HOW BRANDS BECOME ICONS

The Principles of Cultural Branding

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What is an Iconic Brand?

The author very fondly starts with the Oxford dictionary meaning of the phrase Cultural icon i.e., "a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol, especially of a culture or a movement; a person or an institution worthy of admiration or respect." It shows his conviction to stay true to the basic and exact meaning of the phrase and how he fluently blends his ideas to the basic meaning and offers a very historical (literally) approach to how brands carved a niche in the various points in the time-line that stretches a little over half a century.

Since we are quite familiar with what an Identity brand is, Holt shows the relevance of an identity brand becoming an iconic brand. He states that brands having a certain amount of identity value and cultural relevance depending on the culture, preference, and socio-economic scenario, political and demographic setup tend to become Iconic brands. His belief is that brands have long been treated in a rather standard- one size fits all manner. And to take forward this new approach he mentions a few axioms:

- Iconic brands address Acute Contradictions in Society
- Iconic brands Perform Identity Myths that address these desires and Myths
- Identity myths reside in the brand, which consumers experience and share via ritual action
- These identity myths are set in populist worlds
- Iconic brands perform as activists, leading culture
- Iconic brands rely on breakthrough performances, rather than consistent communications
- Iconic brands enjoy a cultural Halo effect

Names of some old and famous brands, such as VW, Mountain Dew, Corona, Budweiser etc., have been sighted to examine and validate each of the given axioms. The following chapters are a step further in such direction.

How is Cultural Branding different?

In this chapter the author is trying to make the reader understand the difference between cultural branding from all other forms, shapes, sizes and models of branding, namely viral branding, mind-share branding and emotional branding. Sighting examples of brands like corona and coke he explains how a brand of cheap Mexican beer rose to become a world famous brand. Corona's iconic value resided in the particulars of its distinctive myths, not in the abstractions that mind share advocates emphasize. And one comes to understand why Mind share branding works only for utilitarian low involvement products. Over a period of time Corona beer had to change its identity from a story about partying in Mexico to one about relaxing in isolation on a quiet beach. Both the representations happened in a different eras.

The author further moves to advocate why emotional branding is not so useful to give and enlarge a certain identity brand an iconic status. Emotional attachment is the consequence of a great myth which is spun around a brand, which further provides the customers with – moments of recognition that puts images, sounds and feelings on barely perceptible desires. Coke didn't compel its customers to form an emotional bond by airing emotional communications.

Another model that the author thinks needs to be clearly disassociated with Cultural branding is viral branding. A short genealogy of Snapple drink is put forth to explains this concept. He clearly admits that the buzz and hype created by Snapple was very important and necessary. But these viral effects were the artifacts of the brands success and not its causes. Snapple earned these desirable qualities because the brand pushed a compelling new identity myth. For without it, Snapple wouldn't have reached a status of an iconic brand. But the era in which it was

launched and how it was placed in front of the customers played an equally important part. Its amateurishness, underground coolness, not to be bogged by the big "corporate honchos" of cola and so on and so forth. For advertising the company hired a celebrities it could afford and similarly they were resounding a generation of people who loved this way of life. Not afraid to be cool, idiotic, idiosyncratic and unorthodox. Snapple was a non carbonated iced tea drink which could also be used to create several weird concoctions and people (customers) liked them for it. The buzz that Snapple created was the consequence of the power of its myth. Simply getting people to talk about a catchy phrase is not a note worthy event. But what really sticks are stories that affect how people think about themselves in the world.

Brands need to be seen by the consumers as the role model in what they want to see and achieve in this society. For Snapple it was a critique of the corporate life of the 1990s.

Cultural branding goes beyond the realm of experience by the 5 senses; on the contrary it leverages on the identity myths to sell the product. Communications plays a very big part in visualization and conceptualization of the myth and the accompanying stories/ experience. A culture that dominates or is in the minority or in the sub-conscious of the consumer becomes the corner stone of the brands meteoric rise and appeal. Such sub cultures existed in each of the above mentioned brands' time. Consistency in communicating the abstract and visible benefits of the brand is also something that these brands didn't follow. But from what the other mentions, it is quite apparent that brands don't hesitate in shifting from one identity myth to another. For e.g. Coke celebrated America's triumphs against the Nazi, then shifted to dramatize the ways to heal internal strife around was in the 1970s, and then shifted again to attend to racial divisions in the early 1980s.

Targeting Myth Markets

Pepsi co built Mountain dew into an extraordinary financial success because they twice reinvented the brands myth. Locating the prevailing cultural contradiction of the day was the key to its success. From masculine conformity, to the celebration of yuppies as America's heroes, to the preposterous ideals of hyper aggressive masculinity in a dreadful labour market, Mountain Dew had identified and associated with each one.

It is very interesting how the author tries to signify the role played by Mountain dew in disassociating itself with the national ideology and contradicting some of the cultures. It takes various myths and stories to be woven around a brand to make it culturally acceptable and applauded. Also the brand needs to associate with such stories (manhood, rebel, success and fearlessness in case of MD) to get a myth attached to it.

