

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	I
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PART ONE

CREATING A CULTURE

The First Commandment // Have an Organizing Principle	12
The Second Commandment // Be Useful, Relevant, and Entertaining	40
The Third Commandment // Ask Heretical Questions	62
The Fourth Commandment // Align with Behaviour	89
The Fifth Commandment // Be Generous	III

PART TWO

MAKING IT HAPPEN

The Sixth Commandment // Join The 5% Club	136
The Seventh Commandment // Prioritize Experience Over Innovation	163
The Eighth Commandment // Weaponize Your Audience	189
The Ninth Commandment // Make Trust Sacred	214
The Tenth Commandment // Be Brave	237

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	263
<i>Further reading</i>	267
<i>Index</i>	271

INTRODUCTION

Imagine, for a second, that the person next to you in whatever bookstore, airport, or living room you've picked this book up has just coughed. Or sneezed. Or generally expelled some sort of germ that threatens to ruin the better part of next week.

Chances are you'd step away, consider washing your hands, or mutter an instinctive curse or prayer, depending on your disposition. Contagion, typically, is not something we want to tangle with.

But in marketing (and entertainment, media, and many other fields), contagion is something to seize upon and amplify. Brands thrive on it. It is a cheap ticket to extensive reach. The same mechanism that causes an ill-judged tweet to derail a career enables a lo-fi video to persuade millions of strangers to pour buckets of ice over their heads. It makes brand ideas that will spread like wildfire. These contagious things can be beautifully filmed creative stories that earn a place in pop culture. They can be innovative public-relations campaigns that champion social causes. Or they can be a livestream of a potato slowly growing in a pile of sand (trust us; it's coming).

In an age where expensive ads can be blocked but billions of eyeballs can be reached for free on people's smartphones, contagious

thinking is more valuable than ever. Marketers unable to create contagious ideas will quickly find themselves over and out – overspending on advertising and, potentially, out of a job.

Advertising isn't dead, but it needs to take some lessons from the flu.

WE ARE (COUGH) CONTAGIOUS

Contagious launched in 2004, in the middle of a marketing maelstrom; a time of historic change. Mobile was beginning to get smart, social media was primed to explode, and people's relationships with brands were becoming a whole lot more interactive and opinionated. New media had created new behaviours, enabling the audience to run ahead of the advertiser.

The communications industry needed a fresh guidance system, to make sense of all the change and disruption. Contagious was devised as a triple-headed guide – business intelligence resource, quarterly journal, and marketing advisory service – to help its clients navigate the immediate future of marketing.

Our purpose as a company is to ignite exceptional ideas. Contagious's services are designed for marketers seeking competitive edge through creativity and innovation. We interrogate the world's most exceptional marketing and disruptive trends to help our clients achieve winning ideas, fast. We believe in the maxim that creativity is the last legal means to gain an unfair advantage over the competition.

Since its launch, the company has become a world-class authority on the future of marketing and the power of creative leadership. Fascinated by the stuff people choose to care about and feel compelled to share, we've created a platform to explore alternative advertising ideas, to assess the impact of emerging technologies, and to champion a greater sense of purpose for brands.

WE'D LIKE TO MAKE YOU CONTAGIOUS

So why should you read this book? For one, it's chock full of the most compelling and disruptive ideas the advertising industry has devised in

this millennium. Whether you’re in the mood for an ingenious activation from a Guatemalan shoe retailer, an oddball vending machine for a Japanese coffee brand, internet-connected underwear, or a radio station for dogs, we’ve got it all. If you work in the marketing industry or are simply fascinated by the effect creative ideas exert on culture as well as business, you’ll find plenty to chew on here.

More than just creative inspiration, though, this book is a practical guide: ten clear and simple commandments that will enable you to create and share successful, contagious ideas. Honed over the most intense decade of change and disruption in the advertising universe, this decalogue for today lays out a clear framework to set you on the path to better and more effective ideas, both in marketing and beyond.

