

Andreas [00:00:26] Welcome, everybody. Thanks for listening. And good to have you here at the Future of Business podcast, where we take you to discuss with us today where the diverse range of sectors and stories he and the Oxford MBA cohort and how these people and stories will shape the future of business. My name is Andreas. And today it's my privilege to be hosting Alejandro today and we are here to discuss the future of branding. Alejandro, how are you doing today?

Alejandro [00:00:58] Hi, Andreas, I'm great. Thank you for having me.

Alejandro [00:01:01] It's my pleasure. Alejandro and I are both part of the Oxford MBA cohort, and we are also both part of St. Hughes College in Oxford. Why don't you briefly explain to people, what are colleges and what you like about you?

Alejandro [00:01:16] Well, college is basically kind of like your residential hub, at least for all grad students. And I mean, it's I think the equivalent would be like a Harry Potter house, I'd say. But it's basically, you know, your family outside of the school, a place where you go to the dining hall, a place where you go to the library to meet people outside of of your discipline. And we are blessed with beautiful garden sets. And he's like probably one of the best gardens that are here in the university.

Alejandro [00:01:45] Absolutely. Thank you. So it's really cool gardens and also thank you. It's home to two cats called up about flapjack and Mrs biscuits, correct? All fat cats that are very much a big part of my heart here in Oxford. But let's get away from cats. That's not what we're here to discuss today. But maybe instead of me talk about cats, you can talk a little bit about the work you're doing and why it matters to you.

Alejandro [00:02:12] Right, so I well, I come from a from a branding background, and for those who don't know what brand is or have like a very ambiguous idea of what brand is basically branding is, you know, the soul of a company. You know, your brand is the soul of a company. It's not a logo. It's not just the name of a company. It's not just the color palette and, you know, things that look nice and shiny. It's much more than that. And it's the essence. It's the soul of a company and basically what differentiates you from your rivals or, you know, other companies out there?

Alejandro [00:02:54] You. You know what he's talking about, how the brand it's the heart, the soul of the company, really. And I feel like if I was an accountant, the question he would talk about how the balance sheets of the soul of the company. But clearly the best model, no perfect personal likeness. And I think the cool thing about brands is that they are so visible. So. I think in theory, a brand of what a consumer makes out of a company. So you could even argue that the brand belongs much more to the people than it belongs to the company because at the end of the day, they are the ones who kind of remember at a format or perceive it. And it's clearly something that's meant for the public rather than internally. And at the same time, what I sometimes struggle with a little bit of just like the difference between what is that a brand is compared to the product or the organization behind it. Can you maybe very briefly kind of help us separate products on brand here?

Alejandro [00:03:58] Absolutely. And I think. And let me start by saying that there are not different things and I'll tell you why. But first, I think it's funny that you mention accounting because I think that's one of the most difficult aspects of our brand is really how you quantify it. And it's been a challenge because there's no direct kind of measure of KPI about like, you know, how many brands tons does your company have or, you know, reports every year. But one of the best ways to measure it, or at least kind of indirectly

measure it. And you mentioned that is, well, how visible they said, you know how relevant it is to consumers. Now I will say that yes, you know, consumers usually get the most out of the brand, but let's not forget, that's also for the employers and for people that work in the company. Right. So we when I, you know, I was looking to work for a very great branding agencies. And one of the phrases that we use to to use all the time is a brand needs to help outsiders to buy and insiders to really believe. So you have to always pay attention to those two groups, right? Yes. Consumers get most of it and they cherish it. But also employers, because at the end of the day, they're working for that brand.

Alejandro [00:05:19] Let me let me just try to be kept as we the brand as the pulse to help outsiders to buy and insiders to believe. Correct. That does sound like something the brand agency would tell their clients, but in a good way kind of thumbs up the power and the relevance of this. And clearly, the more competitive the market is looking for talent, especially we looked at like banking tech developers, the more relevant it gets added more. These companies are investing in talent in branding agencies to look after something like employer branding and personal branding. When you look at it, what branding does? So we discussed a little bit while branding is important. Some of the company we talked about the differences it had to product and the role it plays for both internal relations and consumers, excellent people. Can you talk a little bit about where branding is heading? What is what is the meaning of branding today compared to, let's say, I don't know, 10 years ago? And what is the next big challenge that branding has to solve for companies worldwide?

