website explained: "Join the revolution with us here at Fashion Victim! These are revolutionary times, so where better to get the gear you need. We have all the latest designs in the world of propaganda and revolution, not to mention we are the only licensed retailers of Che Guevara shirts in the US of A."

Even this brief tour of the Magic trade show suggests that those four and a half rational factors aren't going to be quite enough to steer Consumer Economicus to a decision. We say we make choices based on factors like value and comfort—but what happens when we face a nearly infinite variety of things that are close to identical on a functional level? Perhaps, like Miuccia Prada, Consumer Economicus thinks that buying a "symbol" is a sign of "weakness." But in the real world of the Pretty Good Problem, symbols are more important than ever.

ecko unltd.'s cul-de-sac cred

The knee-jerk bias against logos that consumers display when quizzed by pollsters should be no surprise. Even if we concede that, yes, some symbols and objects really are important to us after all, we remain suspicious that symbolic meaning can be invented—by, for example, professional branders and logo makers. Valuing an object just because it's a symbol—of status or anything else—sounds fake, contrived, phony. This is why most descriptions of the new consumer emphasize our demand for *authenticity*.

While evoked constantly, the word is seldom defined. But one can presume that the *authentic* symbol is grounded in some kind of empirical, provable reality—that if you burrow down behind it, you will find exactly the things that the symbol purports to represent. Think of it as the difference between a trophy obtained by winning a race and an identical trophy obtained by forking over a few bucks at a pawnshop: One is clearly authentic in the way that the other is not.

So maybe the Apple brand connects with consumers because its products really are innovative and different, and Nike's brand is authentic because it can be tied directly to the company's roots as an enabler of athletic achievement. Any symbol that fails this basic authenticity test, according to this line of thought, will fail with the new Consumer Economicus.

But who *really* decides what's authentic and what isn't? Just across the street from the Las Vegas Convention Center, in a temporary building that was the size of a house, I found an interesting case study in how complicated the answer to that question can be. The structure was emblazoned with the stark silhouette of a rhinoceros: the logo of apparel brand Ecko Unltd. The Ecko rhino, on T-shirts, baggy jeans, and other garments, has become a widely recognized symbol, familiar in dozens of rap videos and on streets (and cul-de-sacs) all over America, and in five thousand retail locations, from specialty shops to malls. Its most explosive growth has occurred in the years since the turn of the twenty-first century—right alongside the growing rhetoric about logoproof consumers.

American hip-hop culture, with its roots dating back to the gritty realities of the Bronx in the late 1970s, provides a particularly interesting backdrop for discussing authenticity. Clearly, hip-hop has long since gone mainstream, and as both a musical genre and a recognizable visual style is widely consumed outside of the tough urban environments where it first flourished. Even so, as anyone with passing familiarity with contemporary hip-hop knows, it's a culture that remains positively obsessed with authenticity—almost every top-selling rapper makes his or her own street cred (maybe a past dealing drugs, maybe direct experience with violence, maybe just an autobiography tied up in big-city poverty) a primary lyrical subject. In the early 2000s, as hip-hop evolved into an aesthetic available in suburban department stores under the rubric of "urban" apparel, connections to the authentic street remained important. Urban apparel redefined the young men's clothing business, and most of the successful brands had some direct link to hip-hop—Rocawear through Jay-Z and Damon Dash; Sean John through P. Diddy; Phat Fashions through Russell Simmons.

Ecko was as big as, or bigger than, any of the hip-hop-associated brands just mentioned. Many people would likely have recognized that rhino symbol on Ecko's freestanding building at Magic, but few would have been able to tell you much about the man behind it: a white, baby-faced thirty-three-year-old from the Jersey suburbs. Marc Milecofsky grew up in Lakewood, about an hour and a half south of Manhattan, and spent more time in malls than in the streets. His father was a pharmacist, his mother a real estate agent. He had two sisters, one of whom was his twin, Marci. (The name Ecko is derived from a family story: When his mother was pregnant with Marci, the doctor informed her of an "echo," which turned out to be Marc.) In about the fifth grade, he started to think about the relationship between style and social groups. He also figured out that not every place was as ethnically and culturally diverse as Lakewood's public schools: At extended family get-togethers, it was a source of amusement that young Marc was into this exotic thing

called break dancing. Not that he could do it very well—"too fat," he told me. He couldn't rap, either; but he could draw.

