



IDEAS, OPINIONS, INFORMATION
(& OCCASIONAL BALDERDASH)
FOR FRIENDS OF
BRANDBOOK LLC



Précis:

Our cultural and business dialogue is saturated with numerical rankings. How helpful are they to the development and enhancement of brands?

This brief is the first in a series exploring the uses and limits of numerical ratings, and their utility for brand owners.

BRAND ECSTASY & NON-NUMERICAL KNOWING, or On a Scale of 1-10, You're an 11!

Scales from 1-10 This thread begins with my new Primary Care Doctor asking about a minor pain complaint: "On a scale of one to ten, where would you place this pain?"

"What's a ten?" I ask. He's a bit nonplussed, but it is a very important question. If we are going to use numerical scales, that implies measurable standards. Is a ten the most painful thing imaginable? I heard from an Indonesian friend that Dengue Fever "the bone-break disease" is so painful the sufferer gets to a point where death would be a welcome relief) Or is a ten merely the most painful thing you have experienced (in which case the scale is different for everyone) If you go with Dengue as a 10, by comparison, the pains a normal person experiences in life have to be between .001 and 1. I decide to that I will get no medical attention with a ranking of 1, so I go with the personal model, and say, "2".

Turns out 2 is good for no more than Tylenol and another appointment. Next visit, I'll have to try a 7, though it would be tough to find out they amputate above 6. But I feel like a coward, retreating from a universal standard to a meaningless personal scale.

But that gets me thinking; I don't really support the idea of reducing everything to numerical rankings.



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Nobody likes being reduced to a number.

We much prefer being identified by a name and a narrative.

Consumer Reports

Does an outstanding job of balancing numerical ratings with text based reviews for a nuanced decision making tool. They also do a great job of objectivity; avoiding more than most other sources the complicity of 'having a dog in the hunt.' I read the review of the Tesla with the 105 ranking, but when I went back to get a screen shot I couldnt find it. Maybe the cosmic implications made them think better of it!

Numerical ranking forces us to make decisions, to summarize. I crowns winners, agonizes losers. It whets our appetite for the backstory, who? Why? How did they do it? In branding especially, numers beg for narrative support.



Consumer Reports whose rankings I read compulsively—creates numerical rankings with infographics for everything from automobiles to marmalade. They recently ranked the Tesla above 105 on a scale of 100; first time ever they exceeded the top number. Clearly there was some fudging going on there; further recognition that numerical scales fall short of the full picture? But what keeps me coming back to CU is their ability to add text, pictures and video to give nuance to their infographics.

Category	Model	Price Range	Score	Visuals	Rank
Luxury midsize cars	Lincoln MKZ Hybrid	\$35,190 - \$47,495 (\$41,915)	83	Progress bar, icons	34
	Infiniti Q70 Hybrid	\$49,850 - \$67,050 (\$58,655)	83	Progress bar, icons	26
	Lexus ES 300h	\$38,000 - \$40,920 (\$44,017)	77	Progress bar, icons	36
Sporty cars	Volkswagen Jetta GLI	\$17,680 - \$31,120 (\$26,815)	74	Progress bar, icons	27
Midsize sport-utility vehicles	Toyota Highlander Hybrid Limited	\$29,990 - \$50,485 (\$50,875)	85	Progress bar, icons	25
	Toyota Highlander XLE (V6)	\$29,990 - \$50,485 (\$30,941)	84	Progress bar, icons	20
Luxury large cars	Tesla Model S P85D	\$70,000 - \$105,000 (\$127,820)	100	Progress bar, icons	87
	Tesla Model S 85kWh	\$70,000 - \$105,000 (\$89,650)	99	Progress bar, icons	84

Industrial Scale Rankings There are whole industries built around numerically ranking people; It seems to me seems fraught with danger. In the Olympics, 5 judges watch an athlete and their scores are averaged. But everyone watching feels the injustice of seeing a brilliant performance just miss the podium. Or employment selection: highly evolved artificial intelligence programs analyze the vocabulary and semantics of resumes and deliver a stacks of candidates by numerical ranking. Only then are

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they reviewed by humans, and fewer still actually interviewed. Totally dehumanizing! Is it any wonder there is so much turnover in the labor market?

Why do we love numerical lists? Blogs are flooded with click bait headlines of 5 ways of this or 7 keys to that. As if the number were somehow magical. Top ten lists abound. Then there are election polls! What an insane proposition. People can tell you their positive rating, their negative rating, but until they pull the lever in that booth, it's all an multi-dimensional stew. What is it about numbers that gives us such security?

Dogma put in perspective When I was a design greenhorn, I audited a class given by the famous industrial designer, George Nelson. Nelson researched his work exhaustively, yet at the same time he warned his graduate students to beware "The Dogma of Measurable Performance" Nelson of course used science and technology of his day in many imaginative ways, but he was trying to teach something important, something our civilization has lost sight of: many things cannot—ought not—be measured on a numerical scale.

