

Every Marketing Class Should Study Thom Browne

128 credit hours are needed to graduate with a degree in marketing from the University of Notre Dame. 48 of those must be business credits and 21 of those must come from marketing electives. As a fourth-year marketing major, I've learned every acronym, mnemonic, "Top 5" list, and statistic in the world of marketing. However, no lesson has been drilled into my mind more than "the best brands have an identifiable brand voice." It seems as though I won't succeed as a marketer without the differences between a brand identity, a brand personality, a brand archetype, and a brand image tattooed onto my arm. It's clear, a brand needs a singular, distinguishable voice to succeed in the marketplace.

It's true, some of the most successful brands of all time can be fit into an archetype and described with about three adjectives. Companies like Nike, Apple, Coca-Cola, Harley-Davidson, and Starbucks were among the most cited among all the marketing courses I've taken in my four years at Notre Dame for their consistent marketing communications. Apple fell into the "creator" archetype, described as creative, imaginative, and innovative. Harley-Davidson is a "rebel" brand, portraying a free-spirited and brash brand personality. In particular, fashion brands thrive off of falling into a clear archetype as the wearer directly demonstrates or aligns themselves with the brand's "personality traits."

Having a consistent voice and personality allows consumers to connect with the brand like they would an actual person; consumers come to expect certain actions and communications from the brand like they could predict the actions of their best friend. Brands today have values, and to stray too far away from them is to come across as inauthentic and unreliable.

Of course, the "voices" of the brands listed above have been cultivated for years on end by teams of marketers who have been influenced by the financial goals of the company's shareholders as well as the demands of their consumers. Not one of them has had communications actually come from a singular voice. What would happen if a brand did?

I introduce Thom Browne, Inc.: a for-profit company that represents the closest one could get to a true experiment in having a singular brand voice. Founding the brand and leading it ever since, Thom Browne started his luxury fashion brand in 2003 with no formal design education, aside from what he learned from his tailor, Rocco Ciccarelli, and through his time working as a designer at Ralph Lauren. Browne studied accounting at Notre Dame and says he had little to no knowledge or interest in the fashion industry at the time. The [Thom Browne website](#) details the origins of the brand:

"In 2003, Browne began his business with five grey suits in a made-to-measure shop in New York City's West Village. With each jacket and trouser, he paired a grey cardigan, a white oxford

shirt, a grey tie and silver tie-bar, and classic black brogues. The jacket was sharply tailored with a high-armhole fit. The trouser was hemmed at the ankle. This is the Thom Browne uniform.”



Image courtesy of [Thom Browne](#)

Browne began making and wearing his signature grey suit while living in LA as a struggling actor. Admitting it may have been inspired by his days spent in Catholic school uniforms or while working in corporate America, Browne decided to dress in old-grey-flannel suits, but couldn't find one from a vintage store with the proportions he had in mind. Once he was able to tailor one with Ciccarelli, he'd invented his perfect suit.

Though he had limited design education, Browne knew he needed to sell these suits and made his company “exactly the way [he] wanted to make it.” I had the pleasure of hearing Browne speak at Notre Dame four times over the past year and each time he made sure to emphasize three things:

1. Browne wanted to create something larger than “just a suit.” Speaking to a philosophy class, he said, “If I was going to do this, I wanted to make a difference.”
2. He was not going to compromise on his vision; Browne argues, “Authenticity is the most important.”

3. Browne loved this suit business so much that, emotionally, he would be unable to start another one again.

Some may consider this type of stubbornness a vice. For Browne, it has proven to be a great virtue.

Browne was his own billboard, wearing his suits as he walked around New York City. In every retelling of his career journey, Browne emphasizes how people, including schoolchildren, laughed at his outfit as he walked by, taken aback by the shrunken proportions. Despite this, he “knew that somebody would eventually get it” and continued to pursue his vision. While speaking at Notre Dame in April, Browne said, “I wore them myself. That was how people saw [my work]. I had no business plan. I had no plan other than I knew exactly what I wanted to do.”

The founder-as-spokesperson is not an uncommon tactic in marketing. In his brand’s humble beginnings, wearing his suit was an earnest display of the belief Browne had in his product. As Browne put it, “If I don’t wear my clothes, who will?” Perhaps it was because he wanted to look good, or maybe it was because of excellent business foresight, but the early choice to wear a uniform places Browne on a list of innovators and founders including Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg who established a distinct visual identity for themselves and therefore, their companies, through a uniform.



Image courtesy of the [University of Notre Dame](#)

Though Browne now says he has no interest in the business side of things (“I never went about this to make money,” Browne told Notre Dame business students), he has always known the value of offering something unique. Describing the start of his business, *Vogue* puts it best: “What Browne had realized by then was that offering a gray suit that many people found preposterous was much better than offering just another well-tailored gray suit: What was distinctive could, in time and by the laws of fashion, stir desire.”

