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## "Teaching Brands: Critical Approaches" Editor's Notes and Introduction

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## **Teaching Brands: Critical Approaches Editor's Notes and Introduction**

### **Heidi Zimmerman**

Brands have long occupied a privileged place in the marketing of products: they have designated the origin and identity, for example, of objects from soap to oatmeal. But in recent years, brands have become ubiquitous. We see brands on our commutes to work or school and we fold branded objects into our everyday routines. We form identities through our loyalties and aversions to particular brands and we can do so on branded social media platforms. Branding has become a darling—not only of marketers—but also of a whole range of sectors of culture and society. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) has pointed out, politics, religion, creativity, and even selves become subject to processes and strategies of branding. We have seen the rise of city branding and the branding of public space. We have seen how the contemporary employment market, particularly post-Fordist work, comes together with increasing pressures and opportunities to “self-brand” (Hearn 2008). And we have seen how brands insert themselves as a platform and enabler of pro-social possibilities, working to construct themselves as “citizen brands” (Ouellette 2012).

There is a rich literature on politics of contemporary branding, from the work already mentioned to Naomi Klein's (1999) *No Logo*, Adam Arvidsson's (2006) *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture*, Liz Moor's (2007) *The Rise of Brands*, Celia Lury's *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy*. Yet there remain few published teaching resources that tackle critical brand studies directly. This issue of *Teaching Media Quarterly* was conceived as a means to fill this gap by calling upon media educators to submit lesson plans that would help undergraduates think critically about brands in contemporary culture. We hoped to bring questions about race, class, gender, nation, sexuality, inequality and citizenship to the way we talk about brands in the college classroom and offer instructors tools for contextualizing these questions historically and economically. We are pleased to offer our readers three lessons plans, each of which helps students develop a different set of critical tools for analyzing the role of branding at the intersection of media culture and everyday life.

In Leah Shafer's lesson plan, students learn about convergence culture over the course of three class periods by engaging with the case study of the immersive brand phenomenon Flo (the Progressive Insurance mascot). The plan for each session includes a series of screenings, readings, and exercises that invite students to investigate branding in the context of what Henry Jenkins calls “affective economics,” where consumers not only consume but also labor on behalf of the brand. Shafer locates her lesson plan in the context of the transformation from the manufacturing of products to the manufacturing of images. She does so in order to engage students in interpreting the immaterial labor of fans, producers, and consumers of the Flo brand identity.

Neil O'Boyle's lesson asks students to select a brand, its particular celebrity “brand ambassador,” and the cultural universe they create as a case study for understanding the links between marketing and identity. Students “reverse engineer” the selection of the specific brand ambassador in order to deconstruct the ways in which marketing has become, in O'Boyle's words, “much more focused on cultivating links between products and people.” Students present

their findings in collaborative oral presentations and written reports, providing much time for discussion and reflection.

John Bullinger's lesson takes on the subject of experiential branding. Through a combination of critical reading assignments, in-class activities, data-collection worksheets, reflective writing, and a group presentation, this lesson offers students the chance to scrutinize the manner in which brands "embed themselves within the basic structure of students' sociality and communication." Students self-reflexively examine the way brands both mediate and provide a context for their own everyday experiences, both on and offline. By bringing critical tools to bear on the role of brands in their everyday lives, this lesson aims to help students build a "sophisticated understanding of the specific strategies involved in the way in which brands colonize traditionally non-commodified areas of life." This lesson is designed for a two-week period, but can easily be adapted to shorter or longer timeframes.

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