

# The Me Era

Marketing in an age when  
consumers are the real brands.  
And brands are the real consumers.

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Now as entrepreneur and founder of Tigress Tigress, a digital-led integrated communications agency, she embraces behavioural economics, category niche opportunities, multicultural marketing and purpose-branding to create startling new connections between brands and consumers.



Meera Sharath Chandra



“The Me Era” is a book written written during the pandemic and free to download at <https://tigresstigress.com/The-Me-Era.pdf>

or as a flip-through at <https://tigresstigress.com/Meera-Flip-Book/index.html#p=1>

It is, Meera says, “my small way of giving back in these challenging times.”

**I didn't set out to name the book after me.  
Neither was it an afterthought.  
I believe it is just happy synchronicity.**

It is, after all, the story of the individual, the consumer.

A consumer whose every thought and action, every choice and affiliation, every love and hate says, “I am me”. A

consumer who is realising that he or she is unique and differentiated. A universe of one. A brand.

If the last decade was all about the power of the community, I believe the future is about rediscovering the ‘me’ within that groundswell. Yes, all over again.

Because time, technology and market forces have not stood still. And consumers can feel the sand slipping beneath their feet as wave after wave of change lashes upon their world.

It is fast becoming obvious that while we truly enjoy being part of like-minded groups and tribes, we do want to be known for who we intrinsically are.

Not lost among a sweeping swathe of humanity. Not painted over with a broad brushstroke of strategy. Not randomly targeted by an indiscriminate spray of marketing bullets.

Only personal branding can set us apart from the teeming billions.

Equally, though, it is about the living, breathing brand.

A brand that is turning into discerning consumer. By investing in and buying into the delight, loyalty, advocacy and repeat engagement of its new-found franchise-of-one.

If the past few years have been all about consumers co-creating and co-parenting brands, marketers now realise that they must return the favour.

By helping consumers shape their personalities, showcase their talents and achieve their goals. And by defining where they fit into our lives, how they can enhance our potential, what they can add to our purpose.

The marketing handbook is getting rewritten. Because goalposts have shifted. Thumb rules are out of sync with the new paradigm. And unlearning and relearning are the two shortest routes to tomorrow.

Today's marketplace is an equal-opportunity playing field for nifty start-ups and diversified conglomerates, for garage ideas and global consortiums. And business success doesn't lie in expansive plans but in granular understanding.

It's all about two things: resonance and relevance.

Products and people now share an intertwined future. As two symbiotic entities that recognise and respect each other.

If we have imbued brands with human values like DNA, personality, image, traits and purpose, it is time for marketers to create sharply- defined differentiators, well-honed propositions, unique codes and vision statements for us.



#### Time to flip things around

**I have always believed that there is a book inside each of us. One that no one else can write. Because it is drawn from all things that make up an individual and rooted in a set of distinctly personal assets. Firm beliefs, deep passions, amazing talents, bold opinions and strong purpose. It is expertise and experience bound together in numbered pages, with every chapter a hat tip to its author.**

This one's mine.

Who am I? My brand name may have been the work of my parents (and good job, folks, you just wrote me a book title). But my brand value? All mine. Built over years. Across experiences. Within certain social frameworks. Born of certain powerful bonds. Contoured by knowledge. Coloured by emotions. Impacted by events. Scarred by situations. Shaped by influences. Spurred by success. Hardened by failures. Softened by sensitivities. Pushed by circumstance. Propelled by talent. Stymied by diffidence. Buoyed by big dreams. Cut-to-size by reality. The sum total of a life lived by just one person in the whole wide world.

A few other things set me apart: how I look, what I like to wear, what brands I believe in, where I travel, who I meet, my relationships, my health, my state of mind, my lifestyle and attitudes, my commitments and responsibilities, my passions and purpose.

And then being part of the fabric of society, I look for some forms of validation and solidarity – people I vibe with, a shared wavelength, a sense of belonging. I may find them in sport, music, favourite authors, movie genres, social media patterns, in beliefs and aspirations, brands I love, brands I hate.

