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Technology Edition

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# How Brand Identity Evolves in an AI World

Post-Stay

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**Martin Soler argues that AI does not threaten brand identity by making bad content — it threatens it by making an overwhelming volume of acceptable content, which over time erodes the distinctiveness that makes a brand worth remembering. In a world of infinite iteration, he contends, consistency and taste become scarcer and therefore more valuable, not less.**

There is a growing belief that AI will make marketing easier. It sounds right. You upload the guidelines, define the tone of voice, add the logo, set the colors, train your AI, and suddenly every campaign, banner, email, landing page, social post, display ad, sales deck, and slightly desperate Black Friday asset comes out perfectly on brand. That is the theory. In practice, the problems appear quickly.

AI is very good at quantity. It is very good at iteration. It can give you 50 headlines, 10 image directions, 20 email subject lines, 5 versions of a campaign concept, and a surprisingly confident explanation of why all of them are brilliant. This is useful for inspiration, but brand identity is not built by variation. Brand identity is built by repetition, consistency, and distribution.

David Ogilvy put it very well: *“Every advertisement is part of the long-term investment in the personality of the brand.”* That line becomes much more important in the AI era. Every output is not just content. It is a deposit into, or a withdrawal from, the most valuable investment any company makes: the brand. A strange image, a slightly wrong font, an *almost* correct logo (to borrow Simone's observation on uncanniness from the foreword), a tone that sounds like everyone else's, all of these may seem like small losses. Yet they compound over time. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the brand begins to leak.

That is brand leakage: the slow movement of value, reputation, recognition, or customers away from the company's control. Lomar Dictionary defines it as *“when part of a brand's value, reputation, or customers unintentionally moves away from the company's control, often resulting in lost revenue or weaker brand influence.”*

This is where AI creates a strange contradiction. It gives marketers the ability to produce more, faster, and cheaper. Sir Martin Sorrell has argued that the advertising model is changing quickly and that those who harness AI, scale creativity, and deliver faster will win. This is totally correct. But speed is not what builds a brand. Speed helps distribution, testing, and production. It matters, and I'll come back to that later. But speed without control is just a very efficient way to create mess.

And building a brand is one of those domains where *“almost right”* can still be wrong.

A logo that is 95 percent correct is not correct. A colour that is nearly the right blue is not the right blue. A typeface that feels close enough is not close enough if the brand has spent years training the market to recognise something precise. For some businesses and early-stage startups, approximation will be fine.

Scrappy is great. A new rental business testing Instagram posts probably does not need a military-grade brand system. But if you're building a hotel or a company, especially one with scale, recognition, and trust attached to its identity, those details matter. And knowing which details matter, and which can safely be ignored, is exactly the kind of taste that AI lacks.

This is why the current wave of AI brand tools is both exciting and a little daunting. Many are being built around brand guardrails. Upload the guidelines. Lock the fonts. Restrict the colour palette. Use approved photography. Add tone rules. Prevent the model from wandering off into *“inspirational corporate nonsense”* mode. They will improve quickly, and they are already useful. But the hard part is not only the rules. The hard part is the system.

A brand guideline is not a brand system. It is a description of a system. And most of the time, it is a very optimistic description. Because real brands do not live in perfect conditions. They live in exceptions, compromises, edge cases, and taste.

Anyone who has worked on a complex rebrand knows this. On paper, everything looks clear. In reality, almost everything is an exception. Someone needs a tiny logo. Someone needs a version for a background that cannot be changed. Someone needs a full-screen mobile splash screen. Someone needs a version that works when a partner puts it next to five other logos. And someone needs a version that does not break when the sales team exports it as a JPEG from a PDF from a presentation from 2019. This is where the brand lives. Not in the beautiful page of the brand book, but in the ugly edge cases.

And AI creates more edge cases than we have ever had, or wanted to even consider.

This is why I think brand identity in an AI world is less of a graphic design problem and more of an operating system problem. The old model was to hire a graphic designer, make a brand bible, use it in campaigns, produce assets, distribute them, and just keep going. The new model is closer to a living machine. There will be constant inputs, constant requests, constant variations, constant exceptions for audiences, platforms, languages, formats, and moments. The question is not whether AI can create more assets. Of course it can. The question is whether the brand can survive the volume.

Bill Bernbach's line feels very relevant here: *“Adapt your techniques to an idea, not an idea to your techniques.”* That is exactly the trap with AI. The technique becomes so seductive that it starts leading the brand. Because we can personalize everything, we do. Because we can create something that follows the latest trends, we do. Because we can test every sentence, every image, every colour, every call to action, we do. Eventually, the brand becomes a thousand optimized things, but no vision.

This is probably the biggest risk. Not that AI makes bad content. It will make plenty of good content. The risk is that it makes too much acceptable content.