He learned about graffiti culture through photography books by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant. Visiting a cousin in Trenton, he told me, he would see "all the freight trains that I guess had run in New York, bombed with graffiti." Graffiti characters replaced comic books as his primary visual influence. He raked leaves to raise the money for a pair of Adidas shell toes, like Run-D.M.C. had. He learned about Polo through a reference in "La Di La Di," by Doug E. Fresh and Slick Rick. Style was cultural expression, and customizing clothes was "a big part of the urban dialect," he explained, so he took up the airbrush. By his early teens, he was charging classmates to make designs on their jeans or shirts, in his parents' garage. "I was waitressing at a pizza shop, and I was counting my singles," Marci told me. "Marc was counting off twenties."

As a student at Rutgers in 1992, he dreamed up six designs and screen-printed them on T-shirts that he sold. Soon he changed his name (first to Echo and later, after a trademark dispute with another company, to Ecko), teamed up with his sister and another Rutgers student who wrangled financial backing, and started coming to trade shows like Magic to sell his designs under the banner of what would become Ecko Unltd. A lot of new brands, including his, were writing their names out in graffiti-style lettering, so he wanted a symbol instead. The obvious thing to do was lift some icon of the rising new hip-hop culture that so entranced him, like a turntable or a spray can. Instead he found his inspiration in his parents' Lakewood den, where his father kept a collection of kitschy little rhino statues. He didn't think about it so much then, but he has thought about it a lot since.

The first brand logo worn on the outside of a garment is believed to be the Lacoste crocodile: 1920s French tennis star René Lacoste, playing off a nickname given to him by the press, had one embroidered on a jacket he wore and then tennis shirts he designed and sold after retiring. We've seen plenty of logos come and go since then, and of course they all start out with no particular meaning. A

logo can acquire its meaning from the product it is attached to or the people who use the product—in ads, in the real world, or in the gray area in between, such as pictures of celebrities in magazines. Ecko's ads, in *The Source* and *Vibe*, had high production values and put the rhino on a surprising range of maverick recording artists who were not mainstream stars at the time—Talib Kweli, Beatnuts. Lucian James, whose branding agency, Agenda Inc., did some consulting projects for Ecko, points out that the rhino also referenced the symbol language most familiar to the then emerging youth culture: the language of the Polo pony and the Lacoste crocodile. The language of brands. The rhino both participates in this language and subtly satirizes it. "Rhinos are not exactly aspirational," James notes.

Sales went from $15 million in 1998 to $96 million by 2000, then rocketed to more than $400 million today. "I think it's like something sublime," Ecko said to me, speaking about successful logo icons in general. "When something is aesthetically beautiful, people react. And when you can assign a meaning and value to something and summarize or capture all of that instantly, that's something that I think human nature just gloms on to."

If it's true that symbolic meaning cannot be invented—that a symbol must tie back to an empirical reality to qualify as authentic and thus be embraced by consumers—then Ecko's success seems curious indeed. Here, after all, is an outsider suburbanite who created a logo that became synonymous with hip-hop culture and urban style.

But symbolic meaning *can* be invented. After all, think about Ralph Lifshitz. He grew up in a Bronx apartment, far from the milieu of the patrician upper class. He saw the swells in the movies and during the summers that he worked as a waiter in the Catskills, in the 1950s. He wanted to be like them, so he dressed like them, even in high school. Eventually his father, a Russian immigrant, changed the family surname to Lauren.

Ralph Lauren dropped out of city college, got a job as a seller of suits at Brooks Brothers, and toiled away in the nether regions of the

rag trade until he designed a line of fancy neckties that was picked up by Bloomingdale's in 1967. They were sold as emblems of status, under his new brand name, Polo. In her book *The End of Fashion*, journalist Teri Agins credits Lauren with going on to invent "lifestyle merchandising," building what looked like exclusive little boutiques, replicated in countless department stores. A working-class Jewish kid from the Bronx defined WASP status in a way that was accessible on a mass scale. He made it the acceptable thing for the skeptical sixteen-year-old Jersey mall rat who would become Marc Ecko and who never gave a thought to whether the relationship between that Polo symbol and the man who created it was an "authentic" one or not.

the "projectability" of hello kitty

Logos, then, like any other kind of symbol, can have real meaning, and that meaning can be created. This is true even if the resulting symbol lacks "authenticity" in the sense of a direct, demonstrable link to a factual backstory. But there is one more aspect to this first step in cracking the Desire Code. It's the thing that turned Sanrio into a billion-dollar company.