Browne’s signature brand elements featured in most of his designs are a red, white, and blue grosgrain loop tag or placket, and four stripes, usually placed around the wearer’s arm, leg, or calf. Distinct from some of the largest fashion houses in the world, though, Thom Browne does not have a monogram. In a time of logo mania, Browne has created a brand so strong that an entire ensemble is immediately recognizable to the trained fashion eye as a Thom Browne creation, even without one of the signature elements. To put it simply, I can just look at a Thom Browne outfit, whether it be on the runway, the street, or a red carpet, and know it’s Thom Browne.



Images courtesy of [Vogue Runway](#)

While Browne’s uniform and brand elements seem restrictive, Browne argues they allow for more creativity. His shows display looks that hardly deviate from his signature colors of greys, blues, reds, and pastels, and nearly every ensemble is a direct evolution from his first five suits. Each show is distinctly Thom Browne, yet each communicates an entirely different narrative. Ranging from the story of Noah’s Arc to “The Little Prince,” Browne uses classic story retellings to create his own worlds, allowing for his clothes to take on a meaning larger than just fashion.

Included in Thom Browne's world is a loyal base of celebrity ambassadors, including top athletes, artists, musicians, and actors. Thom Browne's "clique" is so prominent, [GO wrote an entire article](#) about it. Browne says the people he chooses to dress are "true individuals... They're really true to themselves, and they do something... I like people to put the time in and be serious about what they do, and not care about what anybody else thinks."

In a roundtable discussion at Notre Dame, I asked how Noah Beck, a young Tik Tok star with 34 million followers, was selected to be invited to the Fall 2023 show. Thom Browne's Vice President of Communications, Matthew Foley, chimed in, "We like to dress people who are the best at what they do. Noah is the best at Tik Tok." This "best of the best" idea reflects Browne's competitive spirit (he was a varsity swimmer while at Notre Dame) that has helped his business succeed. Browne ensures his clothes are made from the highest-quality materials and expertly tailored, catering to both the internal and external effects fashion has on the wearer—an internal mood booster and an external expression. His commitment to the fine details reflects the same precision with which Browne carries out his structured day-to-day routine. Anyone who wears his clothes displays a similar commitment to being (or at the very least, looking) the best in the room.



Image courtesy of [GO](#)

Browne's clients not only share his personal ethos, they've also built a personal relationship with him and an emotional connection to his clothes. Rapper Lil Uzi Vert is quoted as saying, "I wear Thom Browne every day...It makes me feel more than unique. It makes me feel complete. It makes me feel like no one else exists." Whoopi Goldberg has been wearing Thom Browne for years. Ahead of his Fall 2023 show, she told [GO](#), "I want to see whatever he's doing because, you know, it's Thom...I love him. He's kind of like family in a way."

In an over-saturated market, marketers have learned that consumers are no longer buying brands for their utilitarian value. Based on Carl Jung's Hierarchy of Needs, the best brands create a sense of community, allowing the consumer to feel like they belong to something larger. Thom Browne has done just that. A frequent wearer of Thom Browne, artist [Amy Sherman](#), said, "If I was walking down the street and I saw somebody who was wearing Thom Browne, automatically I would feel a kinship. The same kinship I feel when I walk into a room full of businesspeople and maybe one person's an artist—you kind of already know each other."

Returning to campus in April to speak at the Mendoza College of Business, Browne seemed uninterested in talking about the business side of his brand. While the company continues to grow (it was acquired by Zegna in 2018 for \$500 million), some may think it has added more voices to the brand. However, Browne has not strayed far from his original values, rather, the investment has allowed his designs to flourish. Speaking to [The Cut](#), Browne said his shows "are pure creativity. I don't think about the business and commerce at all. It's all about ideas and concepts." Browne considers the shows to be the main form of advertising for the brand, therefore he still has full creative control over the company's primary mode of communication. Browne says, "The shows add meaning to the commercial. They make you look at the grey suit a little differently."

It's difficult to call any corporation entirely authentic or meaningful since all of them have the ultimate goal of turning a profit. Of course, Browne and his CEO, Rodrigo Bazan, aim to double the number of people purchasing Thom Browne products in the next few years. Browne's identity-building was certainly no fluke, but his dedication to creating something larger than fashion in his way, regardless of outside opinions, has allowed him to establish a community of loyal consumers. Rather than a fashion brand, Browne is marketing an ideology that invites even non-wearers to join in. This is the sort of brand-building that marketers aspire to, and why Thom Browne should be discussed beyond the fashion industry.