Creating contagious ideas requires breaking long-standing paradigms and well-worn category norms. Picture a beer ad. Is there a party or maybe a sports game, men bantering, women giggling and a culminating shot of either the bottle or a freshly poured pint, sparkling with condensation and a tiny bit of brew frothing over the lip? Adhere to the category codes and the ad practically writes itself. For shampoo it’s even simpler, a paradigm enforced by brand handbooks around the globe: always include a ‘spin, swish and smile’, in which the woman starring in the commercial turns to the camera, flips her freshly washed hair, and flashes a brilliant grin. Perfectly generic, perfectly forgettable.

Think of the hundreds or thousands of advertisements you encounter every day on the television or your tablet, on your commute to work, or in front of your PC that follow these category codes. How many can you remember? Just as our immune systems consistently win the battle against predictable and ubiquitous germs, our brains’ defences tune out banal ideas and stale executions. People have developed a cognitive immunity to most marketing.

This book provides ten strategic imperatives to developing creative ideas that avoid these codes and shatter such norms – and consequently bring about more contagious outcomes by penetrating people’s defences in a positive way. By following these commandments, you’ll unlock ideas that move from audience to audience under their own power, enabling your brand to become part of the cultural conversation. Although creating such ideas cannot be done by rote, there *are* precedents and guidelines

to create purposeful initiatives that resonate with real people. We hope to help you do just that.

THE TALE OF THE ARGENTINEAN AD MAN

Stories lie at the heart of all infectious ideas, and two stories sparked the formation of Contagious as a business. The first comes from Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. It's 1998. A shiny new neighbourhood, branded as Madero Este, has been built at Puerto Madero, a former industrial district by the river. It comprises the country's first Hilton hotel, an apartment block, office buildings, mall and cinema complex. To promote the new neighbourhood, wealthy developer Alberto L. González approaches one of the country's most celebrated creative directors, Jorge Heymann. 'Here's \$4 million,' he says. 'We need an advertising campaign to drive awareness and attract people to this new city within the city. Come back to me with some ideas.'

Just as any self-respecting creative director would do when handed such an ambitious and high-profile brief, Heymann spent time interrogating the product. He visited Puerto Madero at various times of day and night to get a feel for this ambitious, gleaming new place. But when he turned up to pitch his advertising ideas to the business magnate, he came empty-handed. He told González: 'Sir, you don't need an ad campaign. You need . . . a bridge.'

By looking at Madero Este through the lens of a consumer, Heymann realized that it felt too disconnected from the main hub of the city to be an attractive proposition for would-be visitors. The river was a psychological barrier as much as a physical one. Sure, he could easily have churned out the usual array of billboards, print ads, radio and TV commercials. But if people had to take two buses, commit to a circuitous walk or pay the expense of a taxi, they wouldn't be in the mood for much shopping and socializing by the time they got to the new hotspot. No amount of advertising sheen would solve that. But a bridge would.

Not just any bridge, though.

Heymann felt that this upstart new district that had changed the map of Buenos Aires needed something bold and iconic. It needed a story. The

bridge ought to be contagious; a landmark that people talked about, that generated media buzz and column inches – an ambitious design that would serve as the advertising campaign, with the benefit of lasting far longer than a conventional twelve-week media plan. It would be both an artery and an artwork. Something that would immediately connect Madero Este to its customer base and bring the fledgling neighbourhood to life.

Knowing that fame begets fame, Heymann printed a business card with the developer's logo and his own name on it and flew to Spain to convince Santiago Calatrava, one of the world's most iconic architects, to take on the brief. The result? Puente de la Mujer, a stunning and unique pedestrian footbridge connecting Puerto Madero to the rest of Buenos Aires. The city got an amazing new landmark and the shops, apartments, offices, cinema, hotel, and restaurants of Madero Este got lots of customers. At \$6 million, the project cost 50 per cent more than the original marketing and media budget, but the return on investment was exponentially higher. In the book *The New Waterfront: A Worldwide Urban Success Story*, authors Ann Breen and Dick Rigby describe it as one of the most successful waterfront renewal projects in the world.

That great twentieth-century philosopher Elvis Presley once urged us all to 'Walk a Mile in My Shoes', and the Argentinean ad man did just that (although it's unclear if they were blue suede). By exploring Puerto Madero on foot, rather than drafting up some ad layouts in his office on the other side of town, the creative director got inside the mind of the target audience. He anticipated their reactions by plotting their journey. And his creative brain landed on an alternative response to the traditional marketing brief.

