

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A BRANDLESS BRAND?

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08 : 05 : 2018 Branding : Packaging : Retail



Soylent

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— Victoria Buchanan, strategic researcher, *The Future Laboratory*

Over 400 new startups are hoping to redefine our relationship with seemingly mundane categories: razors, toothbrushes, glasses, suitcases and socks have all being redesigned with the ‘user experience’ in mind. In most cases this involves product stripped back to its most essential parts and ‘debranded’ in order to convey authenticity but also reduce costs, savings which can then be passed on to the consumer.

Brandless is one case in point, a response, so its founder says, to the vast number 'over-branded' products currently on the market. With more than 200 items on offer, ranging from food and beauty products to personal care and household supplies, the company's value proposition is built around providing premium products at low prices. The company says that all of the items sold on the website are ethical and organic, but because they have been 'de-branded,' cutting costs on an expensive design team means the saving (they say 40%) can be used to reduce the ultimate sales price.

Beyond the benefit of cost savings, however, debranding also makes sense given that consumers are increasingly mistrustful of corporations. Cohn-Wolfe finds that just 23% of consumers in the U.S. believe that 'brands are open and honest,' and that number dips to just 7% in Western Europe. Product and packaging increasingly needs to work harder to communicate value and build trust.

Soylent and **The Ordinary** have also taken a similar approach, shunning marketing jargon in favour of an anti-brand aesthetic. Instead of superfluous design, everything about their packaging is intended to communicate the value of the ingredients inside. Essentially that you aren't about to get ripped off.

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Soylent's 'extreme minimalism' goes as far as bottle reduced to a white silhouette, stamped with a company logo and calorie count. But is it really fair to call this type of aesthetic 'brandfree?'

The reality is that the design of packaging is still an important part of our decision-making process and part of the way we relate to brands on an emotional level. If every brand 'debranded' the shopping aisle would become a very stressful place.

One of the flaws of debranded products which put a focus on the transparency of ingredients is that it leaves the consumer to have to scrutinize ingredient lists. 'The logic behind Brandless isn't wrong,' Katie Ewer, creative strategist at Jones Knowles Ritchie, tells FastCo. 'But now imagine every company applies that insight. Unbranded goods don't resolve the issues of choice fatigue. In fact, they could make it worse.'

Debranding only makes sense when it's designed with a clear purpose and a commitment to saving customers time.

That's not to say that there isn't a future for debranded goods. With increasing numbers of high-turnover household essentials sold directly to consumers through online portals, or even more obliquely through voice commerce platforms, the need to design for shelf appeal could change how we relate to branding in the future. If I'm reordering coffee that I already know I like, the reality is that it might as well just show up in a debranded jar.

Right now we need to make sure that we don't confuse generic design with simplicity. Unbranding still requires good design, no matter how simple it may seem. As Steve Jobs famously said: 'It takes a lot of hard work to make something simple.'

For more on the current zeitgeist for post-brand brands, read our [Accessible Premium](#) microtrend.

