

Stockholm syndrome: A cautionary tale of desperate consumers and despicable brands



By [Matthew Edwards](#)

26 Nov 2015

Brands are intrinsic to our modern lives. Almost everything you see and interact with on a daily basis is branded in some way, from the food we eat to the clothes we wear. In our modern lives brands are the way we define ourselves and the medium through which we attempt to understand the chaos of the corporate world.



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There is inherent and considerable power in this. Being so intricately woven into our daily lives, it is only logical that the brands we love would start to dictate our buying behaviour, lifestyle choices and even our personalities. Brands are no longer just choices we make; they are the foundation of our modern lives. There is an old adage that states 'with great power comes great responsibility' and this really rings true in the modern age of global brands. When we as consumers place our trust in brands we expect them to value this and act accordingly, treating us with a mutual respect and working hard to continue earning this trust.

Unfortunately, this is often not the case.

Powerful brands sometimes forget how important the relationship they have with their customers is, which can lead to these relationships being taken for granted, abused and sometimes irreparably damaged. A good example was the 2014 string of controversies surrounding Shell and its Arctic oil drilling exploits. Following a number of potentially dangerous incidents in its initial exploratory expedition in 2012, Shell came under fire from numerous environmental organisations, members of the public and their own customers to cease their Arctic operations.

{{Image}}

Flexing their considerable political muscle allowed Shell to continue with their operations (despite the public outcry) and, almost inevitably, things went wrong. Shell was fined \$1.1m for violations to the clean air act after their ships' engines released unacceptable levels of nitrogen oxide, ammonia and various other pollutants into the pristine Arctic air¹. Through its resolute stubbornness to continue its Arctic operations, Shell caused considerable damage to their reputation and brand image and left a sour taste in the mouths of their consumers.

What the oil giant didn't foresee was the response from the outraged public. Rather than allowing them to get away with their reckless behaviour, Greenpeace led a campaign against Shell, with the specific agenda of convincing Lego to end their promotional partnership with the Anglo-Dutch oil company and shed light on their arctic atrocities. Through a series of physical protests, highly-poignant viral videos and memes that leveraged off the popularity of recent hit '*The Lego Movie*', Greenpeace rallied the public to sign a petition to put considerable pressure on Lego². Lego gave in to public pressure and announced that it would not renew its deal with Shell at the end of the contract, a moral victory for keyboard warriors everywhere, and an example of the power of the consumer.

Unfortunately, the consumer is not always right.

Sometimes big corporate brands have such a profound stranglehold on their customers that they can get away with seemingly anything, forcing us to do things their way or face life without their magnificent benevolence. This is what I like to call a despicable brand. A brand that fully realises how completely inured their customers are to their products and/or services; they use it as a means to ensure that the consumers keep consuming, no matter which new and often unnecessary offering they throw at us.

To give a face (excuse the pun) to my favourite despicable brand, one needs look no further than the behemoth that is Facebook. As of the second quarter of 2015 Facebook had 1.49 billion monthly active users³ and with a current global population of roughly 7.3 billion, this translates to 20.41% of the entire human race using Facebook every month; the mind boggles! It's hardly surprising, however, when you consider that nearly everyone you know is on Facebook. Think about it, these days even your technologically illiterate grandmother has a Facebook profile. Dead people have Facebook profiles too; it's estimated that 30 million users died within Facebook's first eight years of existence⁴, with the majority of those profiles living on indefinitely like eerie digital tombstones.

We have reached a point where Facebook is no longer just a casual online service that allows you to catch up with friends and relatives around the world; it is one of the most powerful brands in the world, with financial clout that trumps many small countries. Facebook addiction is far more prevalent than we realise and a study, ironically sponsored by Facebook itself, showed that on average people check Facebook on their smartphones 13.8 times a day and it is often the first thing they do upon waking up in the morning⁵. I admit that I am often guilty of this myself.

It would be entirely hypocritical for me to just sit here and slate the social media giant when I am an avid daily user myself. Facebook provides a fantastic medium for connecting with the people we don't get to see very often, it provides a platform for us to express our extremely valuable and relevant (as far as we're concerned) views on anything from politics to the *Walking Dead* and, let's be honest here, it's a great way to pass time and entertain oneself. So why write this article? Why call out Facebook as a 'despicable brand'?

