

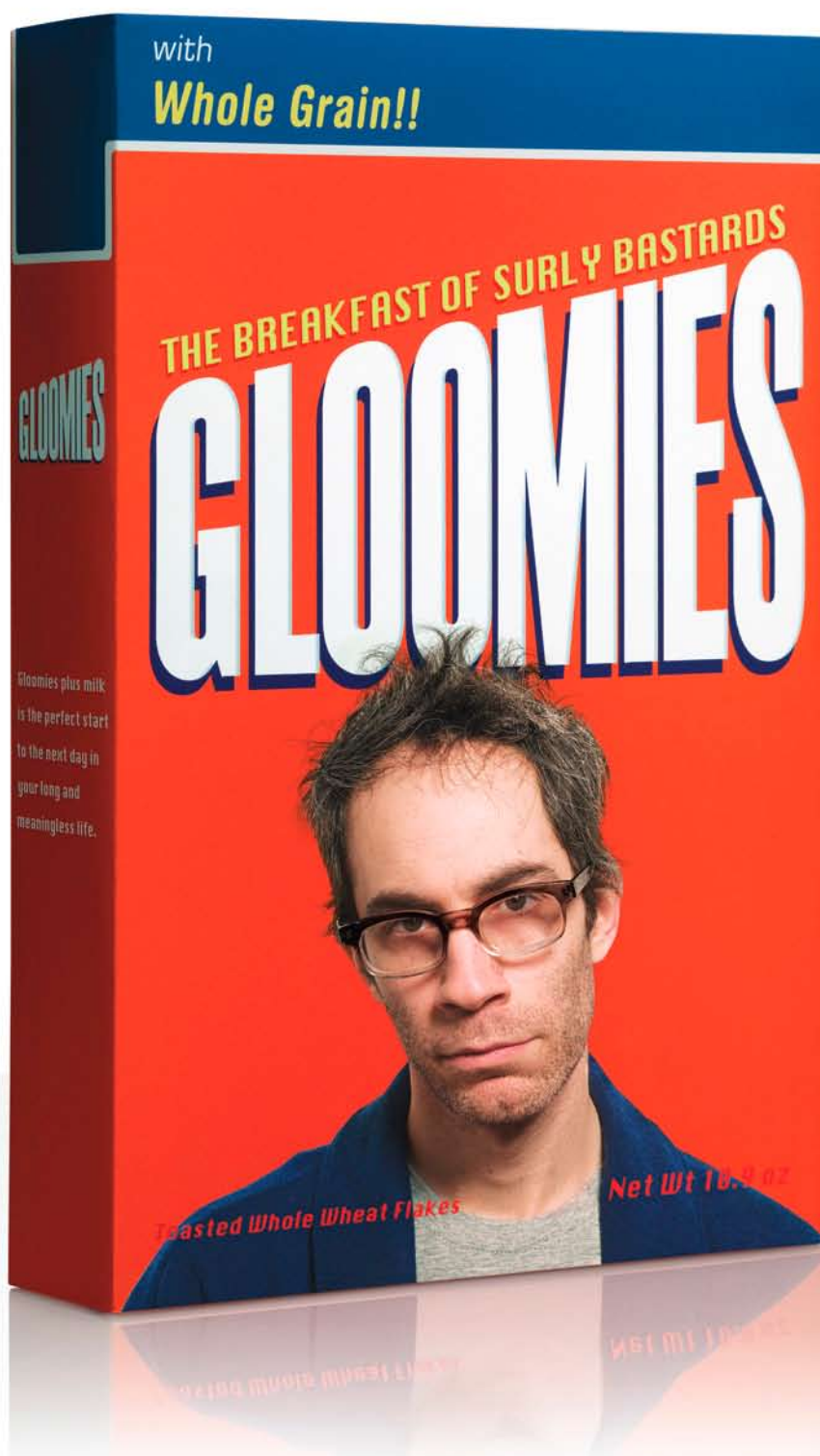
# ● Meet the Happy New Me, Same as the Crappy Old Me

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In an attempt to rebrand himself—to reposition his tired “personal brand” from miserable and pissed off to shiny and happy—**Shalom Auslander** seeks the advice of marketing wizards, self-help gurus, and a legend of the advertising world



PHILLIP TOLEDANO



“COCA-COLA,” said the account executive, “owns Happiness.”

