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# Killing the Cat

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# NO MERCY / NO MALICE



Scott Galloway

Jaguar, a brand that's been in a coma for years, is trying to wake up ... and it's gasping. The car-free "Copy Nothing" kickoff video and the rollout of a pink concept EV at Art Basel Miami have inspired well-earned mockery. The launch rivaled Elon's "We Robot" event for the "all chip, no salsa" product launch of 2024. Getting attention is key to any marketing campaign, so mission accomplished. Sort of.

Tata Motors, which owns Jaguar and its stablemate Land Rover, has also succeeded in further eroding what's left of Jaguar's brand equity. Jaguar trashed its iconic logo, all its current models, and its traditional promise of speed, power, and elegance. In their place is an uninspired and generic brand mark, a concept model that will never be put into production, and an incomprehensible promise: something about good-looking people, bright colors, and exotic haircuts.

A lot has been said about this HBR case study that's writing itself, including some predictable culture war bullshit about Jaguar having gone woke. Most of this misses the larger point, which is that Jaguar's move is further proof that the brand age is over.

### **Do No Harm**

Just as doctors have a Hippocratic oath, chief marketing officers ought to have a similar pledge: "First, do no harm..."

I've advised lots of big consumer brands about their marketing, and I've noticed that CMOs recognize their days are numbered and are desperate to show visible motion, whether it makes sense or not. Often that activity, devoid of progress, means spending lots of money on a "new" agency stocked with sharply dressed young people who will host events giving awards to whoever's spent the most money across the advertising industrial complex. "I'm honored to be part of this brand's history and am shocked how well my predecessors managed the brand," said no new CMO ever. The typical incoming speech: "Thank God I'm here — we need to redo everything."

Which is usually self-defeating. For about 50 years following World War II, it was good business to churn out a mediocre product and then surround it with emotion (i.e., branding). On any given night about 60% of America was in one of three places, ABC, CBS, or NBC. Via the miracle of TV advertising, a few cents' worth of peanut paste could be transubstantiated into a jar of maternal love, as "Choosy mothers choose Jif."

In the age of the internet, network television is in hospice. Exhibit A: the proposed merger of Omnicom and Interpublic. When I started Prophet, a brand strategy consultancy, these firms were the Alphabets and Metas of the economy; now they're consolidating, two emaciated polar bears fighting over fewer seals and sharing a melting piece of ice. The previous sentence is both awful and wonderful. Mostly the former.

Brands mean a lot less than they used to. Consumers now have a range of weapons of mass diligence to help them find and rate products, starting with Google and social media. I travel constantly, so I used to rely on well-known brands when booking hotels in cities I didn't know well. The name Mandarin Oriental, or Four Seasons, meant I could consistently expect and get a 7- or 8-level customer experience. Lately, though, I've been using ChatGPT and other AI tools to find 9s that better fit the moment, and me: the gym at The Soho House Berlin; the rooftop

restaurant at the Waldorf in Beverly Hills, the bar at Chiltern Firehouse. If I sound like a privileged douchebag, trust your instincts.

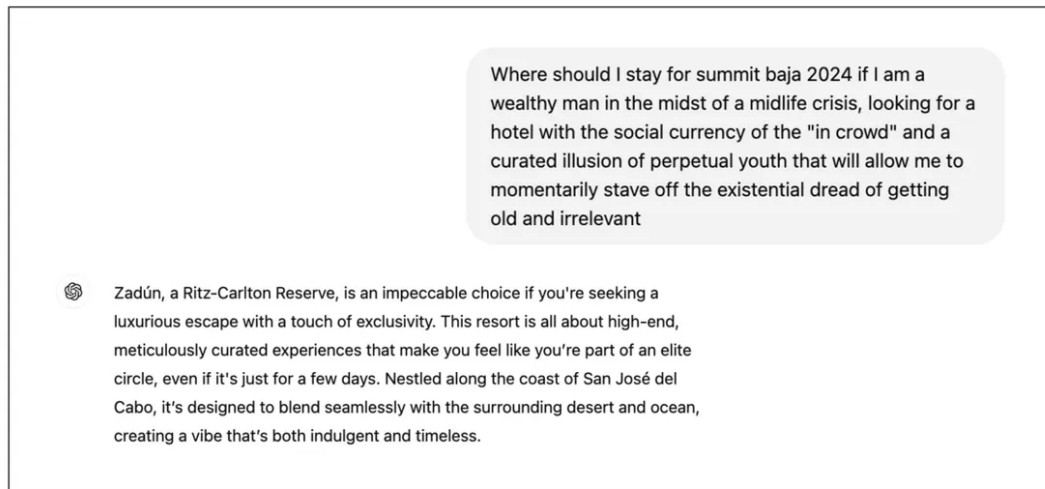


IMAGE SOURCE: CHATGPT

The internet has diminished the power of even strong brands, and it's penetrated the shield of good branding from mediocre products (e.g., Nike, Intel, Target, etc.). A product or service that cannot fulfill its promise to make you smarter or sexier can't reverse its fortunes by listening to Don Draper. And inventing and refining a great product, fixing its supply chain, and improving your customer service is a lot more work than turning to Midjourney and asking for a new logo.

### **No Sale**

Jaguar's problem for a long time has been products that didn't live up to the brand promise. Well after its swinging London '60s heyday, Ford bought the company in 1989, and it's now owned by India's Tata. It still manufactures the cars in Coventry, U.K., thus technically preserving the Britishness that's key to its brand identity. Although they've improved, the cars continue to be dogged by a lingering reputation as mechanical nightmares. Anybody who drove one was making the statement: "I am a gangster who probably owns two of these status symbols, because one is always in the shop." Stylewise, Jaguar's current lineup has little of the elan of the legendary E-type or other classic models. In terms of sales in the premium car market, Jaguar is an afterthought behind category leaders BMW and Audi. With a

few exceptions, Jaguar hasn't been able to make anything in the \$50,000+ price range that anybody wants to buy.