It sounds obvious, but marketers sometimes need to leave their desks and data dashboards to get inside the lives of the people who buy their products and services. Helping marketers use new approaches to find creative solutions is what *Contagious* was born to do.

THE TALE OF ANCIENT MEXICAN SCROTUMS

A second story helped to shape *Contagious*. When researching a question posed by a multinational food-and-drinks client – 'Can a brand

ever be truly empathetic?’ – Paul stumbled across this tale of extreme empathy. (Please stay with us on this one!)

In Western religious societies, childbirth is explicitly connected with Original Sin. In biblical terms, the pain and suffering associated with labour is seen as a natural punishment for female transgression. Things didn’t go according to plan in the Garden of Eden, Eve got hornswoggled by the snake, and so God passed judgement, condemning Man to sustain life through hard labour and Woman to create new life through painful childbirth. This belief was so entrenched that early anaesthesia was routinely withheld from women during childbirth, since ‘descendants of Eve’ were ‘supposed’ to suffer.

One of the few societies to take a contrary view, however, were the Huichol of Mexico. These descendants of the Aztecs believed that the burden of childbirth should be shared. To do so they created an ingenious – and extremely empathetic – solution (men: get ready to wince). During labour, the expectant mother would hold on to a rope that was tied to her male partner’s scrotum. With each painful contraction, she would instinctively give the string a yank, so that her partner – positioned above her in the rafters of a house or the branches of a tree – could share both the pain and, ultimately, the spiritual joy of the experience.

Now, we’re not suggesting that anyone involved in building brands should go to such extreme lengths in order to empathize with their customers. But Contagious does encourage marketers to build the capacity to (metaphorically) ‘feel their tugs’ and follow Elvis’s sage advice to get inside someone’s mind to better anticipate their needs.

Mass media can be efficient at spreading a product message at scale, and can generate a strong emotional reaction, but at Contagious we also believe that to benefit fully from any degree of loyalty or interest shown by a consumer, brands should use their unique clout – be it media muscle or creative armoury – to bring about positive change. To create utility. To shape experiences that would otherwise be out of reach or unavailable. In our frequently frenetic and bewildering world, brands have started to fill some of society’s vacuums by acting as advisors, concierges, problem solvers, educators, and entertainment providers.

FEEL THEIR TUGS

'Feel Their Tugs' would certainly make an appropriate slogan for T-shirts slipped into marketing conference tote bags, but the Mexican Huichol story and the tale of the advertising brief that became a bridge both get to the heart of why Contagious was created as a business, born on the back of a beer mat in a London gastropub.

Traditional marketers expend much energy on mapping out 'the customer journey' – plotting consumers' typical daily behaviours in order to figure out the most appropriate 'contact points'. In plain English: to find places where brands can target people with advertising messages. As the 'Feel Their Tugs' analogy suggests, Contagious instead advocates that brands identify the 'pain points' in the customer journey, and provide solutions, services, facilities, information or experiences to solve or ease them. This is a different, more empathetic mindset to the traditional advertising approach that adopts an almost militaristic approach to communicating a message to consumers; which probably explains why words like 'campaign', 'target', 'bombard', 'guerrilla', 'penetration', and 'stealth' are common in the standard marketing dictionary.

Obviously, price and product performance are major factors in purchasing decisions, but when brands behave in such intuitive, productive ways, it increases the likelihood of establishing a more tangible connection (or, in marketing speak, a 'reason to believe') compared with a standard, transient advertisement.

Delta Airlines felt its passengers' tugs when it resolved a typical passenger anxiety – the fear of a suitcase getting lost en route – by adding a feature to its mobile app enabling customers to track the exact whereabouts of their luggage from the moment it leaves the check-in desk. The Bank of Åland felt its customers' tugs when it reshaped its identity as a sustainability-focused financial institution. Safaricom addressed cultural tugs by turning its mobile-phone balance into an ad-hoc banking system in Kenya. The following pages are full of such examples of brands paying attention to their customers' problems, adding a dose of creativity to their solution, and reaping the benefits.