All this adds up to a heady singularity. And I do believe it must be acknowledged, encouraged, celebrated.

For many of us – floating on our backs in pools of affinity, being friended and liked and retweeted, having chatty conversations with robots and machines – the penny is dropping. We are at that time. We are at that place. We are bang in the middle of The Me Era.

For marketers and those in the business of communication, this is both the challenge and the opportunity. Because this is the new reality. It's even beyond mass customisation and hyperpersonalisation.

**It's a complete role reversal.**

I am my relationships

**When a personal brand is being shaped, perhaps the first and innermost layer of influences comes from close and familiar relationships. This impacts us in more ways than we care to admit.**

Today, these influences have become a power bank of stimuli for resourceful marketers.

Pharma companies talk to us, using genetic markers to initiate a dialogue. They also tap into life stages and the emotional first principles surrounding each of them.

Baby care brands are pitched at new mums and dads, using a beautiful personal milestone as the start point for a conversation and then growing along, across the experience curve, with the family.

Special occasions like Christmas and weddings spark off iconic ad campaigns, using bonding as a powerful glue. In fact, special days are evolving around relationships with mother, father, sibling, friend, passion, community and planet – a homage to the gravitational pull of connections forged at a deeper level.

There's a reason why we use phrases like 'Hallmark Moment' without thinking twice. Because when communication is based on emotion that runs so deep, each of us sees our closest and dearest people reflected in it, captured as indelible cameos in our minds.



*A specially touching or poignant occasion when emotions are stirred, that's a Hallmark Moment.*

Which is why the same popular vacation spots suddenly hold a different meaning for us – coloured as they are, by our own magical once-in-a-lifetime memories. Which is also why some songs resonate with us in a totally inexplicable way – because they are emblematic of a time or a place or an event in our lives.

**The list of advertising messages that recognise us for who we are increases with every passing day. Because of a simple truth and a blinding realisation. A visceral individual experience is always going to be at the epicentre.**

Dove's *Self Esteem* and *Real Beauty* communications celebrate the right to be not-so-perfect, to be you. From *Evolution* and *Onslaught* to *Real Beauty Sketches* and now the *Show Us* campaign, the brand consistently calls out body image and social comparison issues and reframes what we want to see in the mirror. (See Dove 'Photoshop Action in Directory 28)

Nike does this ever so well too – *What Are Little Girls Made Of*, *Dream Crazy*, *What Will They Say About You*, *Equality Has No Boundaries* – just a few insightful messages that turn us into self-starters with a vision. In recent days, *We Are Never Too Far Down To Come Back* spurs us to battle our way through the tough times we are facing.

And as State Street's *Fearless Girl* stares down the Wall Street bull, we too stare down perceptions and stereotypes.



A refreshing take on the deep understanding between friends was Budweiser's *Wassup* that heroed 'watching a game and having a Bud' with just one word that united mates in complete bonding. Amazing that this 'at home, on the couch' moment, that was a good 7 years ahead of Covid-19, now makes utter sense.

Increasingly, brands have identified and addressed a new relationship – the one we have with ourselves. The DeBeers

*Right Hand* campaign comes to mind. The communication made a diamond a self-purchase – no more waiting for someone to put a ring on your finger.

And born of equal relationships is a brand's ability to laugh at itself, be human, be honest. This has created a whole new genre of endearing and memorable mea culpa advertising like KFC's *FCK* ad for its chicken shortage that elicited both social sharing and ready forgiveness.



*When KFC began working with a new distributor in the UK, they ran out of chicken. They ran this ad to say sorry to all their customers. A year later, a poll of Britain's top marketers had 'FCK' as the best campaign of the year.*

It also makes for confident brands that thumb their noses at competitors – Burger King's *Burn That Ad and Whopper Detour* (Directory 51) took on McDonald's in daring ways and sent engagement and sales through the roof. The old PC v Mac campaign still draws a chuckle and the cola wars will always be legendary.