A Japanese firm, Sanrio has been in the "character goods" business since the 1960s. By one count, its artists have dreamed up more than 450 cute little creatures. The word *character* is a little misleading. The characters created by, for example, the Walt Disney Company or Marvel Entertainment first reach the world through a comic book or a movie or television show. They have attributes, personalities, and backstories. Sanrio's characters (often animals) do not. They first reach the world by being emblazoned on products. Although they might be aesthetically charming, they are empty of specific meaning.

One of Sanrio's creations is probably familiar to you; certainly it's familiar to young women all over the world and has been for decades. In 1974, Yuko Shimizu was a young designer on the staff of

Sanrio. She had created several characters for the company, but none had caught on. Over time, she later explained, "I realized simplicity was what was important." She was given the assignment of dreaming up some more characters to adorn small vinyl purses. She came up with six designs, only one of which did particularly well. That design was quite simple: a cat with a bow on its head and no mouth. ("I couldn't express the mouth in a cute way," Shimizu said, "so I decided not to use it.") After some debate, her managing director gave it the name Hello Kitty and started putting the character on stationery, handkerchiefs, aprons, and so on. Before long, Shimizu was receiving fairly extraordinary fan mail. "I felt the power of Hello Kitty," she later recalled somewhat cryptically. "And felt that it could be used as a tool for communication between people."

Sales of items bearing Hello Kitty's elusively inexpressive but undeniably cute likeness climbed through the 1970s, stalled briefly, rose again in the 1980s, and after another dip experienced tremendous growth again starting in the mid-1990s. In their book, *Hello Kitty*, business journalists Ken Belson and Brian Bremner say that by the cat's thirtieth anniversary, Sanrio was making around six thousand Hello Kitty products a year, granting paid licenses to others who made sixteen thousand more, and selling them in forty countries. (About ten thousand Hello Kitty items are generally available in North America.) The ever rotating product line has included all manner of toys, clothing, stationery, and the like, but also appliances, toothbrushes, golf bags, spatulas, bikes, computers, mobile phones, and, in one instance, a $30,000 diamond-encrusted wristwatch. Although Hello Kitty was seen strictly as a young girls' phenomenon in the United States for many years, that had changed by 2004, when Sanrio research found that a third of the customers in its U.S. stores were people over eighteen, shopping for themselves. This epiphany was followed by the release of Hello Kitty lingerie and jewelry. In 2007, MBNA was offering a Hello Kitty Platinum Plus Visa card. Sanrio's licensees have included not simply anonymous commodity makers, but acclaimed designers like Richie Rich and

Traver Rains, whose Kitty-emblazoned Heatherette dresses sold for $1,000 and were worn by the likes of Paris and Nicky Hilton. And, of course, Hello Kitty appears on a great variety of T-shirts, from the most basic to more rarefied options, like a collaboration with designer Paul Frank that sold at Bloomingdale's and other department stores.

The astonishing success of Hello Kitty has been the subject of much speculation. Some aspects of that success seem straightforward enough. For starters, Hello Kitty is adorable. And celebrities in Japan, and later in the United States, have embraced the icon in one media-saturated setting or another, presumably inspiring some copycat consumption. But there must be more to it than that.

While Sanrio has made certain "biographical" information about her known, if you feel like tracking it down (she lives in London, she has a sister who bakes cookies, and so on), she is not, like Snoopy or Mickey Mouse, a character who has engaged in memorable adventures or has developed a personality of any kind. This is intentional. "We work very hard to avoid things that would define the character," a Sanrio executive has explained. Similarly, the company also does very little advertising on behalf of this, its most profitable emblem. Nor can the mouthless cat be said to "stand for" some social or cultural idea—like the Polo emblem's supposed connotation of upper-class leisure or the Ecko rhino's (possibly debatable) links to urban culture. Hello Kitty stands for nothing.