THE CONTAGIOUS COMMANDMENTS

‘Feel Their Tugs’ is a canny slogan, but a tad socially awkward. Let’s be honest, it’s not always appropriate to begin business conversations with images of lassoed scrotums. But it did plant a seed that ultimately led to us writing the Contagious Commandments: our ten steps to successful marketing, future fitness, and brand bravery. The commandments – forged over more than a decade of writing, speaking, and thinking about the changing marketing industry, through more than fifty issues of our quarterly printed journal, and innumerable hands-on sessions in the trenches with Contagious clients – are what we believe to be the hallmarks of contagious companies; a set of principles and provocations to make brands fit for the future.

// ONE / Have an Organizing Principle / Figure out why your business exists – both for you and for the people you serve.

Don’t get distracted by short-termism and faddish trends.

Your organizing principle should be a clear manifestation of your company’s reason for being, the central tent pole on which the very fabric of your company hangs.

// TWO / Be Useful, Relevant, and Entertaining / The original contagious commandment, circa 2005. Fundamental, but somehow still often overlooked. If you’re asking someone to invest time and energy into the content, services, and experience your brand offers, you’d better be sure what you’re giving back has value.

// THREE / Ask Heretical Questions / When was the last time you asked questions about the fundamental nature of your organization? Brave marketers champion awkwardness and embrace dissent. They question and question and question until they get to the true heart of an issue. And, perhaps most importantly, they empower others in their company to do the same.

// FOUR / Align with Behaviour / Resist the urge to reinvent the wheel or build a walled garden far away from where consumers actually operate. Instead, collaborate. Identify

existing patterns and behaviours and figure out how your brand can build on them, rather than distracting from them.

// FIVE / Be Generous / Don't ask what's in it for you, ask what's in it for them. The best advertising isn't always advertising. Ease the friction, solve the pain points in the customer journey, and leave the world a better place after your campaign than it was before.

// SIX / Join The 5% Club / Test and learn. 'Fail Forward Fast' is not a cliché for nothing. Divert a percentage of your production budget, your media budget, your award-show budget to experimentation. Be optimistically curious: failure sucks, but only if you don't learn something from it.

// SEVEN / Prioritize Experience Over Innovation / Good technology is no excuse for a bad idea. Innovation may garner a brief PR boost, but unless that innovation is delivering superior customer experience, it won't help you in the long run. Technology should serve creativity, not the other way around.

// EIGHT / Weaponize Your Audience / Turn people into media. Leverage their voices to shout you out from the mountain tops. Your audience is powerful and vocal – invite them to influence your brand's direction and behaviour, and give them tools and assets to spread the word about what you're up to.

// NINE / Make Trust Sacred / Reputation is a micro-economy with far-reaching repercussions for your business. Cultivate trust with your consumers so they'll see you as a partner or ally. Step one: never forget that data is a manifestation of the lives of living, breathing people. Treat it with respect.

// TEN / Be Brave / Studies show that the brains of business people subliminally equate creative ideas (i.e. the new and risky) with poison, vomit, and agony. But! Creative work is six times more effective than non-creative work. We must prioritize creativity to cut through the cognitive immunity of jaded consumers. Brief bravely for that creativity. Empower courage.

INTRODUCTION

In the following pages we unpack and expound on these commandments. Study them, and we think your brand, company or clients will be stronger. But of course we know that the advertising industry's most precious commodity is time, and the unit of currency is attention. Agencies spend thousands of hours devising ingenious ways to trigger a reaction inside the scant seconds it takes to scroll past a Facebook post or to hover over the 'Skip Ad' button on YouTube.

So, yes, we get it: many of you work in the most horologically challenged industry on the planet, yet there's a heap of information being hurled at you inside these pages. Therefore, to aid the time-crunched reader, we have presented each commandment in two versions: latte and espresso.

The full versions are, metaphorically speaking, a luxurious latte, foaming inside a glazed ceramic cup, to be consumed at leisure while reclining on a vintage leather sofa. At the end of every commandment comes the espresso version: its essence distilled into a short, sharp hit. Two minutes, and you'll get the gist; you'll have enough to explain to your boss or your team what the core ideas and key takeaways are.

Plus, at *Contagious*, we've got a few tricks up our sleeve – frameworks, tools, and diagrams that will help you take the insights from a commandment and put them to work in your own business. Keep an eye out for those throughout the book.