Jaguar's current business response to this makes sense: Management decided to wind the company down and relaunch it. Jaguar is ending production of its three current models and retooling to produce an all-new all-electric line. It's also decided to abandon the premium market and go further upscale into luxury cars priced at around \$400,000. This is a smaller market with fatter margins, so the company is closing some dealerships.

All of which points to something that's gone mostly unremarked in the chatter about Jaguar's rebrand. The move is another symptom of growing global income equality. New billionaires are being minted at a rate of about 270 per year, while the middle class — even at the upper reaches, what marketers call the “mass affluent” — continues to disappear. Jaguar doesn't see any growth selling to lawyers and dentists, but it does see a future selling to entrepreneurs and financiers.

It's going to be at least a year, however, before any new-era Jaguars go on sale. No one outside the company knows how they will look or what will be under the hood. The clunky pink Type 00 sports-tank Jaguar introduced in Miami is a concept car: It will never go into production. I've been to a lot of car conventions and seen a lot of concept cars. In my view, they are a waste of effort and money, no matter how sexy. They're shiny one-off marketing props. Ivanka Trump is (seriously) more likely to be president than the Tesla Robovan is to ever be produced.

### **Talking Pictures**

So, with a dark year ahead of it and no new product ready to show customers, Jaguar decided to fix the one thing that wasn't broken.



The new brand mark makes it seem Jaguar is relaunching as an AI consulting firm. The logo looks as if it was designed by AI and never tested with real people. According to one respondent to an entirely un-scientific survey I conducted on Instagram, it “would be a great logo for a kitchen knife set.”

One of the most precious things a company can possess is a powerful logo, one that imprints itself on the eye and instantly tells the brand’s story. Humans are visually oriented. Written language is only about 5,000 years old, and the printing press is less than 600 years old, but visual communication via drawn or painted images dates back to our Neanderthal ancestors. That’s right – it may even predate our existence as a species. We process visual information about 60,000 times faster than we do words. Researchers at MIT once estimated that the human brain can correctly identify an image in as little as 13 milliseconds.

When I talk about logos in my marketing class, I demonstrate their power by asking students if they can identify a mark using just their peripheral vision. Great logos – the Nike swoosh, the McDonald’s arches, the Mercedes “three-pointed star” – are immediately recognizable even almost outside our plane of vision. An effective logo needs to be meaningful, resonant, distinctive, and scalable. Jaguar’s pouncing cat, which it called the “leaper,” was all that.

There are few things in nature stronger and more agile than a jaguar. As sleek and beautiful as they are lethal, they’re the apex predator of South America’s jungles and deserts. Stealthy and fast, they kill by pouncing from behind and piercing their prey’s skulls with jaws and teeth capable of penetrating artillery shells. Also, they’re

the only animals that, when hunted, will turn around and hunt their hunters. (Not really, but go with it. It's on-brand for the cat.) Jaguars look arrogant AF and rightfully so. The old logo and mark told that story; the new logo says "We hired some MIT grads who, for \$800k, told us to lay off everyone in our customer service department and replace them with Salesforce's Agentforce."

Jaguar's leaper now survives only in a faint echo of the original, the negative space in a field of horizontal lines on a small side panel of the Type 00. To take the greatest visual metaphor in automotive history and kill it is to destroy shareholder value. It's the essence of CMO malpractice. It's just as stupid and wasteful as if Disney responded to a spate of weak releases by taking Mickey, Moana, Darth Vader, and Elsa out and shooting them.

It's also a rejection of everything that ever made Jaguar ... Jaguar. Not just the grace and power of the animal, but also the brand's Britishness. There is nothing feline or Rule Britannia about the Type 00. And for all that talk about "Copy Nothing," the car's silhouette is reminiscent of the Rolls-Royce Spectre, and its sharp edges and lines recall the Cybertruck. The Jaguar people who signed off on all this richly deserve to have their careers pounced on.

### **Think Different**

Branding is about differentiation and creating a sense of scarcity. That means leaning into whatever you have that makes you stand out. If you're going bald, shave your head completely. If you're a tall woman, wear heels. If you need glasses, get the biggest pair you can find.

Jaguar is abandoning its differentiators while at the same time trying to enter the high-end luxury market, where being singular is the whole shooting match. The higher you go in price, the more eccentric it gets.

In my view, Jaguar should not have spent a dollar on marketing before it had an inspiring, ready-to-ship product to show the public.

The companies that have added the most value in the past 10 years barely advertise at all. Netflix now has a market cap of about \$400b; in 2014 it was about \$21b. Alphabet's market cap 10 years ago was roughly \$390b; today it is \$2.5t. Those companies and others took dollars out of advertising and put them into making better products and getting them to customers faster and cheaper than their competitors. Amazon didn't win e-commerce with a marketing campaign; it won by doing the hard work of guaranteeing free delivery in 48 hours. Others have won by going asset light: Nvidia uses suppliers for all of its manufacturing; Shein,

the fastest-growing apparel company in the world, has no stores and no warehouses.

It's not too late for Jaguar to ditch its rebrand and start all over again with a strategy where a great product is not an afterthought to a marketing campaign. This is, in a way, an opportunity to announce that, after a huge outpouring of goodwill toward the iconic metaphor, they are going "Old Coke" and reverting. However, we shouldn't hold our breath. The current landscape of reality-TV stars and misinformation has rid the corporate world of one important and simple phrase: "We fucked up."

Life is so Rich,

**SCOTT**