Or, perhaps, for anything. Yuko Shimizu has said that she was never thinking about anything other than making an image that would appeal to little girls. "The simplicity is what made people understand Hello Kitty," she concluded. A perceptive study of the Hello Kitty phenomenon by Tokyo-based cultural scholar Brian J. McVeigh suggests an interesting theory that is implied by his paper's title: "How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool and Camp." While he notes factors like "accessibility" and consistency, the most compelling factor he isolates is "projectability." Hello Kitty's blank, "cryptic" simplicity, he argues, is among her great strengths; standing for

nothing, she is "waiting to be interpreted," and this is precisely how an "ambiguous"—and let's be frank: meaningless—symbol comes to stand for nostalgia to one person, fashionability to another, camp to a third, vague subversiveness to a fourth. "Without the mouth, it is easier for the person looking at Hello Kitty to project their feelings onto the character," explains a Sanrio spokesman that McVeigh quotes. "The person can be happy or sad together with Hello Kitty." Hello Kitty, McVeigh argues, is a "mirror that reflects whatever image, desire, or fantasy an individual brings to it." Belson and Bremner return to this theme repeatedly in their book on the business of Hello Kitty. "What makes Kitty so intriguing is that she projects entirely different meanings depending on the consumer," they write. The cat is "an icon that allows viewers to assign whatever meaning to her that they want."

Many of the consumers that McVeigh interviewed about Hello Kitty complained about corporations targeting them, making them buy things—things like more Hello Kitty products. But as he pointed out, "Capitalist forces do not simply foist knickknacks on the masses, and we must give credit to the individual consumer who, after all, chooses to purchase certain incarnations of Hello Kitty but not others (or chooses not to buy Hello Kitty at all)." After all, if Sanrio's managers could create dozens of Hello Kittys, they most certainly would—and they are trying all the time. In more than three decades of effort, they have never come close.

Not only can logos have meaning, and not only can that meaning be manufactured—it can be manufactured *by consumers*. Ultimately, a cultural symbol that catches on is almost never simply imposed, but rather is created and then tacitly agreed upon by those who choose to accept its meaning, wherever that meaning may have originated. That's what Hello Kitty is: a cultural symbol. And a successful brand.

the hundreds

Bobby Hundreds, needless to say, is not particularly impressed by the likes of Hello Kitty, or Marc Ecko, or any of the brands at Magic.

Well, that's not completely true. There's at least *one* brand that Bobby Hundreds believes in. It's called the Hundreds. This is the brand that he and his business partner, known as Ben Hundreds, founded in 2003. The Hundreds came about when Ben and Bobby met not while skateboarding, but at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles, where they had some first-year classes together. They bonded over their mutual interests in art, music, and design—and their mutual horror of becoming the respectable suit-wearing drones their parents wanted them to be. Seeking a more fulfilling alternative, they decided to start something of their own: a brand. The Hundreds sold T-shirts, with designs created by Bobby. Ben runs the business side. And that's why they were at Magic. They had a booth, and they were selling their shirts to retailers, meeting with magazine editors and trend consultants, and networking.

They had created their first line of shirts less than two years earlier. Department store chains were too mainstream for the Hundreds; instead, they wanted to get their T-shirts into certain skateboard shops or independent "streetwear" stores. Their bête noir was Urban Outfitters, which they saw as the ultimate corporate vulture. The first store they set their sights on was Fred Segal, a trendsetting boutique in Santa Monica. They showed up one day in 2003 and "ambushed" the buyer. "There are fifty new T-shirt lines that come out every day," Bobby explained to me, so they knew that theirs would rise or fall on the strength of the Hundreds as a brand. "We really emphasized that we weren't just a T-shirt line—we were more of a lifestyle" that aimed to "bring this subculture out," he said. "And I guess we sold him on that."

The Fred Segal deal helped them persuade other retail buyers to give the Hundreds a try. By the time we met up at Magic, the Hundreds had distribution in scores of stores, in eight states and fifteen countries. I'd noticed that their website included what was essentially a fan club section—you could join the Hundreds "bomb squad" and get stickers to put up around your city. I assumed this was bravado. Bobby told me I was wrong. "We get so many e-mails every day from kids, not just in America, but around the world, who