PART ONE
CREATING A
CULTURE

HAVE AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE

According to a much higher authority than the mere mortals writing this book, commandments are not necessarily a place to get fancy. ‘Thou shalt not kill’ isn’t exactly digging deep for rules about comportment, is it? Thus, our first commandment is both blatantly obvious and incredibly important. Before doing anything else, you must understand why your company exists in the world.

As Jack Ma, founder of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba, wrote to shareholders in a 2017 letter, ‘We have responsibilities beyond business results. When I started Alibaba eighteen years ago, my partners and I asked ourselves not how to build a successful company, but why we want to build this company in the first place.’ The mission that grew out of that conversation – to make it easier to do business anywhere – has enabled smart, adaptive decision-making in pursuit of long-term success in a fast-evolving world.

Within your organization you may have your own term for this. Maybe you call it a ‘North Star’ or a ‘purpose’ or the ‘big idea’ or a ‘mission statement’ or your ‘why’. Maybe you have a poster tacked up next

HAVE AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE

to your computer monitor with a numbered list of company values. At Contagious, we like the term ‘organizing principle’.

We’re not dogmatic about this phrase, by any means, but it does have a few helpful attributes. It doesn’t have the automatic association with social good that the word ‘purpose’ does. It doesn’t drag people into mechanical sales conversations like ‘why’ often can. It doesn’t reek of jargon like ‘North Star’. Instead, it’s direct and clear about what it does: your organizing principle is a thesis around which your company or brand can radiate and rally. It is a central belief that drives everything you do, from internal policies to external communications.

Feel free to mentally substitute your term for ‘organizing principle’ throughout. We reckon it will still be relevant. But also don’t hesitate to ditch yours and think in terms of an organizing principle. We think you’ll like the way it works.

WE EXIST TO NOT SELL YOU THINGS

Organizing principle, literally writ large, became an audacious message against Black Friday, the day-long festival of shopping that American capitalism has given the world, in 2011. There, right on the front section of *The New York Times*, was a full-page ad by outdoor-clothing manufacturer Patagonia. ‘DON’T BUY THIS JACKET’, screamed the headline, accompanied by a picture of the brand’s best-selling R2 fleece. The copy below the jacket explained how our modern consumption culture is depleting the Earth’s resources, and detailed the effect this particular item of clothing has on the environment: how each one produced needs 135 litres of water, and generates twenty-four times its final weight in carbon dioxide emissions.

The stark words didn’t come without a call to action though. Patagonia took the opportunity to explain its Common Threads Initiative, with the programme’s five Rs (Reduce, Repair, Reuse, Recycle, Reimagine) detailing a pact between the company and its customers, to work in tandem to move towards ‘a world where we take only what nature can replace’.

Common Threads launched in September of that year, when

Patagonia and eBay debuted a resale website where people could buy pre-owned Patagonia clothing and gear. Once customers made the pact, the brand would elevate their attempts to find new homes for their gear through a special auction section on eBay. Patagonia's VP of environmental affairs and communication, Rick Ridgeway, introduced the site's aims, and the partnership with eBay, echoing eBay CEO John Donahoe's statement: 'The greenest product is the one that already exists.'

It was a stunningly bold step for a manufacturer to tell people not to make unnecessary purchases of its products, especially during the feeding frenzy of Black Friday. But the Common Threads Initiative follows on from Patagonia's long list of environmental programmes and promises. It managed to pull off this initiative by proving its dedication to the cause, which resonated with its outdoorsy, environmentally aware consumers. According to Bloomberg's Kyle Stock, 'In 2012 – which included about nine months of the "buy less" marketing – Patagonia sales increased almost one-third, to \$543 million, as the company opened fourteen more stores. Last year [2013], revenue ticked up another 6 per cent, to \$575 million. In short, the pitch helped crank out \$158 million worth of new apparel.' Ironic, to be sure, but one hopes those sales came at the expense of less environmentally focused competitors.