Alejandro [00:06:31] Sure. And I'll, you know, I think I'll start by talking about the difference between brand and product because it's really relevant to actually where brand is headed. Originally, you branded something because you wanted to distinguish the product from another product range. So, you know, for example, a brand that comes to mind that really started to do this was dove, you know? Yeah. Back in the day, you know, they wanted to show that their soap was way better than, you know, the soaped offered by the competitor because it was made with, you know, milk and nourishment and that so. But if you think about it, it was a one way thing as in like I was just marketing something as mine. It was a very kind of possessive type of brand and it evolved throughout the years that possession, you know, that or original meaning of brand evolved into a dialog between the consumer and the company, and now more. It's more like a forum because you're not only having a discussion with the consumer. Yeah, it's important, but because we live in a super connected, hyperconnected, hyper visible world and brands need to be paying attention to many stakeholders. And that's why they're they need. They need to host a forum. And I think that's, you know, that's what that's something that it's going to keep evolving. You know, Brands doesn't matter what type, they need to be truly embedded into what's going on in the world. They need to be finally aware of the context of the social, political, economic status of the world and then react to it.

Alejandro [00:08:09] Let's let me stay with that for a moment and try to get more concrete about some of these ideas. Some of these ideas. So I really kind of like the attention on the. Original meaning of planning something where you mark your own possession. But so people know like that it's called brand branding, because back in the days when people had sheep or cattle, they would take some sort of mark and heat it up and push it into the animal side to literally brand their name or their mark into them to make sure that people knew that was their cow or their sheep. I'm pretty sure it's not being done anymore, at least not by any of the brands we like. But I'm sure somewhere somebody with not caring about how the consumer perceives them if they are mocking their animals, any animals that way. And you talked a little bit about how how in the beginning it's quite easy to be

like, I just want to sell my soap. And then he said something interesting talking about how and how now it's not only a dialog, but it's even a forum. And that sounds quite abstract. And I wondered if you could help us kind of kind of drill this down a little bit more concrete about this. So when I think of Dove. I had no idea involved in these soaps, but I noticed brands so clearly in and out for these advertisements that are celebrating diversity and big women and different skin colors. And I remember these campaigns where people are like throwing like a girl. We're kind of celebrating what it means to be a woman. And I see how this is talking to us and to our society. But I don't see the foam aspect of it. Can you try to kind of take this brand as an example, dove and help us understand a little bit what it means to be a father and maybe as a concrete example, something to kind of pin this down to make it less abstract for us?

Alejandro [00:09:56] Sure. I think I mean it dove is a great example because obviously. Well, I mean, it's it's a brand that's been around forever, right? And we've seen an evolution, you know, throughout the years. So yes, first it was about differentiation. And then, you know, establishing a relationship with this customer and listening to them their needs. But it really became a forum when they started to really push the the essence of real beauty, which became their brand essence, right? Real beauty doesn't matter the way you look. It doesn't matter the color of your skin, your curves, your shape and your beautiful. And they weren't afraid to break stereotypes or not, not stereotypes, but to kind of like break with the status quo of showing just like the perfect body type. Yeah, every time, right? Celebrating realness and it became a forum because it was not just the people buying the soap I wear like. Happy and felt identified with the brand with love, but it sparked a whole conversation around real bodies, real beauty about women empowerment, and that is why I truly believe that brands have a higher duty, if you will, you know, to to make the world a better place to just the not just sell soap, but by spreading a message, spreading a purpose and acting on it. They can really make a difference in people's lives.

Andreas [00:11:35] Spreading a message influencing people, sparking conversation that is also one way. How does this come back to the brand? Because what you describe, I think what you have in mind is some sort of interaction, some sort of multi multi side that process going on. So can you talk a little bit about how building a brand and being in dialog with your consumers is then coming back to the company, to the product?

Alejandro [00:12:02] Well, because social media has been, I think, the key to make that forum happen as well. Right. So it's not just broadcasting the message, but also paying attention to what the users and notice how I didn't say only the customer or the consumer, but users, because they can interact with the brand and not every brand is good at listening to, you know, what happens in social media, but the majority are had become very attuned to do it right. They listen, they take, you know, whatever they're saying on Twitter and Facebook or on Instagram, they take it into account

Alejandro [00:12:36] like, well, like how

Alejandro [00:12:37] how like, for example, we were, we were, you know, not long ago, Kentucky Fried Chicken, for example, had a really is a real issue with chicken in in the United Kingdom. And obviously, people were angry and they, you know, they took it to the social media to kind of like vent about how like, you know, a chicken restaurant didn't have chicken, right? So Kentucky Fried Chicken, obviously aware of the disaster, embraced that conversation and launched a campaign that was incredibly successful in leading the scramble. The letters of the logo spelled something that, well, you know, kind of shows

that they they they didn't do a good job, you know, with their logistics. But it was a genuine apology, and they were able to not only listen to the people but own that conversation and basically change, you know, change the topic into into, you know, into that. Say to them like more of a human situation where like, you know, like, yes, we made a mistake, but we're trying our best.

Andreas [00:13:44] Yeah. So Kentucky Fried Chicken, that seemed to have some delivery issues with chicken. I guess there was a supplier involved to cut who cut negotiations off at some point and stop delivering. So they ended up closing auto restaurants and then people complain and they and they we went there longer to say, f c k.

