

# Will Apple Crumble?



Apple is a very special brand. Like Virgin, Nike and Coca Cola, it has transcended its category and become a way of life. To its followers, the delicious anticipation of unpacking any new product from that emporium of 'cool' (be it an ipod, a desktop computer or anything in-between) never fails to elicit an admiring grin, as they marvel at how clever, how beautiful and how elegant it all is. How did they think of that? Have you seen this? Even humble power adaptors are lovingly-peeled of their shiny, protective skins before their ornamental beauty succumbs to function. Wave after wave of ultra-desirable products have been longed-for, lusted-over then voraciously consumed by millions of Apple fans all over the world. You only have to watch an Apple-user flush with pride, as they slip their MacBook onto their lap on the train home, to see how the brand ignites passion - the Apple logo on the back of the screen glows as confidently as they do! Like any exclusive club, there is a joining fee and followers have always been prepared to pay a premium for the privilege of owning Apple products and for the status they confer.

Although the Apple universe has grown massively over recent years, it still something of a niche brand in the personal computer marketplace. So, after years of developing passionately-inspired products for the creatively-enlightened, Apple recently decided that seducing the dedicated was no longer enough.

Buoyed by inroads into the lucrative corporate world with its Blackberry-bashing iPhone and ambidextrous Macs (running Windows on one hand and Mac OS X on the other), Apple, evidently, believes that it is finally ready for the big time. The lucrative business market is beckoning and it is too tempting to resist.



And so the latest generation of iMac desktop models arrived with their smart and serious new look featuring a high-tech satin silver finish with neat black details, a theme that continued with the MacBook Air (the almost-impossibly



ie the 'must have' object-of-om LAX to LHR). Now it is 3ook' laptop range - per- of all. The MacBook (which is successor to the iconic iBooks and PowerBooks) is, quite simply, the coolest computer on campus and, therefore, the laptop on which future generations of Mac users are weaned. In redesigning it Apple is redefining the look of the popular Mac and reasserting the essential values of the brand. So, it has boldly broken with the past and has left behind the visual language of naïve glossy white mouldings, sexy perspex mice, rubbery blacks and tactile finishes that used to characterise Apple's funky 'design studio' image. These have, perhaps inevitably, given way a contemporary formula of satin silver and black - albeit as nicely executed as you would expect from Apple. This executive makeover will, no doubt, prove attractive to corporate customers who can now buy laptops that combine Apple usability with boardroom-friendly styling. The specs tick all the boxes and the prices are reasonable enough when you take all the latest features into account. All of which is satisfyingly rational, but disturbingly un-Apple.

The worry is that, in chasing after the big corporate markets Apple risks 'going native' and allowing its uniqueness to be diluted. The creative style and risqué edginess that have always set Apple products apart, engendering it with an emo-

tionally-charged 'love-it-or-loath-it' allure, is now under threat. The latest products simply look and feel too sensible and 'grown-up' to bear the Apple logo. The new styling might be clean and elegant with some fine detailing, but look sideways at any of the new laptops and you could be looking at a Sony Vaio, Compaq Presario or one of many other worthy but forgettable business tools. The risk is that they could, ultimately, become dependent on 'spec and price' shoot-outs with the big PC brands to maintain and grow market share in the commercial quagmire of the business computer market. Can anyone imagine the big guys rolling-over and allowing Apple to come and steal their most profitable sales without a putting-up an aggressive fight the like of which no Mac has seen before?

Has Apple been so blinded by ambition that it risks losing its soul, the very soul that has always set it apart? Frankly, when Apple buyers are reduced to choosing a new Mac on spec and price, the magic will have been lost and the brand re-

duced to a deflated effigy of its former glory. Apple faces a stark choice, it can follow the money and trade on residual Apple-ness while it lasts; or it can take careful stock of its brand values, work hard to nourish and nurture the special difference that sets it apart and develop the kinds of new products that will continue to thrill and delight its emotionally-driven, opinion-forming, cool-seeking customers.

Apple's phenomenally-potent brand appeal, based on exciting and alluring products, has always been its secret weapon. It has sustained it for years, even when the products were, on occasion, technically below par. Today, as it squares-up to face the industry Goliath's, Apple needs to be certain that its secret weapon is up to scratch or the battle will be shorter and the end of the story less victorious than it had planned.





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Brands with which Keith Lucas has personally been engaged include: BBC, Rolex, BAA, Discovery Channel, Firmenich, Farrer & Company, Reed Elsevier, BP, Ford, Jaguar, Citroën, McKinsey & Company, Goldman Sachs, Towers Watson, BT Global Services, Hitachi, Samsung and Motorola.

Lucasbrand has created, developed and repositioned brands across many sectors including broadcast, publishing, airlines, airports, luxury goods, perfumery, telecoms, cars, energy, consumer electronics, professional services and banking.

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