We have reached that stage of consumer-brand comfort where we now talk openly about subjects – from menstrual cycles to mental health, from sexual orientation to abuse. We raise our voices against issues and concerns, flagging off biases and inequalities. And we have started engaging with our planet knowing that we alone are responsible for eroding the goodwill of that equation.

**Relationships are the stuff human values are made of. They are often the stuff emotional baggage is made of. Successful messaging understands this, respects this.**

#### Relationships in the Me Era. Thought-starters.

1. Global events and pandemics force us to re-examine our relationships and realise how invaluable some of them are. But adversity also creates friends out of complete strangers – those who have been through challenges together are bonded forever through an unforgettable happenstance.
2. Social media helps brands exploit the six degrees of separation. A friend of a friend is the beginning of a powerful customer chain. It is the stuff of LinkedIn introductions, a thread or tag, a follower base, a referral. In theory, anyone anywhere in the world could become a customer in less than six steps.
3. Technology is hailed as the great enabler of relationships. But, potentially, technology itself could be a relationship for those who live more in the virtual world. Gamers, AR/VR enthusiasts, app users, forum visitors. Today, we confide in, rely on and share all moments 24/7 with our gadgets. A very special bond we can't live without.

#### I am my education

**The shaping of our intellects, the honing of our minds and the moulding of our morality – all begin with the schooling we have been through. In addition to the curriculum, we get life lessons that are invaluable.**

Our teachers, our fellow students, our alma mater – all have a role in the decisions we take and the choices we make.

And then again, there is the pride of excelling, the badge value of institutions, the ability to land placements.

From playschool to PhD, you are the result of an academic order that builds your value system.

Your progress – year after year, class after class – will nudge you towards your favourite discipline, your strong suit in which you will become proficient in time to come. This will inform your career path and your future professional success.

Add to this the camaraderie of the wonder years, the enduring friendships, the passion clubs and unforgettable escapades – and your distinctive character begins to emerge.

One of the classic examples of the 'me factor' can be seen in a typical alumni group. Given the same educational ladder, how

have you and your batchmates evolved so differently as techies, doctors, lawyers, artists, poets, teachers, wanderers, founders?



*A photograph of several doctors, a group of engineers, a Professor of geology, a (failed) politician, a publisher, a novelist, a man who designs aircraft carriers and a creative director.*

## Education finds its expression in so many diverse and interesting ways. It is also, increasingly, a method by which brands engender affinity with their customers.

Education makes for highly valuable online content. The beauty of your knowledge is that it is immensely shareable once acquired. And the online space is ideal meeting ground for learning. The *CNA Speaking Exchange* initiative is a delightful case study, where young foreign students learn English from senior citizens in retirement homes in a win-win interaction.

Information can be made highly interactive. Brands are using immersive storytelling to tell us more about the category as a whole and their functionalities in particular. They crowdsource and co-opt customers and reward their creativity. Microsoft's *The Fanchise Model* campaign makes customers a part of the story and gives them a piece of the action. Teaching them Xbox intricacies while picking their brains in return.



*Smart, the largest telco in the Philippines, wanted to help kids from poor families with their studies. They repurposed old mobile phones, translating school textbooks into text messages which were programmed into surplus sim cards. Now old phones had new lives, as txtbks.*

Knowledge should be a universal right. The Philippine mobile brand Smart created a profound impact by turning used SIM cards into *TXTBKS* – textbooks for children that levelled the playing field for education across the country. Again, the Project Literacy campaign called *The Alphabet of Illiteracy* is

a refresher course for us on social ills and a compelling case for essential education.

Righting wrongs and altering mindsets are best done through impactful lessons that feel like engaging content. *Dumb Ways to Die*, the Metro Trains initiative in Australia, is demonstrative of this. As is the stop-in-your-tracks *Near Miss Memorials* campaign by Kiwirail.