This isn't a shallow corporate social responsibility campaign, or a cynical publicity grab. Patagonia is causing change in communities through activism by encouraging its customers – which it refers to as 'constituents' – to consume less, to be more conscientious of what they buy, and even elect individuals to help bring this about at a governmental policy level, with a 'Vote the Environment' push designed to help people choose local policies that are environmentally friendly. Over forty years, by tearing apart its business multiple times, the company has developed a stronger philosophical core. It wants to be a transformative force.

Patagonia has found an organizing principle. A central belief. A powerful perspective that goes way beyond a charitable donation or a single campaign. *This is the reason it exists.*

'Whenever companies tell you what their mission statement is, you can kind of see the ennui in their eyes,' Ridgeway says. 'Patagonia's different, because the mission guides the business. And it guides me, on

a short- and long-term basis, to make the decisions I make. It really is the reason the company succeeds.'

That mission statement? 'Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis.'

With this organizing principle in hand, Patagonia can go about its business in the world with confidence that it's staying true to itself and not starting down garden paths. In the past few years the brand has:

- // launched a \$20 million investment fund to support responsible and like-minded start-ups bringing positive change to the environment.
- // created a beer, under its Patagonia Provisions label, that is made using Kernza, a grain that doesn't require pesticides, uses less water than wheat, and 'acts like a sponge for carbon', according to label head Birgit Cameron.
- // announced it would give people store credit in exchange for their used Patagonia clothing, which the brand would then wash (in an eco-friendly waterless process), repair, and resell at low prices.
- // led the charge of outdoor apparel companies to pull a lucrative annual conference out of the state of Utah after the state's government failed to support the protection of Bears Ears National Monument.
- // posted a call to action titled 'The President Stole Your Land' after President Trump rolled back federal recognition of 85 per cent of the Bears Ears lands, and announced that the company would sue Trump in court, stating: 'Protecting public lands is a core tenet of our mission.'

Is Patagonia a venture capital company? A brewery? A thrift store? A lobbyist? A protest organizer? In some ways, it's all of the above. At its core, though, it remains an outdoor-apparel brand. But because the brand's clear organizing principle is understood both internally and externally, none of these efforts strikes us as out of place. It all makes sense.

Companies with strong philosophical (and often ethical) foundations are able to develop bold ideas that would make their competitors' sales pitches shrink. An organizing principle gives ideas, and brands, their spine.

START WITH WHY

The power of having a clear understanding of not just what you do but why you do it isn't a new or novel concept, of course. Chances are you've heard Simon Sinek's TED Talk, the third most viewed talk in TED's history, or read one of his enlightening books on the concept of 'starting with why'.

'People don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it,' says Sinek. 'Very, very few people or organizations know why they do what they do. And by *why* I don't mean "to make a profit". That's a result. It's always a result. By *why*, I mean: What's your purpose? What's your cause? What's your belief? Why does your organization exist? Why do you get out of bed in the morning? And why should anyone care? As a result, the way we think, we act, the way we communicate is from the outside in, it's obvious. We go from the clearest thing to the fuzziest thing. But the inspired leaders and the inspired organizations – regardless of their size, regardless of their industry – all think, act and communicate from the inside out.'

This inside-out thinking is a powerful concept that can't be overstated, especially for those tasked with communicating the value of a brand to a broad audience. By peeling back the layers of *what* a brand is or *what* consumers want, eventually we get to *why* a brand exists and *why* consumers choose them. Marketers should be like a curious child, asking 'why' over and over until they uncover universal truths (or drive their parents/bosses to madness).

Asking why, and drilling down to root causes, is key to unlocking insights about your brand and about your customers. And by combining those insights to create a holistic yet simple picture of why your brand exists in the lives of its customers, you can drill down to an organizing principle that will drive your marketing from the inside out. From the foundation of an organizing principle you can build both impactful social good campaigns (see Bayer's HeroSmiths box on pages 25–6) and light-hearted stunts with equal success. With an organizing principle at its core, an idea gives employees, suppliers, partners, and customers alike a reason to believe.

An organizing principle forces you to examine your priorities, take a position, and plant a flag in the ground. As legendary ad man and DDB

co-founder Bill Bernbach summed it up: 'If you stand for something, you will always find some people for you and some against you. If you stand for nothing, you will find nobody against you, and nobody for you.'

