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Brands Make Lousy Lovers



By Marty Kaplan



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What brand doesn't belong on this list? Amazon, Uber, Yelp, Hillary.

It's a trick question. They all belong. In recent days, they've all been making it harder for their fans to love them.

I loved Amazon at first sight. Later, when it killed Borders, I forgave it, and called it creative destruction. I vowed to patronize independent bookstores more. I said I'd be glad to pay a premium for knowledgeable staff. Here's how that worked out: I'd call to see if they had something, and almost always they didn't, but said it sounds like a terrific book, we'd be more than happy to order it, shouldn't take much more than a week. And, meanwhile, there, on my screen, calling to me, was Amazon, one click and one day away. Almost always, I did click. It felt like a secret vice.

What's hurting my relationship with Amazon's brand now is its price war with publisher Hachette. In May, Jeff Bezos decided that only a few e-books would retail on Amazon for more than \$9.99. Hachette said, Sorry, you can't tell us what to do, we set our own e-book prices. Amazon retaliated by preventing pre-orders of books from Hachette authors like J.K. Rowling and John Patterson, and by slow-walking fulfillment of orders for Hachette books. Suddenly it's two weeks instead of tomorrow.

I want to make excuses for Amazon. I want to believe that tactics like these are ordinary in any modern market. Instead, I'm asking myself why I'm in a relationship with a bully.

I loved Uber at first, too. You tap, they come right away, you never have to reach for your wallet, calculate a tip or sign a slip, and compared to valet parking in Los Angeles, it can be a bargain. I didn't mind that Uber had the taxi industry in its crosshairs. How

about the regulated taxi industry getting its own digital act together? Why not compete to deliver the best consumer experience instead of going after them in lawsuits and taxi commissions?

But reports about Uber's competition with Lyft have dampened my ardor. Lyft's systems have been gummed up by thousands of car requests from Uber minions who either don't show up, or ride for just a few blocks and try to recruit the Lyft driver to Uber for a \$500-a-head bounty. So much for the romance of the sharing economy. I can't be the only fanboy wondering whether Uber is still cool.

I had a crush on Yelp, too. I liked how it gave independent consumers a voice and opened up word-of-mouth to everyone. Everyone knows to take Yelp ratings with a grain of salt. Friends, family and employees are always trying to rig the comments. I thought Yelp's algorithms would intercept some of that, and that my personal jerk detector would help me figure out the real wisdom of the crowd. I'd heard charges that rigging was being done by Yelp itself - that it shakes down the businesses it rates to buy ads on their site, threatening that their reviews will tank if they balk. But I'd dismissed those complaints as sour grapes and paranoia.

On Thursday, a federal appeals court threw out a case against Yelp alleging economic extortion. When I heard one of the plaintiffs on the radio, my gut told me he was the real deal. The more I heard from him and others, the more I believed them. In my ruling, Yelp runs a pay-to-play shop. But in her ruling, Judge Marsha S. Berzon said the plaintiffs hadn't proven economic extortion. Here's the killer in the ruling: Even if owners who refused to buy ads had actually proven that Yelp withheld positive reviews, it wouldn't matter, because Yelp "has no obligation" to publish them. "It is not unlawful for Yelp to post and sequence... reviews." Yelp is a business. It has no greater obligation to live up to my fantasies about fairness and accuracy than does Fox News.

The same day the Yelp decision came down, the Washington Post published Hillary Clinton's review of Henry Kissinger's new book, "World Order." In it she calls him "a friend," vouches for his "astute observations" and notes that they share "a belief in the indispensability of continued American leadership in service of a just and liberal order."

I have been her fan since she was the First Lady of Arkansas, Hillary Rodham. This tribute to Kissinger won't be the only test of my fidelity, but I'm not ready to write this one off as a one-off. Actually, I can think of a few different words to describe him than she did. Gasbag, narcissist and criminal come to mind.

We now know that when Kissinger was Lyndon Johnson's advisor to Vietnam peace talks, he secretly allegedly leaked to Richard Nixon that a truce was imminent. This enabled Nixon to torpedo the treaty, telling the Thieu government of South Vietnam that Nixon would give him a better deal than Johnson. Thieu pulled out of the talks, and Nixon, running as the peace candidate, arguably won the 1968 presidential election because of Kissinger's sabotage. Before the war would end, 20,000 more American troops would die, 100,000 would be wounded and more than a million Vietnamese would be killed. We also now know that the "just and liberal order" that Hillary Clinton and Henry Kissinger agree on didn't prevent him from backing the military coup that overthrew the democratically elected but inconveniently socialist president of Chile, or from making common cause with murderous despots from Argentina to East Timor.

I get why she calls him a friend. They were both secretaries of state. Members of that club don't blow the whistle on one another. I also get that the book review is meant to burnish her hawk credentials. It does. Unfortunately, what it also does is remind us that she is, after all, a politician.

By now we should know better than to believe any politician is driven more by ideals than by interests. Even so, there are plenty of competing interests for a candidate to pick from. I'd like to believe that if Hillary Clinton becomes a candidate for president, when she weighs plutocrats' interests against the human costs of their wealth, the exigencies of fundraising won't have a thumb on that scale, just as I'd like to believe that her valentine to Henry Kissinger is just an effort to pre-empt whining from John McCain and Lindsay Graham. But if recent years have taught us anything, it's that loving any brand is a losing proposition, in politics no less than in commerce. Unfortunately, the business that brands are in is persuading us to confuse their power with our love.

This is a crosspost of my column for the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me: martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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