Another phrase used by Holt in explaining this very precarious and rare event is Populist worlds. Populist worlds are groups that express a distinctive ideology through their activities. They are potent cultural sites because the public perceives that populist world ideologies are authentic. It is the utopian world where one does what one wants to do. It is created artificially and sometimes exists independently. And myths that help brands rope consumers that want such experience usually originate from such populist world but to become its very own anti-thesis.

Myth markets are contradictions in national ideology. It is quite possible to have a number of contradictions in the society as of today, and each such contradiction provides a brand with an opportunity to spawn a myth market. Myth markets crumble when cultural upheaval strikes. This leaves the iconic brand iconic only if

they abandon their old myth and invent a revised version that taps into a new myth market.

Composing the Cultural Brief

There are 3 elements of the cultural brief that one needs to understand before moving on to how to composing it. The cultural analogue to the positioning statement is the cultural brief. Following are its key components:

- Myth Treatment
- Populist authenticity
- Charismatic aesthetic

The author explains each of them with respect to how Volkswagen reached iconic status in the midst of Detroit heavy weights in a highly muscle and style driven 1970s market. The VW Beetle was considered one of the ugliest and least reliable cars. While it was cheap, maneuverable and durable, it also broke down regularly and was very small and Spartan. The Beetle's ads explicitly mentioned the quality control and functional benefits of the car, which quite opposite to what other American manufacturers did. It created a world in which customers are intelligent and creative people who can define for themselves what is style and beautiful. Beetle was the smart ass friend, saying things straight and simple without much hoopla. To be perceived as authentic the campaign adopted the art world's disdain for mass culture and its advertising. It conveyed the message that it "one of us" to the bohemian art world enthusiasts who attained a disliking for the mass culture of commoditized association to cars in general.

Volkswagen never tried to stretch its point of view a broader mass audience. Its mantra encompassed an array of beliefs and feelings, such as "live below your means". And what is more admirable is the fact that it did not shy away from defending such beliefs. This hippie sub-culture that VW associated itself with

didn't benefit the company monetarily. But the time it became mainstream and on the fringe of populist activity in coastal and college towns, its sales exploded. As far as the charismatic aesthetic of the brand is concerned, VW offered an antithesis to the prevailing set of typical ads. An aesthetic that combined a cutting sense of humor with the minimalist aesthetic of the modern design. These print ads took Detroit head on. While other cars made use of flashy designs, glossy artwork and fashion magazines, Beetle used exactly the opposite of that.

The author has manufactured a very sound path to understanding why VW and other brands did so well by merely composing a culture that was not very popular. The brand managers of Beetle had the ability to foresee a cultural shift in the minds of the customer. The right nodes of the minds of the people were touched.

Leveraging Cultural and Political Authority

In this chapter the author asks us to step back to view the brand as a strategic asset. The economic value of the brand as we all know is based on the future earning stream of the brand. It is expected to generate this from customers who are loyal and relate to the brand's stories and prior myths. Certain kinds of stories and social desires are associated to a brand's success and ability to encompass them under their halo. An example of Budweiser is used to explain how to develop a cultural brand equity model.

With "this bud's for you" campaign Budweiser delivered one of the most powerful brand myths of the 1980s. The artisans were working hard behind the scenes to keep the bud season alive by constantly changing the myth along side conventional brand strategies, mind share to cool-hunt to buzz.

Other campaigns such as "lizard" and "Whassup" combined to deliver a new myth after the earlier one died. Bud always championed the sub-urban working class man who could be masculine, fierce and man-of-action heroes. Movies like John Rambo, Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone were the rage of the time. The working class man responded to this call effectively. "Buy American" was the underlying sentiment as the jobs were being lost to other countries and cheap imports from other countries was also on the rise. Adopting this persona of Ronal Reagan who was the president during this period, Bud lauded workers for their efforts and exhorted them to approach their jobs with right values. It saluted the American workforce for their gung-ho spirit and painting portraits of their industry and skill to advance the economic supremacy of America.

Brands that author a cultural myth earn the right to come back later with new myths. American stories of brotherhood and camaraderie were in Anheuser-Busch pocket as far as a myth contradicting the society was concerned. Americans looked at bud to tell new stories about how guys create fraternity and find respect.

In the later ad campaigns Bud realized its loss in shrugging the earlier myth. The whassup guys seemed like losers, slickers who mostly hung out, drank beer and watched television. Viewed from this lens of mind share, it looked as if Bud not only abandoned its hard-earned equity, but actually subverted its former self. Budweiser's fortune returned when it finally delivered on its historic political commitments. America responded in turn, treating the whassup and lizard guys as heroes and celebrities.

Brand Loyalty as a Social Network

Explaining this afore mentioned topic and taking the cultural branding tide further, the author stumbles upon what he calls three constituencies. The genealogy of ESPN is described to see how a network television program reached phenomenal height and success. Touching upon the right chords with the underlying sentiment and cultural of the decade can really do wonders for a brand.

