How brands can help people become their authentic selves

Many consumers have a wish for life meaning and purpose. Does your brand lean into that need?



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Consciously or unconsciously, our consumer choices say a lot about us, from our values to our cultural background to our hopes and aspirations. At a time when many feel powerless to influence world events, what we buy may become a key part of our identity and how we

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interact with the world around us.

Brands like Patagonia, whose commitment to the environment allows clients to feel they are helping save the planet, have long understood this. Conversely, brands with a poor or shifting image can negatively affect buyers' self-worth. Take Tesla, once a go-to for environmentally and tech-conscious consumers, now facing a 49% decline in European sales as backlash to its CEO grows and many drivers feel uneasy owning such a car.

In a chapter in *The Routledge Handbook of Identity and Consumption*, IESE's Inigo Gallo, with Jennifer Edson Escalas of Vanderbilt University and Patti Williams of Wharton (University of Pennsylvania), explores the links between identity-driven consumers and brand purpose. What happens when a brand represents the key values on which a person bases their own purpose and sense of meaning?

The pleasant life, the good life and the meaningful life

There are several ways in which interacting with a brand with purpose can help consumers fulfill their identity needs:

- **Discover and achieve their human purpose.** Purpose is a central life aim that shapes goals and behavior and is linked to greater life satisfaction, self-esteem, resilience and more. Brands can amplify this. Even if a brand's mission isn't perfectly aligned with the consumer's, supporting it can foster connection and identity. For example, a high schooler who is passionate about sports might put a Red Bull sticker on her water bottle, even if she's not a big consumer. This allows her to reinforce her values and signal her commitment to a better world.
- **Attain a more meaningful and significant life.** Consumers often construct a life narrative — a personal story that helps them make sense of their experiences and maintain a sense of order in their lives. This process of sensemaking is essentially the creation of meaning — a universal drive and a buffer against uncertainty. Brands can support this by embodying values that extend beyond their products and reflect what individuals find meaningful.
- **Achieve self-acceptance and their true self.** At a basic level, choosing brands with purpose can help consumers feel good about themselves and their impact on the world. Purpose-driven brands can also play a deeper role in shaping self-identity. People build self-esteem and discover their true selves by living in alignment with

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their values, such as caring for others or protecting the environment. A brand with a purpose that resonates can serve as a symbol of these values, reinforcing self-worth and personal identity.

From “mine” to “me”

Moving a consumer from simply wanting to own a brand to identifying with it on a moral, ethical and personal level requires a three-pronged mindset and, crucially, an authenticity in the brand’s values that goes beyond marketing tactics:

1. **A brand’s purpose is long-term, not trend-driven.** A true brand purpose isn’t just a temporary campaign or marketing tactic — it’s a long-term commitment that shapes everything the brand does. It’s not about jumping on the latest social cause for attention but about staying true to a core mission over time. A strong purpose remains consistent even as the brand evolves, giving employees and consumers a clear sense of direction and trust in its values.
2. **Purpose should be at the core, not an afterthought.** A brand’s purpose should be embedded in its identity and strategy, not treated as a side project. It should influence decision-making at every level, from leadership to marketing, rather than being a separate initiative. Ideally, consumers should recognize this purpose as a key part of the brand’s identity, not just something mentioned in an ad or corporate statement.
3. **Purpose should go beyond profit.** A deeper purpose aims to make a real impact on the world. The most meaningful brand purposes go beyond business goals, striving to contribute to society in a way that resonates with people on a deeper level. Profits, of course, are necessary, but they are a means to an end, and it’s the end that brand purpose should focus on.

Consumers aren’t just people who need things — they often also have the need to shape, or fill, an identity. Authentically purposeful brands can help them remain committed to their purposes and values, and express their true selves.

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Iñigo Gallo

Associate Professor in the Marketing Department at IESE Business School. His areas of expertise are consumer behavior, decision-making, word-of-mouth, experiential purchases and digital marketing.

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