Learning builds and defines one's distinctiveness. Iconic brands like Nike, Harley Davidson and Apple feed that by clearly delineating their audience archetype – preferring to champion individualism over a more popular appeal. Cult brands are now looking for cult consumers.

Education gives us benchmarks to live by. When applied to products or services, this helps us calibrate offerings in a category, judge our resonance with a brand and decide on advocacy, indifference or enmity. Thoughtful brands are those that empower us with knowledge and keep us one step ahead of the now.

## There is no shortage of information on the worldwide web. But from a well-educated mind comes a more refined search and a better ability to turn content into knowledge. This is the hallmark of an empowered customer.

### Education in the Me Era. Thought-starters.

1. Learning never ends and therein lies the opportunity. If brands can be a source of constant knowledge, if they can be the trusted mentors in their category, if they can be the thought leaders in their domain, they will become the go-to resource for customers. An investment in constant customer education is an investment in the brand.
2. Technology is perhaps the fastest to change – and that makes it the greatest leveller. It's easy to play catch-up by skipping a few versions and hopping onto the latest trend. As it evolves, technology simplifies usage, becomes more universal – brands could be at the cusp, helping grassroots audiences change the quality of their lives.
3. The power and impact of edutainment have never been higher. While remote learning classes and online courses are increasing in numbers, absorption of knowledge via interactive and lean-forward mechanisms is the most effective way forward. The secret lies in making rich, experiential content intrinsic to the curriculum.

I am my moral compass

## Brands are increasingly expected to go beyond product or service offering to purpose and mission. Today, consumers find affinity with brands that fight their fight, espouse their cause, resonate with their ideology.

Our belief systems operate at deep levels – and they underpin our everyday reactions in very strong ways. This holds true for our biases as well – often unconscious, they surface out of the blue and impact our responses.

Often, the vision we have for a better world stems from life experiences we have encountered. Profiling affects all of us – whether it is racism, sexism, ableism, ageism or classism, whether it is shaming or bullying, whether it is just because we don't fit into a box. And this informs the way we think and act.

But more importantly, it gives us an opportunity to raise our voices for what we believe in and to change the status quo.

When we find a brand that is in sync with our views and points to the same true north, it rationalises our choice and reaffirms our trust.

With the thrust on preserving our planet, sustainability and eco- friendliness are now two key drivers for purchase. And with the emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusion are becoming the new criteria companies must meet.

Add to this the various ills of society, the many injustices that still need resolving and human rights that must be restored – and we realise that we too, much like governments, corporations and brands, have greater responsibilities in this world.

## Brands have beliefs embedded in their souls too. These outline what they will and will not do. These speak to their efforts towards the greater good.



Benetton declared their strong stance years ago, accompanied by bold and often controversial imagery. From *United Colours of Benetton* to the *Unhate* campaign, they called out bias and stood for change.

The defiant words of the *We Rise* film by righttoplay.com script the future of girl power and admire the attitude of a gender that refuses to be subjugated.

Who can forget *The Marathon Walker* – the woman carrying a pot on her head right through the Paris marathon – fighting to bring borewells to her village, in a disruptive intervention for Water For Africa?

The shocking reality of harmful plastic was showcased as an imaginary place *Trash Isles*, complete with its own passport, citizens and constitution. A vivid demonstration of the country-size dilemma of waste and the need for urgent action.

The Sydney Children's Hospital Foundation found a common ailment among kids – homesickness. The campaign *Curing Homesickness – Mum's Sauce* enabled donating in an effortless and engaging way. As kids said they really missed mum's pasta sauce, they bottled it and sold it in order to garner funds.

The Lebanese newspaper *An Nahar* sparked off a massive movement with *The New National Anthem Edition* to include women in the lyrics. This burgeoned into a full-blown social rising for equality and led to reform and change.

*Diversity Is Strength* says the AIG Pride Jersey campaign. The United Black jersey was made up of LGBTQ Pride colours in a show of solidarity. Very recently, Skittles did quite the opposite but for the same reason, going colourless and giving up its rainbow for its Pride partnership with GLAAD.