The sports media has three interdependent constituencies –the customer segments that are called followers, insiders and feeders. ESPN's man of action athlete myth began to exert enormous influence on American men's lives during the late 1980s and hit its stride beginning in the early 1990s, as the new free agent frontier ideology and its man of action ideal took hold. The brand performed a national myth based on a new kind of athletic achievement. American society demanded myths that made it desirable and intrinsically worthwhile to work in the intensive labor markets. Individual athletes who were successful in the most competitive sports were the perfect cultural source materials.

ESPN's flagship program and an immense crowd puller on a daily basis was Sports Center. One thing different about ESPN was that it was a service and quite different from Bud, VW and MD. While its bread and butter offerings were the major team sports, the network continually showed that pure athletes could be found everywhere if only one looked hard enough. ESPN was interested in showing its viewers the sportsman hidden inside each one of us. They regularly showcased stories about everyday men and women indulging in sport activity of a different kind and feeling alive and good about it.

Followers: they strongly associate with the brand. ESPN's followers were mostly men, often fathers with children. They ritually abided by the pure-athlete ethos preached by the network. They displayed a type of dependency that is characteristic of people who identify with charismatic leaders. They do not feel shy or ashamed of learning from the network how to view and enjoy sports.

Insiders: Small factions of the audience are men who have a significant history in competitive sports and continue to self identify as competitive athletes. As adults they are driven to compete and to the extent that they're able, they play in very competitive amateur leagues. They are singularly concerned with achievement and winning.

Feeders: they have superficial connection to the values propagated by the icon though its myth. Attracted to the status and social ties that the brand produces, they use the brand as a vehicle to build social solidarity with friends and colleagues, as an interaction lubricant, and as a status symbol.

ESPN's three constituencies together form a social network around the brand. Brand loyalty is held together by the relationship of these three. There are multiple causes of brand loyalty, which vary across product categories. Customers of iconic brands are loyal because they're interlocked into a social network. Much of the value of the brand is imparted by the other constituents. Once the brand has inserted itself as the performer of the myths for a network of followers, insiders and feeders, individual customers find it very difficult to walk away from the brand to competitive offerings because they lose the social effects of this network.

The constituencies of an iconic brand are quite interdependent. The value that each constituency finds in the brand partly depends on the other constituencies.

Managing an iconic brand becomes a juggling act. Managers must draw and construct myths from a populist world in a way that rings true with followers.

Co-Authoring the Myth

Iconic brands are usually built with advertisements: films produced by the brand owner. But two other potential coauthors- culture and populist worlds – also contribute significantly to the myth. Harley's astounding rise in identity value in the early 1990s followed the same path as other iconic brands. HD became a convincing symbol for a myth about manhood and america's gunfighter. The myth felt authentic because it was well grounded in the most credible populist world for championing gunfighter values – the outlaw motorcycle clubs. Its authors cannot be sourced as they were too diffuse and because usual suspect – the manufacturer was only peripherally involved. Later film-makers, journalists and politicians picked up these bikers as raw cultural materials for their own varied agendas. Without this helping hand from the co-authors Harley management would still be struggling to sell bikes to working class guys.

The source material for harley's initial outlaw myth was created by the outlaw motorcycle clubs of the 1950s. However good the viral branding may be, brands alone cannot cultivate a myth. Earlier the HD family tried to distance itself away from the outlaw bikers and the surrounding myth. It portrayed the sub-urban setting of a nuclear family and adventurous and holidaying gentlemen touring their bikes. But, finally when the company decided to play along, it let lose the myth that got built around the brand. No points for guessing that Harley was fortunate that relinquishing control turned out so well, but this was pure luck.

In the 1990s Harley became more sophisticated at cultural branding. Instead of fighting the influential cultural texts, the company began to elaborate on and tweak these texts to shape the myth to best suit its customers.

Branding Cultural Activism

The penultimate chapter of this book, the author gives a gist of what he wants future mangers to understand when they take important roles in big MNCs. Systematic building of brands, organizations must reinvent their marketing function. They must strategize according to various branding principles discussed here and beyond. And they must hire cultural activists and not stewards of brand essence. Iconic brands build reputations, but not in the typical economic sense. Rather, successful brands develop reputations for telling a certain kind of story that addresses the identity desires of a particular constituency. Specifying the brand's cultural and political authority provides managers direction to develop appropriate myths for the brand, and allows them to rule out the myths that are a poor fit. Cultural knowledge is critical for building iconic brands, yet is sorely lacking in most managers' arsenals. Such knowledge requires managers to develop new skills. This means looking far beyond consumers they are known today.

Cultural branding is a plan that directs the brand toward a particular kind of myth and also specidies how that myth should be composed. It must identify the most valuable type of myth for the brand to perform at a particular historical juncture, and then provide specific direction to creative partners on how to compose the myth. Even the most compelling identity myths would falter, not because competitors attack, but because societal changes drain their value. These cultural disruptions create extraordinary opportunities for innovative new identity brands while also presenting treacherous hazards for incumbents.