Acceptable is the problem. Bad content gets rejected. Excellent content gets noticed. Acceptable content gets approved, posted, boosted, versioned, localized, and forgotten.

It fills the feed. It meets the deadline. It passes the brand check, mostly. And slowly, the brand becomes average. My main takeaway from iF Design's 2026 Trends report is that we are entering an age of average, unless we actively resist it.

Social media has already trained us to expect constant novelty. We do not want to see the same ad twenty times anymore. The old repetition model has been weakened. In the past, repetition meant literally repeating the same thing. Same TV spot. Same print campaign. Same outdoor. Same slogan. Same jingle that somehow stayed in your head for three decades, usually against your will. Take a pause here and try to remember: which ad slogan or jingle from the last ten years do you actually remember?

Today, repetition has to work differently. The audience wants freshness, but the brand needs memory. So the challenge is not to repeat the exact same asset. The challenge is to repeat the same identity through different assets. And this is the point of speed that I alluded to above.

Think about Apple's recent launch of the MacBook Neo. The positioning may change (a cheap MacBook?), the campaign idea may change, and even the typeface may change. But it still feels recognizably Apple. The same is or was true of Nike, Louis Vuitton, Rolex, Aman, The Standard, citizenM, and a handful of others that have built real mental availability. You do not need every ad to look identical, but you do need every touchpoint to feel like it came from the same world.

This is where many companies will struggle. They do not really have a brand identity. They have a logo, a colour palette, a website and a few phrases like *"innovative"*, *"human-centred"*, and *"seamless experience"*. Then they ask AI to scale it. But scaling something weak does not make it strong. It just creates more of the same weakness, with a little more randomness each time.

In hospitality, this becomes particularly interesting. Hotels are physical brands. A hotel brand is not only a logo or a website. It is the lobby smell, the staff attitudes, the coffee, the tone of the pre-arrival email, the way the room key looks, the music, the check-in process, the way complaints are handled, and whether the online promise was there in reality. AI can create the content around the brand, but it cannot fake the experience forever. Worse, it might make the gap more obvious.

If the AI-generated marketing becomes more polished than the real product, trust will break. If all the content appears AI-generated, trust will break. We already know what this feels like. A hotel with beautiful photos and an average room. A restaurant with perfect Instagram content and tired service. A SaaS company with a brilliant website and a product that looks like it was assembled during a fire drill. AI will make it easier to polish the promise. But one key metric of a brand is the gap between the promise and the experience.

The brand should sound the same, look the same, and act the same. If the social media is warm and playful, but the customer service email reads like a legal warning, if the website says *"effortless luxury"*, but check-in feels like passport control, if the AI chatbot speaks in a friendly tone but cannot solve anything, all those elements, in no particular order or priority, make the brand.

In Wes Anderson's beautiful film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the GM is the ultimate brand director, ensuring the experience is exactly as he has imagined it. He embodies the brand. It lives in his head. Taste is the filter he applies to every detail. He knows which details matter, because they do not all matter. But AI has no idea which details matter.

The best use of AI in brand identity will probably not be *"make everything"*. It will be *"help us make many things that still feel like us"*. That means the brand system has to become more precise. Not just a PDF guideline, but templates, locked assets, approved components, image rules, motion rules, prompt libraries, examples of what good looks like, examples of what wrong looks like, human approval for critical assets, and a clear distinction between flexible elements and sacred elements.

Campaign headlines can vary. The logo cannot. Social captions can adapt by audience. The brand idea cannot change every Tuesday. Photography can be refreshed. The underlying visual world should not become unrecognisable. AI can create endless branches, but taste matters. What details are important or unimportant, when and why? That's a key part of taste.

This is where I think brand teams will become more important, not less. The boring version of the future says AI replaces brand work. The more realistic version is that AI floods the organization with output, and brand teams become the people who stop the flood from becoming slop. They will need to define the system, train the tools, and approve the exceptions that keep the brand consistent.

Not everything needs to be handcrafted. There are plenty of assets where AI can do the heavy lifting. Size variations, first drafts, localization, background adaptations, email versions, simple display ads, internal templates, social ideas, campaign extensions. Great. Let the machine do the repetitive work.

But the core assets still need intention. The main idea. The campaign thought. The promises behind the system. The things that confirm to the market who you are.

People don't remember variations. They remember repetition and how you made them feel. But without variation, they get bored.

And that is the key point. AI gives us variation. Brand needs repetition. The winners will be the companies that learn how to use AI to create freshness without destroying memory. The losers will be the ones who mistake iteration for presence.

So maybe the future of brand identity is not about being more creative in every asset. It is about being more disciplined in the system. More precise about what must never change. More relaxed about what can. More honest about whether the brand has a real idea at the centre, or only a logo surrounded by fancy buzzwords.

In a world of infinite content, consistency and taste become rarer. And because they become rarer, they become more valuable.