I was freelance copywriting for Satan at an advertising agency in New York City. I prefer writing fiction and occasional journalism, but the Dark Lord pays well, and there’s free coffee on the twenty-third floor. The downside is the whole spiritual-death/rotting-from-the-inside-out thing, but I do get a front-row seat to the downfall of Western civilization.

“They own it?” I asked.

She nodded. She seemed proud of Coca-Cola, and proud of herself for being proud of them.

“They’ve owned it,” she added, “for a hundred years.”

I wondered if perhaps that was why there was so little of it left to go around. Coke’s got it all. It’s locked up in a basement in Atlanta, and eight tar-black ounces of Happy Sludge is going to cost you seventy-nine cents (\$2.99 for a half gallon).

Branding, as this is known, has been around for some time now. By creating a positive “personality” for their products—youthful, happy, caring, hip—marketers don’t have to worry about selling products on their merits. The new adolescent-targeting body sprays—Hung scent, or Throbbing, or whatever it is—aren’t much different from any other overly perfumed delousing agent, so they create a personality to which their intended consumer can relate—in this case, a teenager so desperate and lonely that he’s willing to believe a \$3 can of spray will turn women into the insatiable, gag-reflexless vixens from the violent pornography upon which he subsists. It’s not a \$1,200 laptop with a \$2 screen that fries if you close it too quickly; it’s a

counterculture visionary who encourages you to “think different” (particularly about adverbs). If Starbucks sat down next to you at a bar and said, “Hi, I sell subpar coffee from Third World nations to desperate Western conformists,” you’d probably call for your check. But if Starbucks said, “Hi, I donate a portion of my bottled-water profits to helping children get clean water,” you might buy Starbucks a drink. You might introduce Starbucks to your friends and tell them how cool he is. That’s branding. It’s not clever, but it works.

“**SAY WHAT YOU WANT** about the Nazis,” a marketing executive once said to me, “they had great branding.”

The account executive continued to laud Coke for owning Happiness. She commended Levi’s for owning Rebelliousness, and praised Nike for owning Sports.

“Competition,” corrected the junior account planner standing beside her.

“Competition is part of sports,” said the account executive with an exasperated shake of her head. The chastened junior account planner mumbled his agreement. That was the account exec’s brand: kind of a Sarah Palin I’ve-twisted-the-idea-of-feminism-so-far-backward-that-it’s-actually-sexism-again thing, with a bit of Martha Stewart I-may-not-have-a-penis-but-I-will-fuck-you. It kinda worked.

Me, I own Misery. The world gets to me, it just does. I know it shouldn’t, but Christ on a shitstick, what a fucking mess. Maybe they showed me too many Holocaust films when I was a kid. Maybe I’ve read too many blogs. Maybe it’s just the result of working in advertising for ten years: I’ve seen too much, I know too much. I know what corporations think of you; worse, I’ve seen you in focus groups, proving them right. I know they can prove, quantitatively, that balloons printed with the names of prescription drugs lead people to ask their doctors for those very same drugs. I know that putting the name of a laundry detergent on the hood of a race car that drives around in circles all Sunday afternoon predisposes people to buying that laundry detergent. I know too much. I’m in too deep. I need that *Men in Black* memory-eraser thing on a rope beside the front door of my house so I can zap myself every night before going inside. Maybe if I print its picture on a fucking balloon, someone will build one.

I’m miserable. I’m down. I’m unCoke.

“What’s wrong?” asks my wife.

“What’s wrong?” asks the waiter.

“What’s wrong?” asks a co-worker.

And then, one day last month, I was in the kitchen attempting to make a sandwich for my 3-year-old son—*Fucking peanut butter*. I thought, *can they make it any thicker? Why don’t I just spray a can of peanut-flavored foam insulation into his mouth and watch*

*him choke to death?*—when he slouched over the kitchen table, rested his chin on his arms, and sighed.

“I’m miserable, too, Dad,” he said.

“What do you mean ‘too?’” I asked.

It was a stinging realization. Was this brand of mine hurting one of the few people on this failing planet I actually love? Was I corrupting his life view? Was I being a bad father?

My wife walked in.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

“He thinks I’m miserable,” I said.

“You are,” she said. “But he’s just quoting a Berenstain Bears book.”

It was small comfort. I come from a dysfunctional family. My mother owned Melodrama. My father owned Belligerence. Together we owned Broken.

The following day, in a large conference room high atop Manhattan, was when the discussion about Coca-Cola took place.

“Maybe Nike owns Belief in Yourself,” the junior account planner was saying.

The junior account executive nodded.

“Let’s use that for the Adidas meeting,” the account executive said. Then she turned to me and said, “Maybe you could do something angry about happiness.” The junior

account planner nodded. “That could be great,” he said. “Counterintuitive.”

I sipped my lukewarm coffee, imagined plummeting the twenty-three floors to my death on the sidewalk below, and decided it was time to rebrand myself. It was time to use my evil powers for good.

Why not? I’d been in psychoanalysis for over a decade, and I’d come pretty far, but the last ten pounds of misery are the hardest to lose. It was time for some good old American bullshit. If carbonated paint stripper can own Happiness, why the fuck can’t I? If the Cow-schwitz bovine death camp known as Burger King can be a barrel of laughs, what’s stopping me? Sure, right now my brand is the Miserable Guy, but maybe with some help and guidance I could make it, I don’t know, the Easygoing Guy, or the Quick-Witted Scamp Always Ready with the Sharp Retort. I’d settle for the Guy Who Isn’t Going to Harangue You All Evening with Endless Bitching About Who Knows What. If not for myself, then at least for my son.

I soon realized that while writing copy in an ad agency had given me knowledge about branding companies, personal branding was unknown to me. How did it work? Where did you begin? Did anyone



do this? Later that evening, a quick online search for “Brand you” turned up over a million hits. What a world. Best to start at the beginning, I thought, and clicked on a link to an online class entitled Brand Yourself:

In today’s extremely competitive marketplace...*you need to make an impression and stand out.* The clearest, quickest way to do that is to *create your own brand*.... This class will explore the success of popular personal brands (think Rachael Ray, Oprah, and J. K. Rowling). Through lectures, exercises, and chats, you will develop a complete brand portfolio.

I felt the bile rise in my throat.

“What’s wrong?” asked my wife.

“We’re miserable,” answered my frowning son.

At least with the online class, I didn’t have to meet any, you know, people. The teacher, a woman named Julia,\* had been an instructor at Yale University and the head of programming at a major TV network.

I swallowed my bile, sent them \$350, and a few minutes later they sent me my first assignment, some questions to help identify my brand. I answered as best I could.

1. **What kind of impression do you give when you enter a room?** Probably that I don’t want to be in that room.

2. **What do people remember most about you?** I’d say that they probably vaguely remember having been at a party and having a good time until they met some guy who ruined it for them.

3. **What is unique to you?** I have no idea. Suffering? Agony? Angst? I’m afraid those aren’t as unique as they should be.

It was a week away from the first class, and I couldn’t wait. My *son* couldn’t wait. And so the next morning, after finishing my homework, I did what any brand in trouble would do: I phoned Alex Bogusky.

Alex Bogusky is the co-chairman of the Boulder-based Crispin Porter + Bogusky, the hottest ad agency in the country, according to *Fast Company* magazine. It also called him “a legend” and “the mechanic of cool.” The magazine obviously has some kind of a weird thing for him, but it’s not entirely undeserved. From Mini to Nike, this was the Guy, and he had just been hired by Microsoft. If he could make Satan seem cool, was it too much to think he could make me seem well-adjusted?

“Let me check with him,” said a man named Steve, Bogusky’s PR director.

“I’d be willing to come out to Boulder,” I said.

“Let me check with him.”

“I’d really appreciate it.”

“I’ll check with him.”

→ The Kellogg Co. is adding a little honey to Corn Flakes to cement its popularity among Hispanic consumers as well as the over-55 crowd.... “Kellogg’s Corn Flakes has been a part of the Latino breakfast experience for years,” said Susanne Norwitz, director of brand PR at Kellogg. “This new flavor addition simply provides another great option for those who love the wholesome goodness of Corn Flakes.”—*Brandweek*, June 18, 2009

**A WEEK LATER**, I logged on for my first branding class. They were discussing the movie *Juno*.

“She’s not the typical female we’ve seen in the past,” said Julia.

“Yes,” said a student named Lisa, the owner of a marketing firm in New York City. “That kid certainly had brand.”

“Or think of Sean Penn,” continued Julia.

It seemed to me she was extolling phony, one-dimensional characters as examples of strong brands, as something to which we should all aspire. “Or Richard Simmons,” she said. “Richard Simmons is hardly ever in a depressed mood.”

“That’s a good example,” said Lisa.

“Now, we were talking about energy,” said Julia. “How important it is to establish your own unique energy to bring to these assignments and your life.”

I was confused.

“What does that mean, *own unique energy*?” I asked.

A student named Vivian spoke up.

“The energy you put forth is often the perception that others see you are,” said Vivian. “If you are negative all the time, not a lot of people will want to spend a lot of time around you.”

“We are all different,” said Julia. “Therefore you have your own unique energy that you give off. What impression do you make when you enter a room?”

I had no idea what they were talking about.

“Think of very dynamic people who enter a room,” said Julia. “They are clearly giving off an energy. It’s clear they are charismatic or dynamic.”

“But that’s just charisma or dynamism,” I said.

“Yes,” said Julia. “It’s charisma and being dynamic...not depressed or downtrodden...or boring.... These are all ways of presenting yourself. It’s your choice.”

“But what if you actually *are* depressed or downtrodden?” I asked.

“Look at Martha Stewart,” Vivian offered. “If she was depressed before she went to jail, you would never have known it. Her corporate brand was front and center.”

“Good point, Viv,” said Julia. “I’m sure Martha and Oprah and Tyra and Ellen all have had days or things that happen in their lives, but they keep up their brand, and each one has their own unique way of doing so.”

“What if the real me is a bit of a pain in the ass?” I asked.

“Smiling helps,” Lisa added.

The bile returned. Was I the only one with ethical qualms about what we were discussing?

After class, I checked my e-mail. Steven from Crispin had e-mailed saying Alex would see me.

“When would you like to come?” he asked.

I suggested mid-August.

“How’s early August?” he said.

“Great. How’s the eighth?”

“How’s the seventh?”

“Fine,” I answered.

He put me down for the seventh.

**FOR THE NEXT CLASS**, we were supposed to prepare “personal catchphrases.” Julia had e-mailed, suggesting that I try to spin my depression as honesty.

“I’m having trouble with this,” I admitted to Julia. “It seems a bit disingenuous.”

“Hello,” said Brian, joining in.

“Brian,” I asked, “does any of this personal-branding stuff seem disingenuous?”

“As in insincere?” he asked.

“As in phony and manipulative.”

The consensus of the class seemed to be not. Brian suggested that people like having things presented to them in little packages, so why not create the package you want people to see? Julia mentioned Larry David and Stewie Griffin as examples of successful brands that make negativity work for them.

Brian thought those were marvelous ideas.

I thought they were fictional characters.

“Brian,” Julia asked, “how are you coming with your branding?”

“I’m going for the Good Friend Who Is There for You When You Need Him,” Brian replied. “A guy who is supportive but will also give it to you straight.”

“I wish I could pull that off,” I said.

I found myself becoming **disturbingly aware of all the brands around me**. Strangers, co-workers, friends—everyone was reduced to a unique selling proposition, a niche, an angle.

\* Names have been changed.



Brian assured me that I would find the right brand soon. Julia comforted me as well. *There, there, brandless child.*

"Can we move your meeting with Alex from the seventh to the sixth?" Steve asked.

"Sure," I said.

"We're on for the sixth," he replied.

I would have to fly from Albany Airport to Chicago O'Hare, catch a second plane to Denver, and drive an hour from there to Boulder. But it would be worth it. I was clearly a difficult product. Apple—Apple's easy. They're iPods, they're cool, buy them. They're so cool nobody even cares that they're poorly made pieces of shit. Brand Me, though, that was a tough one.

If anyone could help, it was Alex Bogusky.

**AS THE DAYS**, classes, and assignments passed ("Create a logo for yourself!" "Develop a headline that encapsulates your brand!"), I found myself becoming disturbingly aware of all the brands around me. Strangers, co-workers, friends—everyone was reduced to a unique selling proposition, a niche, an angle. All I could see was strategic positioning. Why was my wife wearing Doc Martens? What was she going for—"Mature but Playful?" Why was my son so much more active at school than he was at home, running around screaming at the top of his lungs? Was he doing the whole "Extreme" thing? He wasn't my son anymore; he was a struggling youth-brand trying to get heard in the increasingly crowded pre-K marketplace. Is that how he saw himself? What was my wife's problem? Why am I driving a subcompact Japanese car? Am I doing a whole Sporty and Hip yet Authentic and Unpretentious thing? Dear God, what was happening?

I was late to the final class. Julia welcomed me back. Brian excitedly announced that he had decided to create a separate identity for himself.

"That's fantastic," said Julia.

Brian explained that he had finally realized there were two Brians: There was the real Brian, the Brian that was taking a branding class, and then there was "Brian," the Brian his customers knew and interacted with, and that was the Brian he could mold and shape.

"My customer is a hero in his own myth," said Brian, "and I take place in his story!"

I tried to imagine what Brian might look like. Then I tried to imagine what he might look like crushed under a bus.

"Which diet book do you think sells more," Brian said, "*The Thinking Man's Guide to Losing Weight* or *Skinny Bitch*?"

*Skinny Bitch*, I guessed, was the one he thought was better branded, but I suggested that perhaps it didn't matter—neither worked, and both played on people's insecurities. Wasn't that the more important consideration?

"Check the ratings on Amazon," said Brian, growing enraged with my cynicism.

Which is what it all comes down to, I suppose—how you're selling. Welcome to the twenty-first century, where the only opinion of you that matters is the one that isn't your own. Rate My Tits. Rate My Ass. Rate My Children. Rate My Essential Being. *1 Star: Awful. This Being left me feeling like I wanted more.* Branding ourselves suddenly makes perfect sense, makes the only sense, and the Brians and Julias of this world press through the adoring crowd and bow in respect before the Golden Calves of branding success—the phony celebrities, the fake politicians, the corporations who own Happy—and say, "Sure, I know it's a Golden Calf, but look at how many people showed up to see it!"

"When I die and God gives me shit about the immoral life I've led," I replied, "I'm going to tell him to check the Amazon ratings. Then I'll explain that I'm an American

from the twenty-first century, and He'll say, 'Oh, right. Fuck you.'"

And with that, the class ended. Julia thanked us, wished us well, and asked me if anything had changed for me in the past four weeks.

"I think I hate myself more than I did a month ago," I said.

Afterward I checked my e-mail.

"Can we move the meeting to the fifth?" Steve asked.

"I've booked all my flights," I said.

"The fifth will work," he said.

"Okay," I said.

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→ By the end of this year, Israel will have a new international image.... Fiona Gilmore, Acanchi's founder and a leading expert in rebranding countries and cities, toured the country last week and met with a wide range of Israelis.... Her mission is to create a brand disconnected from the Arab-Israeli conflict that focuses instead on Israel's scientific and cultural achievements.—*Haaretz*, June 10, 2008

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**THE UNITED FLIGHT** out of Albany was delayed by thirty minutes. I e-mailed Steve to let him know.

"No problem," he said.

I had rebranding on my mind, so just for the hell of it, I smiled at the woman in line beside me. Coke owned Happy, but I figured they wouldn't be too pissed off if I borrowed it for a moment. The woman smiled back.

"Nice day for flying," she said.

I smiled at the airline attendant who took my boarding pass. He smiled back.

"Have a nice flight!" he said.

I smiled at the woman in the seat beside me. She smiled back.

"Do you want the window seat?" she offered.

"That's okay," I smiled.

God, the shit actually worked.

You know why they sell fake vomit? said Lenny Bruce. Because the fake shit sold so well.

Flying time to Chicago O'Hare was two hours, and I filled it mostly with regret. I had spent the past few weeks trying to rebrand myself, trying to happily myself, and it had only made me more depressed. Why didn't anyone seem to think this commodification of the self was a problem?

The flight from Chicago to Denver was delayed half an hour. I got a coffee and e-mailed Steve.

"No problem," said Steve.

It was delayed another half hour. I got another coffee and found a seat at the gate. I e-mailed Steve.

"No problem," said Steve.

An hour later, they finally announced that the plane was ready. I picked up my

bag, went to the gate, and stood in line. That's when Steve e-mailed:

"It can't happen," he wrote. "I am really sorry."

"Funny," I replied.

Surely he was kidding. Surely I hadn't flown halfway across the country only for Bogusky to cancel on me midjourney because of a lousy two-hour delay.

"Are you in-flight?" asked Steve.

"I'm already in Chicago."

"Sorry," he replied.

The gate agent held out her hand for my boarding pass, and I realized I was faced with a crucial decision—fly out to Denver, drive to Boulder, throw a brick through the front window of Crispin Porter + Bogusky, take a piss on the front door, and shit on the front step, or race around the airport to try and find a flight back to New York. I heard Julia in my head—*Being aware of the energy you're giving off is very important*—and I became acutely aware that this was the first big test of my rebranding effort. *Think of Martha Stewart. If she was depressed before she went to jail, you would never have known it. Her corporate brand was front and center.*

"Boarding pass?" the gate agent said.

The hotel was already paid for, the rental was already paid for—it would almost be stupid not to fly out to Denver, drive to Boulder, throw a brick through the front window of Crispin Porter + Bogusky, take a piss on the front door, and shit on the front step.

But what about my son—*I'm miserable, too, Dad?* Didn't he deserve a father who didn't focus on the negative all the time? *If you are negative all the time, not a lot of people will want to spend a lot of time around you.*

"Sir?"

*Richard Simmons is hardly ever in a depressed mood.*

"Sir, will you be flying with us?"

I smiled at her. She smiled back. The bile rose in my throat.

"I need to find a flight back to New York," I said.

She directed me to an airport customer-service person, who informed me that there was only one seat left on the one remaining flight back to Albany, leaving in forty minutes from a gate two terminals away. She gave me the number for reservations, and as I raced to the gate, phoning the airline and trying to reserve the seat, visions of nuclear holocaust danced in my head. *A two-hour flight delay and he ditches me. What is he, the pope? After I've traveled 700 miles?*

"Thank you for holding, sir. How can I help you?"

*What the fuck is wrong with this world? The guy's a glorified shoe salesman and the world treats him like a genius? He sells*

*shoes! He sells burgers! He's Al Bundy! What the fuck is going on?*

"I'm here at O'Hare," I explained as I ran, "and there's a flight to Albany, and..."

*I mean, Jesus Christ, why is anyone surprised at the state of this country? We lie and we are lied to, and the best liars—the ones who don't even see it as lying—get the business cards and the corner offices and the fancy clothes some other liar tricked them into thinking they needed. At least it used to bother people that the liars and frauds and phonies rose to the top, the citizens expressed concern that shit floated. Today we put the shit on magazine covers, laud its buoyancy, and anxiously wait to buy the shit's best-selling business book about how you can float your shit, too.*

An hour later, I was on the plane, taking off, flying back to the very place I had just come from, flying back to Albany Fucking Airport. And that's when it all hit me—I didn't fly out to Denver, did I? I didn't drive to Boulder, throw a brick through the front window of Crispin Porter + Bogusky, take a piss on the front door and shit on the front step. My father probably would have, but I didn't. Sure, my brand may be miserable and pissed off, but it's different from his brand—I don't own Violent and Aggressive and Drunk. Okay, so bullshit gets to me. Bullshit *should* get to me. Bullshit should get to everyone. I'm surprised the whole world isn't pissed off. They're the ones with the problem, not me. Samuel Beckett said the real pessimists are the optimists who are too afraid to acknowledge just how bad everything is, while the real optimists are the pessimists who at least haven't totally given up hope. Beckett? Pissed off. Lenny? Pissed off. Pryor, Kafka, Twain. Pissed off. Someday, sure, when he's old enough to understand, I'll have to explain all this to my son. But I have two options: I can either (a) explain to him that there are things in this world that should piss you off, or (b) explain to him why I'm a willfully ignorant, self-delusional pod person who won't even get angry when everything in the world suggests that angry is exactly what one should be getting:

Obama's messaging...encouraged his audience to see the campaign in terms of themselves, of how they were part of it. He used specific phrasing—"Yes, We Can," "Change we can believe in"—that engaged the consumer and created loyalty and passion in how they thought of the campaign. They felt the brand. They were the brand. It evoked the feeling around an Apple or Adidas campaign.  
—*Brandweek*, December 8, 2008

I'll take my chances with Option A. ❌

SHALOM AUSLANDER is the author of *Foreskin's Lament*.