The answer lies in the mounting evidence that Facebook is not the omnipotent, benevolent deity that we often perceive it to be. Facebook tries to make our lives easier by 'learning' about us and gathering every little bit of information it can about us. It knows what we like and where we live, it knows whom our family and friends are, it knows all of our contact information, whom we 'stalk', where we are at any given time. It reads all the personal messages that we send through it, it reads and stores every single status update and photo we upload. When you really think about it, Facebook knows much

more about us than many of our closest friends or family members. It is so deeply entrenched in our personal lives that being without it is a scary thought for many. But the question we need to ask ourselves is, do we really trust Facebook with all of this precious personal information?

I know that I wouldn't be happy for most of my Facebook 'friends' to know everything Facebook knows about me, so why am I happy to give this information to a faceless corporation that could, quite legally for the most part, do whatever they like with it?

The answer, quite simply, is that I am not and I'm sure most of you aren't either. But we begrudgingly give it to them anyway because we are addicted. Facebook is our drug and we will do anything they ask of us to keep getting our fix. Most of us don't even read their terms and conditions of use, because as far as we're concerned using Facebook is worth whatever price it comes at, even though we don't know what that price is.

One could quite easily argue that this is a case of naive users getting themselves into undesirable situations, agreeing to things that they don't take the time to understand, signing their souls away. But that's not exactly fair. The nature of addiction is such that one can become addicted to anything, often without realising it, and it can no longer be denied that our world is addicted to Facebook. We will do whatever it takes to keep using it, even if it means selling our privacy.

With that being said, I will attempt to explain my reasoning behind calling Facebook a despicable brand.

Facebook knows you're hooked. They have you exactly where they want you and they know everything about you. They know you're not going anywhere and deactivating your profile? Ha! Try it and see how long that lasts. You'll be back before they ever knew you were gone. So after you've kicked and screamed and had your tantrum and finally accepted that Facebook is now your god, would you like to try our Facebook messenger app? It's super awesome and has stuff that you will like... well actually it's really not that different from the previous built-in messenger feature we had. But we want you to download our app so we're going to remove the built-in messenger and not allow you to view your messages until you do. So run along and download it now! Oh and by the way, in those terms and conditions that you won't read when you download the app, we have added a few conditions...

Through the app we can now:

- Read your bookmarks and browsing history;
 - control your mobile data connection;
 - read, add to, modify or remove your contacts;
 - read, add to or modify your calendar events;
 - get your precise geographical location;
 - send and receive text or multimedia messages;
 - read your text and multimedia messages;
 - make calls off your phone without your intervention, read your call log, reroute your calls;
 - read, modify or delete the contents of your memory (SD) card;
 - use your device's camera to take pictures and record video;
 - use your microphone to record audio; and
- read your stream on social media networks and post to your social media streams.⁶

But you don't mind do you?

Of course you don't.

Just by downloading the Facebook messenger app to your smartphone, which you will remember they are now all but forcing you to do, you are giving Facebook almost complete unchecked access to the content and functions of your device. Personally I wouldn't allow anyone such access to my phone, but this is Facebook we're talking about, they will get

their way. In fact, over 500 million people are now actively using the messenger app, having 'agreed to' the above conditions⁷.

Facebook wins again.

Hopefully you are starting to get a sense of the despicable brand concept I'm talking about. Facebook uses its addicted users' dependence to coerce them into doing what they want. It's not unreasonable to think that if Facebook were to release an app that required you to agree to sign over your house to them, millions would rush headfirst into homelessness. Such is the frightening power of this mega brand.

In an age where brands play such a massive role in our lives, we are constantly looking for a hero brand to arise and lead us to enlightenment. We want our brands to be green and sustainable, to create employment and offer us endless value, to respect us and treat us as more than just sales targets. Yet Facebook is laughing in the face of 'consumer power', instead of asking us what we want and need and how they can make our lives better, they are telling us what we need and pushing their products on us whether we want them or not. It is time we take back our power as consumers and make a stand against brands that bully us.

But not just yet, I'm off to check my Facebook stream.

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