Alejandro [00:14:00] Yes, that is the way it should

Alejandro [00:14:02] be allowed to be on here. That's why I was the f c k. And then it became a huge thing and a sentiment, a huge media pass. And it's kind of clear how this branding exercise helped them reach. More people will be very visible in the society and also probably which state and I was kind of clear the specific point. How did the initial spark of this campaign was not coming from the brand, but from the consumer? Exactly. I think that's something that I can kind of calibrate with quite easily. Can you maybe talk a little bit about how branding is going to evolve in the next couple of years and what kind of the future of branding it

Alejandro [00:14:42] well for one, I like to see the word brand. Almost disappear. I don't like the word brand

Alejandro [00:14:50] bubble, but instead

Alejandro [00:14:52] I actually like the word identity. I know that the idea of identity of corporate identity was used in around the 60s, and it was a very traditional way of brand dressing like I'm going to stick a logo everywhere. Stick a low in the soap dispensers in the bathroom, right? And that, you know, that was basically the essence of corporate identity. You basically want to make sure that everybody is. Constantly aware that you are in a company's environment right now. Good, but I like the word identity, perhaps you get rid of the corporate because I mean, you don't need to be a corporation to have a brand or an identity. You could be, you know, a small business, a large business. You know, it could be a personal identity, personal identity. And that is exactly why I think it's important because an identity is not just the way you look, but it's the way you behave. It's the way you interact with people. It's the way you react. You have a point of view. It is the whole package. So I like to see businesses more talk more about their identity as opposed to us, their brand, because brand still has that, uh, you know, that kind of like legacy meaning of just, you know, marking your things with a hot iron, you know?

Alejandro [00:16:01] So how would it look like if a company or an organization is evolving their identity over the next couple of years?

Alejandro [00:16:08] Right. So I think, first of all, I think they need to be real. I don't want to say, Well, yeah, let me let me unpack it, you know, like and and not necessarily woke, right? Because and I'll tell you, I told you about the difference. I think they need to be aware of their capabilities. So for the longest time brands where they were only concerned about what they did and how they did it right, but not really about why they did it. We have a massive explosion of company purpose and purpose driven organizations, and some of them did very well. You know, Unilever was one of the first ones to kind of have a really

strong purpose that to this day, you know, really distinguishes them from their competition from

Alejandro [00:16:52] Nestle, for example.

Alejandro [00:16:54] Continue and then and then, for example, Patagonia, another incredible, purpose driven organization, right? Everybody kind of lives by that purpose, including the founder employees, even the customers. Right? Yeah. But I think it became like a trendy thing to just do. And if you were any company, they were just like, Oh, we're going to save the world. And he'd lost a little bit of authenticity, lost kind of like the genuine aspect, Oh, I've got a

Alejandro [00:17:22] you know, that seems to be like a like a core issue here that that I feel like what you describing is a little bit saying that at the moment we are. And a moment of time with brands. A purpose a company has that is somewhat linked to saving the world, and everybody's kind of doing the same thing with us. And I think we can see a I think if we kind of reflect on the brands we know. I do think that there's a clear pattern emerging then and people are using the same set of vision mission statement of the same sort of value to kind of empower people and save the environment and save the penguins and all. And I think what you're talking about is now that we need to get more authentic, that's more specific informing our identity. Can you maybe try to try to kind of bundle up and look like one example of of a company that is is about who has kind of come away from a purpose driven way to general brand to a more specific, authentic identity that is more sustainable and more doable in this next period?

Alejandro [00:18:30] OK? The one that comes to mind, to be honest, is Spotify. I mean, they just really have like a good I mean. They are changing the world, right? I mean, but their purpose is and does and doesn't really establish like we are changing the world by every song you listen because that's fluffy and like, you know, like if you wear a massive energy corporation and you know, you have actually have the power to change the world and change the world at large, the whole ecosystem, the whole environment, sure, you know, you can talk about it and hopefully act on it. But if you are Spotify or if you are, I don't know any other brand that does deodorant, right? It's like, stay true to what you do. And if you really want to inject a purpose, you know, really make it tangible to people, you know. You know, maybe, you know, if I want to listen to music, if I want to listen to music, I just want to have a good time. I just want to remember things. I just want to dream, right? So. And Spotify is very, very, very well aware of the power of transportation in terms of listening to music takes you places, right? So the purpose is very different than, you know, about connecting with others through music. That's great, people believe. But if suddenly you start solving the order and thinking that I'm going to fly or that I am going to suddenly, you know, cure every single possible disease with my deodorant, then yeah, sure. I mean, you're well intentioned, but like, do I really believe that? So there needs to be a match between, you know, between what you are and what you do really. And then also, you know what you really can accomplish because otherwise it's just empty words and we see a lot of empty words these days.