A TALE OF TWO BRANDS: UBER VS LYFT

We recently saw a neatly packaged side-by-side display of organizing principles as differentiating factors. Uber and Lyft had established themselves as the clubhouse leaders in the competitive ride-sharing space, with Uber a fair bit ahead of the pack. On the expertise and reliability side of things, the two brands were virtually identical. Both services delivered on-demand rides with connected navigation and payment consistently in cities around the world.

But *why* do the two brands do what they do? Let's take a look at their stated missions:

Uber: Transportation as reliable as running water, everywhere and for everyone

Lyft: To reconnect people through transportation and bring communities together

Slightly different, no? And while neither is inherently 'better' than the other, these missions give each brand a unique perspective on events and a unique position in the eyes of potential customers. Essentially, these organizing principles help people choose between two very similar brands. And they give people within the brands easy access to a lens through which to make decisions quickly.

This was illustrated in January 2017, when President Trump announced an apparently racially motivated ban on travellers from seven nations entering the US. Protesters stormed JFK airport in New York, and the yellow taxi cab drivers went on strike in solidarity. Uber and Lyft had a decision to make. Reaching into their back pockets and pulling out their handy organizing principles, they made different decisions. Lyft stopped car services at the airport. Uber turned off its surge pricing and asked passengers to be patient if wait times were extended, an action many interpreted as strike-breaking.

The backlash was quick and ruthless. On social media, a movement

under the hashtag #deleteuber erupted, encouraging people to delete the app, which a reported 200,000 people did, punishing the brand for its misaligned mission. Lyft, sensing an opportunity to double down on its own mission, published an open letter and donated \$1 million to the American Civil Liberties Union. ‘We created Lyft to be a model for the type of community we want our world to be: diverse, inclusive, and safe,’ wrote founders John Zimmer and Logan Green.

In February, the month following the movement, Lyft registered a 7 per cent uptick in its customer base, largely driven by users fleeing Uber. It was a stark example of the way an organizing principle can resonate.

As Ben Boyd, president of practices and sectors at communications marketing agency Edelman, told us: ‘First-mover advantage and scale can create inoculation for a period of time, but eventually trust trumps convenience.’ Eventually, people pick the brand with the organizing principle they relate to.

Uber, of course, wasn’t killed by the deletion movement. The service retains a sizeable lead over its competition, attracts plenty of venture capital and continues to grow. But later the same year it also fired its founder/CEO and went to great pains to rehabilitate its image as a company. Perhaps a sign that it’s wising up to the importance of principles – or fear that the next movement could hurt even more.

THE BENEFIT OF ‘ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE’

Another brand that has nailed the value of an organizing principle is Volvo. The brand is often cited as a marketing success for its ownership of the word safety in the minds of consumers. But Volvo’s organizing principle actually takes the idea of keeping people safe a step further. Their mantra? ‘Everything We Do Starts with People.’

It’s an interesting organizing principle for a car brand, given that it doesn’t mention anything about speed, luxury, style, transportation, or even cars. Instead, it reminds both those working for the company and its customers that Volvo is a company committed to the safety of people, brought to life through its cars. As far back as its founding in 1927, this commitment has been a part of the brand’s DNA. ‘Cars are driven by

people,’ wrote co-founders Assar Gabrielsson and Gustaf Larson. ‘The guiding principle behind everything we make at Volvo, therefore, is – and must remain – safety.’ In fact, the pair started the company because foreign cars were not safe enough for Sweden’s narrow, twisting, and often-snowy roads.

After briefly losing focus – for example, regrettably billing its 2011 S60 as ‘the naughty Volvo’ – the brand recentred itself around its more staid messaging. It brought its people first, cars second principle back to the forefront in 2013, highlighting Volvo’s role in keeping people safe. Intoned one advertisement: ‘Some say cars are all about going fast, some say cars are all about looking cool. They aren’t wrong. But our main passion is to help our drivers and their loved ones to live longer.’

Although automobiles remain Volvo’s primary focus, this sort of organizing principle allows the brand to pivot as the automotive landscape shifts. Take, for example, its partnership with Swedish start-up Albedoro to create a product called LifePaint, a paint product that sprays on clear but reflects brightly when hit with light. The paint, initially designed to help drivers avoid reindeer on dark Nordic highways, became Volvo’s offering to the cycling community, with the brand aiming to minimize collisions between cars and cyclists in London.