Nelson wanted his products to touch the heart, to make people smile. Design needs rational inputs, but much of the process is deeply intuitive. Nelson is also the first person I ever heard say "People buy based on emotion and justify with fact." (though the saying is probably ancient) This makes perfect sense; the facts give us cover for what we want, even though the desire is deeply irrational.

Hence the design of products—and brands—is a process that starts factually: taking into account the human needs (size, shape, utility, cost) but is essentially an intuitive process. Is the emotional attraction of a Tesla worth paying four times the cost of a Nissan Leaf? The answer is non-numerical: It depends on what the buyer wants. True, Tesla has a waiting list and Leafs are more readily available, but the point is that perceptions about economy, social responsibility, luxury, prestige, preference, and exclusivity—all powerful drivers in brand selection—ineffable and arise largely from subconscious and emotional processes. We chose brands to be reflections of our values. The important thing that we enjoy brands for their features, but we love them for how they make us look and what they say about us.

For those of us on the wet end of designing brands and experiences, this idea of how people 'measure' their experience is vital. While numerical ratings fall short of a full review, they are useful—almost inescapable—in helping us evaluate and decide.



George Nelson

(1908-1986) designed everything from buildings and chairs to worlds fair exhibits. Clocks were a special passion for Nelson, he designed dozens of them, very few actually had numbers, but quite a few are still in production and many are design classics in museum collections. Part of his fascination with them was the enjoyment of 'spending time'—non-numerical, intuitive, even hedonistic—in contrast to the strictly numerical 'keeping time'.



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20th Century Adage:

*"People buy based on emotion
and justify their purchase with
facts."*



21st Century Enhancement

*"People read how many stars,
and bail out if they are too low.
Even if the 'stars' look good,
they don't 'buy it now' unless
the text narratives align with
their own evaluation."*

They are also really useful in discovering where an owner's satisfaction level settles in, post purchase. All brands that succeed do so because a certain number of people love the brand and chat it up. I have a HP desktop printer that occasionally pulls the finished sheet back into the mechanism and chews it up. I curse a blue streak at it when this 'back feeding' happens, yet overall I am always enthusiastic about the product—I give it at least a 9, because it has so many great features for such a moderate price. In such a case, having the qualitative description of why it's not a 10, paired with my numerical ranking of 9, helps communicate the relative magnitude of my content/discontent.

Conclusions: OK, I have tried to set the table with some examples; here's my proposition:

1. Numerical evaluations have severe limitations when applied to complex human experience. We will never get rid of numerical evaluations; they make life easy for computers, and we the obedient netizens are trained to accept them. They do actually bring some value to decisions about creating and purchasing branded products. They are just not the whole story.

2. Numbers plus narrative Applying numerical ratings to make a whole story requires some ingenuity. I buy utilitarian products on line all the time, and I read the reader's rankings. I will consider a product someone has rated a 1 star out of 5 if their gripe is something I don't care about and there's a reasonably high average rating, (my ranking of the HP printer is an example) Conversely, a low rating for a key component kills my impetus to 'buy it now'. So for utilitarian products, numbers plus narrative are a much more actionable 'whole story' on the purchase end.

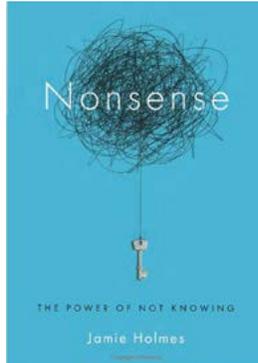
3. Purchase is only a midpoint in the branding process If the customer buys the product and doesn't tell anyone else that they liked it, the brand is not going to take off. *Securing the endorsement of the experienced purchaser is the lifeblood of brand.* It's analogous to becoming a grandparent – you know your genes are a success! Hearing an endorsement from a stranger may equate to a 5, hearing it from a close friend gets you up into the ten range.

4. Emotions are where the action is While the numerical scale is a great indicator of our rational reasons for engaging with a brand, the emotional realm of purchasing decisions remains the most fertile area for invention and economic growth. In a future InBrief we're going to explore these frontiers of numerical and emotional opportunities specifically for branding of expertise-based enterprises.



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Nonsense, The Power of Not Knowing

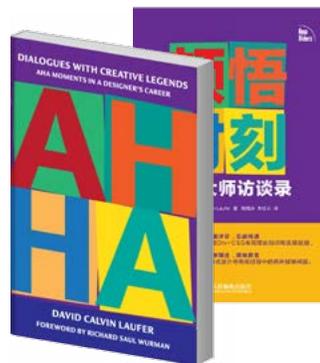
I'm glad to see the appearance of this new book by Jamie Holmes (2015) which posits—at the risk of oversimplification- that we should embrace “not knowing”. Holmes seems to suggest that uncertainty is not just a fact of life but a resource—something to stimulate our imagination and make us wary of easy answers. This is certainly something that designers have felt and used in the past, perhaps not articulated in the way Holmes does.



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Short video excerpts from Dialogues with Creative Legends are on [Brandbook's YouTube channel](#)
Read a longer excerpt on [Design Intelligence](#)

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