Alejandro [00:20:11] And yeah, and I think that Spotify is an incredible, powerful example because there's few brands out there right now who have as much power in raising prices as Spotify have. We were talk I was running opposite the other day, if Spotify was at that price for one euro per month, would I leave for two years for three euro? And it's astonishing. And frankly, that widening of how far they could go. And if I if you ask what I have to question, who else has that strong impact of who answers that strong of a

connection with us, that they are able to change the price point? I would still stick with them. Few things come to mind. Very few things, maybe a cloud storage. But my data is on, I can't get what I've had. But apparently we live in is a really great example of a given effect on how they are competing with major tech companies are doing. They are doing really, really quite well. I kind of want to stress test a little bit OK, because we talked a little bit about how product and brand are different and of Spotify. One could argue that it's not the brand. It's just a product trying to keep this brief. Can you can you talk a little bit? Let me let me put out like a composite like kind of confrontational statement and get debated. All right. Briefly, what is Spotify would? Be changing their brand identity next month to buy dance music. And it would still up on your playlist and amazing product instead of recommendations that would wrap, you know, the stuff they do every year, but it wouldn't be sweetness anymore, wouldn't be green anymore and would have a different name thinking why? Well, why is it not the same thing?

Alejandro [00:21:58] Do you know something that we don't know Andi?

Alejandro [00:22:04] No, that is that is a that is a very, you know, that is a very powerful statement. Um, I'm going to go ahead and say that people will complain. People adopt. You know, people adapt. I mean, and if I if I maybe go come back with something a little bit more controversial. But people were up in arms because Facebook changed their name. You know, the Facebook parent company changed their name to Meta, right? People were like, Well, that's not the solution.

Alejandro [00:22:35] You know, that's true.

Alejandro [00:22:36] But it's not the solution. But it eventually becomes effective because people have to get used to it just by the sheer act of that, they have to get used to it. They can complain, but they can't do anything about it. Will they be no hard feelings around it? Yeah, sure. Now, obviously, that Facebook made a name change is trickier because of obviously all of the things that have happened around that company. But in terms of Spotify, if tomorrow you know, Spotify becomes, you know, I don't know if something random like music dot com, I don't know, you know, something silly, or perhaps people will be like, Whoa, and I don't see the point of that. But eventually they'll probably get used to it because it is a phenomenal service. But that's why I need to remind you that the brand is not just the name. It's the whole experience.

Andreas [00:23:29] I feel like I feel like you made a good point here. I think it speaks to both the holistic ness of a brand as well as its limitations. Evolve songs about our brand is supposed to be much more than just a color code, and it speaks much more to like how we perceive it holistically and at the same time, how our the end of the day, what companies do is about. How to improve allows us to resolve challenges that we are faced with independently from their name. And I do want to drop our funny, funny anecdote here with Facebook changing the name the young Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google became the manga you guys can go through. The difficult figured out how Fang became Manga and how you feel about that brand,

Alejandro [00:24:19] which is in some ways much more fitting than Fang if you think about.

Andreas [00:24:23] You know, I'm not sure if manga fans would agree, but I do know what you mean.

Alejandro [00:24:27] The point is, and you know, to reiterate, the brand is more than the name brand is more than the logo. You know, brand is much more than that. It's very holistic thing, you know, it touches upon the product in the service, you know, the office space, the culture, the experience and even the innovation, right? And it's very holistic and that's how you need to think about it.

Andreas [00:24:51] Looking at the big world of branding and your time here in Oxford. What is it? You want to do with the MBA and this planning world, can you talk a little bit about how the MBA fits into your career and what you're getting from from this in the branding context?

Alejandro [00:25:08] Well, you know, because I think brands are not created nor destroyed. And I am a brand. You are a brand, right? So I think right now I'm trying to rediscover what my brand is. You know, you can invent yourself from, you know, it's really difficult. And in if I take that analogy to corporations like it's also really difficult to vent out of something out of thin air. So you just really need to discover what is it exactly that you want to do next? And for me in the MBA, I think I'm using kind of like my branding sensibilities to find my path. You know, talking to people listening, you know, having a forum, you know, with many inputs, many new experiences, and that's going to help me, you know, recheck, revamp and hopefully evolve my brand into where I need to be and where I want to be.

Andreas [00:25:59] That is nothing short, but a wonderful way to look at an MBA and opportunity it presents to you and your career you're doing. And with that, I'm left to thank you very much for taking the time. Thanks for sharing your wisdom and your and your brand with us and profiting from your likeness here and hopefully from your reach as well and to all of you for listening. And thank you so much for hanging out with us for about 25 minutes. And I hope you will hear us again about the Future of Business podcast.

Alejandro [00:26:29] Thank you. Thank you, Andy. Lovely to be here again.