Introduced with an online video and distributed for free from six London bike shops over a weekend in March, LifePaint was a hit. ‘In the first hour we hit nearly 1 million visitors on our site,’ Hollie Newton, the creative director at Grey London who worked on the campaign, told *Contagious*. ‘Every single can disappeared in under seventy-two hours. And people were selling it on eBay.’ Now Grey is working on rolling out LifePaint across global markets, including the US, Germany and South Africa. Having such a strong perspective on the brand’s purpose, and its role in consumer lives, allows Volvo to be creative in how it reaches people around the world.

Australian vodka brand 42Below positions itself as the purest vodka in the world, thanks to its source: pure, soft New Zealand spring water. Organizing around that idea, the brand found an

intriguing way to communicate with consumers very close to the point of purchase – in pub toilets. Working with Botanical Distillery and communications agency Colenso BBDO, the Bacardi-owned brand gathered up used lemon slices from the bottom of Martini glasses around the country and turned them into soap, aptly called Recycled Lemons Eco Soap. The liquid soap was then bottled and distributed for customers' use and sachets were handed out with drinks.

Along with the soap, 42Below published amusing messages about how the substance tied back to the brand's core organizing principle of purity. Read one verbiage-packed coaster:

As you know, we're on a small rock hurtling through space and we've only got the one, so stuffing it up would be quite a problem, especially for us at 42Below. Why? Because we make the purest vodka on the planet, so if anyone sullies our little island paradise with their filthy emissions and pollution, our vodka might start tasting terrible, like gin. But we're not going to let that happen. Because from now on, as well as making super tasty vodka, we're doing some planet-saving hippie eco-stuff. We're taking all the leftover bits of lemon from the drinks in this bar and recycling them to create 42Below Recycled Cocktail Lemons Eco Soap, which means when you drink 42Below you won't just look cool (if you're already cool looking), but you'll smell good, and feel good, as well as totally save the planet and all mankind. Bit of an overpromise you say? This is marketing, you can't lie. 42Below. Keeping our planet pure to keep our vodka pure.

According to the agency, over 10,000 kilograms of lemons were recycled into 21,000 bottles of soap. The campaign reached 42.5 million people globally, and sparked a 20 per cent sales increase of 42Below in bars.

BRING YOUR ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE TO WORK

One of our favourite examples of organizing principle brilliance comes from Mars's billion-dollar pet food brand, Pedigree.

Legendary ad man Lee Clow – perhaps best known for earning the trust of oft-curmudgeonly control freak Steve Jobs when it came to Apple's advertising – identified a very simple organizing principle for Pedigree while working with the brand at TBWA\Chiat\Day: 'Dogs Rule.' Not 'Pedigree food is better than the rest' (dog food, after all, is a heavily commodified category). Not 'Your dog loves us.' Quite the opposite: we love dogs. Dogs rule.

The realization and statement caused a stark shift at Pedigree, which up to that point hadn't even allowed employees to bring their dogs to work. It caused the brand to re-evaluate not only its messaging but also its entire way of doing business.

'We're for dogs,' a Pedigree campaign intoned soon after. 'Some people are for the whales. Some are for the trees. We're for dogs. The big ones and the little ones, the guardians and the comedians, the pure breeds and the mutts. We're for walks, runs and romps. Digging, scratching, sniffing and fetching. We're for dog parks, dog doors and dog days. If there were an international day for dogs, to celebrate their contribution to the quality of life on earth, we'd be for that too. Because we're for dogs.'

Since Clow's realization in 2005, Pedigree's organizing principle has evolved slightly, but the core idea stays the same. Today on their website you'll see the statement that resembles Volvo's mission, 'Everything we do is for the love of dogs.' Pedigree is an advocate for all things dog, an idea that moves the brand beyond the sale of pet food and expands its mission to include things like dog adoption drives and games to teach kids how to play safely with dogs. In Pedigree's world, having a four-legged friend in your life is unequivocally a good thing, and anything the brand can do to make that possible is in bounds.

This core idea allows the brand free rein to execute interesting campaigns and initiatives only tangentially tied to the sale of pet food. A few of our recent favourites: