

THE BRAND VORTEX

The Guide to Branding with Gravitational Pull

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Preface

What Is a Brand, Really?

Ask ten experts what a brand is, and you'll get ten confident answers. A promise. A story. A personality. A perception. An organizing principle. A shared belief system. A reason to exist.

And all of them are partially right.

In the last two decades, the definition of “brand” has evolved far beyond logos and taglines. Today's most influential thinkers rightly argue that brand is not just what a company says, it's what it *does*, what it *believes*, how it *behaves*. A brand, in this view, is the internal compass that shapes culture, decision-making, and experience.

That's progress.

But it doesn't go far enough.

This book proposes a deeper shift. What if a brand isn't just an organizing principle *inside* a company but a gravitational system that organizes everything around it?

What if brand isn't just *intentional* but *inevitable*. Not something you design once, but something that behaves, moves, and pulls?

What if we stopped thinking about a brand as a set of assets, and started understanding it as a pattern of forces? That's the idea at the center of *The Brand Vortex*.

This book doesn't argue against clarity, culture, or consistency. Those things are desirable goals. More importantly it's what's behind these effects that really matter.

Brand is not a story you tell. It's the *force* that makes the story feel true.

It's not a belief you broadcast. It's the *behavior* that earns belief again and again.

It's not what you say you are. It's what people feel before they can explain why.

If other models help you describe what a brand is, this model helps you understand how a brand *works*.

How it pulls.

How it sticks.

How it grows.

Not from the top down.

But from the inside out.

And from the outside *in*.

Welcome to the Vortex.

Introduction:

Brands Are Not Things

I didn't start out as a brand strategist. I started as a creative.

Early in my career, “branding” meant trade dress. It was the logo, the color palette, the visual language. They were the clothes a company put on to look different. Design was instinctual. You tried things. You immersed yourself in what a company did or stood for. You sought inspiration. You designed for elegance, edge, or emotion. There were norms, trends and styles that were current. You created things that looked and felt right, then “pitched it” with passion and finesse, and you hoped it stuck.

I became fluent in that intuitive mode of branding. Through trial and error, through late nights staring at a sketchpad (and later, a computer screen) until something clicked. But over time, the challenges changed. The stakes changed. Clients didn't just want to look distinct. They wanted to solve business problems. Design had to do more than catch the eye. It had to *move the needle*.

That's when my curiosity deepened. I started asking different questions. Not just “What looks right?” but “What works?” “What drives

outcomes?” “What changes behavior?” Design, I realized, wasn’t only aesthetic. It was psychological. And it was strategic.

Then I had the opportunity to work with world-class brand strategists at one of the largest branding agencies in the biz, at Interbrand, who introduced me to the idea of brand value. This was a shift. It wasn’t about perception alone anymore. It was about contribution. Influence. Impact. It was about how brands create financial value. Maybe this swung the pendulum too far in the other direction, but in the end, this was important because it presented new questions. *How exactly do brands create value, and for whom? How do brands form attachment?*

I moved from creative to strategist in this phase of my career. Not because I abandoned instinct, but because I wanted to resolve the tension between the arbitrary and the effective. I played a bridge role between brand and design. I worked with branding models, the prevailing strategies, and translating brand goals into design briefs for big identity and experience design executions. I wanted to understand not just *how* design influences, but *why*. Why some signals create belief. Why some stories create desire. Why some brands endure and others fade.

That question has fueled my career. It’s led me deep into the study of behavioral economics, cognitive psychology, neuroscience and, of course, business. I’ve been fortunate to apply these learnings in practice across countless brand challenges, for clients in almost every category imaginable, with results. And now, with the great team at ChangeUp, that is my role, as practitioner and philosopher.

This book is the synthesis of that journey. An approach to branding not built in a lab, but in rooms with clients, under deadlines, tested and fortified against unique brand problems, and a constant stream of questions that wouldn’t let go.

And it starts with this

A brand is not a thing.

It is a gravitational system.

It's not a logo. Not a campaign. Not a product. Not even a company. A brand is a *pattern of forces* shaping how people perceive, decide, act, and believe.

Strong brands don't push themselves outward. They *pull* people in. They create meaning that feels real. Memory that feels earned. Momentum that feels personal. And they do it *before* the audience is fully conscious of the process. This is what I have come to call *Brand Gravity*. And it's a very different model from what most branding approaches still use.

Much of the branding world is built on a weak theory. One that imagines people as rational actors. It assumes consumers analyze choices like economists. It tells us to define a "position," find "white space", craft a message, and blast it outward hoping people will agree. That model is broken. This worldview is the branding equivalent of a solar system, one where the brand sat as the sun at the center: static, self-important, broadcasting outward while consumers were imagined orbiting randomly around it, receiving its message like planets receiving light.

But that's not how real influence works. People don't passively orbit brands. We now know from neuroscience, psychology, and behavioral economics that people don't act that way. They don't evaluate, then choose. They behave first then explain it afterward. Their attention is scattered. Their decisions are biased. Their memories are malleable. And yet, brands still try to talk people into believing. Still shout into the void. Still rely on messages instead of *forces*.

This book presents a different approach, one that moves brand out of marketing's shadow and into alignment with how human behavior

really works. Not as a story we tell, but as a force that shapes attention, meaning, and memory from the inside out. Brands still should aspire to be a sun, but how do you fuel that sun to not only shine brightly but create gravity?

A gravitational brand doesn't persuade. It pulls. It doesn't simply broadcast signals. It creates orbits.

That's the goal of this book: to help you build a brand that doesn't just show up, but *sticks*. That doesn't just sell, but *shapes behavior*. That creates a gravitational field around your product, service, or experience so that people don't just remember it they return to it. To do that, I'll introduce a set of tools and models grounded in science and sharpened in practice.

In Part 1, I'll help you find your brand's center using the Brand Gravity Matrix; a framework that maps your brand's gravitational orientation across two behavioral axes: *value type* (functional or emotional) and *influence mode* (empower or orchestrate). From this, we identify four dominant brand types: Simplifiers, Tribalists, Directors, and Symbolists. Each has a distinct path to influence. Each has a different way of pulling people in. Each leads to a strong *Brand Idea*.

Then we'll examine the mechanics of pull: the Vortex Forces. These include *surface forces* like signals, clarity, and fluency, and *deep forces* like personal identity, meaning, and habit. We'll explore how involvement levels and psychological distance affect pull, and why physical experience matters more than ever.

But this isn't theory alone. In Part 2, we move to practice. I'll show how to build gravitational memory, how to layer traits without diluting your center, and how to design a strategy grounded in the quadrant your brand belongs to. Whether you're launching a startup, refreshing a legacy brand, or reviving lost mojo, this model gives you a path.

In this book I will also confront common traps, like mistaking ideas like *trust, purpose, innovation, and quality* for strategy. And I'll show how brand leads to marketing, not the other way around, by understanding the orbit of your customer and designing to intercept it. Throughout the book I will provide additional content in the form of *Spin Notes*- deeper dives into some of the theories applied in the Vortex, and *Spin Outs*- mini case studies with real brands to illustrate brand gravity.

This is a book for strategists, creatives, leaders, founders, and anyone who wants to build something that lasts. It's about turning instinct into influence. It's about bridging psychology and creativity. And above all, it's about designing brands that *pull people in*, not because they're louder, but because they feel closer, truer, and more real.

Because the strongest brands aren't chosen.

They're *gravitated toward*.

That's the future.

Let's build it.

About the Author

Bill Chidley has spent more than forty years helping brands find their center of gravity. His career has moved between creativity and strategy, first leading design and creative teams that shaped how brands look and feel, and later serving as a strategist focused on how brands work and grow. As Vice President of Strategy at Interbrand, he contributed to the *Best Global Brands* valuation and helped shape the modern understanding of brand as a driver of business value.

Today, Bill is the Executive Director of Strategy and co-founder at ChangeUp, a branding and experience design firm that works with clients such as Burger King, BP, Subway, Discount Tire, Baskin Robbins, and Subaru to bring their brands to life through experiences that pull people in and keep them coming back.

Over his career, he has also partnered with companies including Procter & Gamble, McDonald's, Honda, AT&T, The Home Depot, and John Deere, helping them translate business goals into meaning people can feel.

The Brand Vortex is the culmination of that journey. It unites creativity and behavioral science into a single theory of how brands gain gravity, grow with coherence, and earn a place in people's lives.