AIG Japan wanted to send a message about its fight against discrimination. They partnered with the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team to create a jersey made with a new kind of fabric. Black on the surface, when stretched the jersey revealed the colours of the rainbow underneath.

IKEA's Design Vision created the *Thisables Project*, with thoughtful hacks to help the physically challenged navigate household furniture and feel right at home. (Directory Issue 51).

**A cause recognised is a solution found. Brands that find their moral centre also find creative ways to fulfil unspoken needs. Because the most effective route to responsible business is through the corporate conscience.**

#### Purpose in the Me Era. Thought-starters

1. Conscious consumerism is a brand in itself – this makes a marketer’s job harder. When we are willing to pay more for products that do good, when we look beyond the logo to the purpose, the brand narrative becomes frightfully important. And it is not just the product, it is also the ethical process that goes into the making of it.
2. Today, multicultural marketing needs to tackle more than diversity and ethnicity. And the reason is that intersectionality has become a huge factor. When we are victims of two or more kinds of biases simultaneously at play, we are caught in the crosshairs of an unfair world. Products need to be more thoughtful, messaging more sensitive.
3. Let’s talk about the new avatar of luxury – positive, planet-friendly and pricey for a reason. Philanthropic luxury retail has come of age – and affluent millennials are willing to pay top dollar for brands that outline their sustainability mantra for our world. A virtuous cycle where strong demand motivates upscale brands to keep giving back.



*Dove’s ‘Real Beauty’ platform celebrates the right to be imperfect, the right to be you.*

#### I am my brand choices

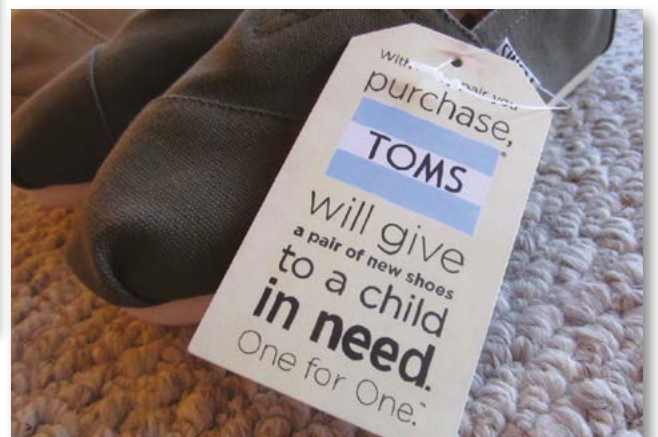
**Choices. Everywhere we turn, every minute of the day. It’s all about the decisions we make. And any moment of wavering is a great intervention point for brands.**

We take calls on so many aspects of our lives – not just our purchases but our homes, our relationships, our lifestyle, what we watch, what we cook, what we wear, what goes into our presentations, what we read, who we friend/tag/retweet – right down to ice cream flavours, lipstick shades, hairstyles, pizza toppings, emojis. The list goes on. When it comes to what we buy, however, a lot more than practicality is at play. There’s peer pressure, image perceptions, biases and beliefs, pricing, deals and offers. And then there is the deeper layer of purpose and brand mission. The brands we buy have to demonstrate their goodness gene.

**These are times when a brand has to add to the consumer’s story. It has to be part of the fabric of his or her life. It has to become a verb in everyday conversation.**

#### Choice in the Me Era. Thought starter

A single customer displays disparate online and offline behaviours. While online comes equipped with all the logical metrics for post-rationalisation, offline affords an undeniable tactile experience. Brands must address the purchase funnel based on how consumers want to be perceived and interacted with in both worlds.



*Blake Mycoskie, founder of TOMS shoes, saw a way to help children who were going barefoot by creating a for-profit brand with giving at its core. For every pair of shoes sold, a pair of shoes would be donated. By buying into the Toms ethos, customers showcased their generosity.*