The Life and Death of Brands

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THE WORLD OF BRANDS

- The world of brands is **large** and diverse.
There are brands of products
services
charities
governmental agencies
tourist destinations
As can be seen from this definition of “brand,” most brands are proprietary in terms of ownership and logo. However, this is not the case for all brands. An exception to this general definition is...
The hallmark of a concept brand is a logo related to a concept that is not proprietary to any individual or corporate entity.

Some examples of concept brands include a pink ribbon for breast cancer awareness,

the universally recognized symbol for peace, and, the recycling symbol.
ALL BRANDS FACE CHALLENGES

- All brands face challenges. In many instances, these challenges differ as a function of the life stage that the brand is in.
We typically speak of brands on a continuum from birth to maturity to later life and death. To better understand the life and death of a particular brand, a brand autopsy may be conducted. It is through such post-mortem research, that a brand’s “cause of death” may be determined. In the process, insights useful to similar brands may be developed.
DEFINITION OF BRAND IDENTITY

- One of the first challenges faced by a brand is the challenge of defining an identity.
- This is a formal definition of BRAND IDENTITY.
- In essence, “brand identity” raises that eternal, existential question, “Why do I exist?”
INDIVIDUAL ANSWERS

- The answer to this question will vary between brands based on many different factors, such as those related to product or service benefits. However, a brand’s identity is to some extent fluid and relative, and changeable as a function of consumer perception, and other variables external to the brand. For example...
Consider a new brand of tea. In its native, developed market, the brand is positioned, and may widely be perceived as a VALUE BRAND. However, take that same product and export it to an emerging market, and chances are it’s going to be perceived as a PREMIUM BRAND. This is because attributions of “value” are made on the basis of variables such as price, availability, and the quality of a brand relative to competing brands.
Once a brand has established an identity within a particular market, many challenges related to brand messaging arise. Marketers must define goals for their messaging, and then optimize their message accordingly. Further, critically important decisions must be made regarding the media for their message.

In developed as well as emerging markets, brand messaging has traditionally been accomplished through print and electronic media, in-store displays, outdoor advertising, public appearances, sponsorships, and, of course, word-of-mouth. However, in the digital age, the definition of “word-of-mouth” must be considered...
...a work in progress. Due to an ever-increasing array of social media outlets and apps, what constitutes “word-of-mouth” is ever-evolving.
While methods and media may change, many of the goals of brand messaging, like the ones listed here, have remained stable. One typical objective of brand messaging is to generate word-of-mouth. Note that word-of-mouth can thus be both a medium for brand messaging, and the objective of the message.

As both the medium and the message, word-of-mouth can assume critical importance for a brand. This is so because in some markets, various alternative means of brand messaging may be limited, unavailable, or even restricted by government authorities.
Some aids to brand messaging, and to building word-of-mouth, include brand personification, the introduction of a brand mascot or brand ambassador, and the skillful application of knowledge of consumer “hot buttons.” Each of these will be talking points to be discussed shortly. First, an important caveat about the need to CULTURE-TAILOR a brand’s message.
Regardless of the individual strategy or brand-building technique employed, all brand messaging must be CULTURE-TAILORED to the targeted market. Culture-tailoring is of vital importance for all brands, but of particular importance to those brands expanding to emerging markets. It would be a critical error to assume that just because a brand name, an advertising tag line, or a brand’s packaging works well in a developed market, that it will automatically work well in an emerging market. Some examples…
Coca-Cola was initially introduced in China as “Kekoukela”, which translated as “Bite the Wax Tadpole” or “Female Horse Stuffed with Wax” (depending on the dialect). After further researching Chinese characters, Coke settled on “kokoukole” as a phonetic equivalent (which translates as “Happiness in the Mouth”).

Coke almost had its message “lost in translation” in China...as did one of its longtime rivals...
PEPSI

- Pepsi's advertising tag line, "Come Alive with the Pepsi Generation," was initially translated in a way that implied that a product benefit was this beverage's ability to bring back one's long-lost ancestors.
In the United States, the name “Gerber” is synonymous with “baby food.” Every jar of it features the cute little Gerber baby on it. However, when Gerber expanded its operations to emerging markets in Africa, the company learned a critically important, culture-related lesson in packaging. In this emerging market, due to widespread illiteracy, the picture on the outside of the jar of a food product, typically portrayed an image of the product to be found inside the jar. Needless to say, existing shipments were recalled, and the requisite changes in packaging were made.

GERBER IN EMERGING MARKETS

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POSITIVE EXAMPLE

- As a POSITIVE example of culture-tailored brand messaging, consider an early campaign for Miller Lite beer. In Euro/American culture, bars and pubs have enjoyed a long history as bastions of free thought and independent thinking. However, they are also places where spirited disagreements between patrons are common, if not expected.
Against this backdrop, a series of commercials were produced with the objective being to identify Miller Lite as the beer that 1) tastes great, and 2) is less filling. This brand identity was conveyed in commercials depicting opposing groups of bar patrons and beer drinkers taking sides regarding which one of these two attributes best characterized Miller Lite.
The effectiveness of the television campaign was rooted in the fact that, over time, it compelled consumers to anticipate, and perhaps even mentally participate in, a rhythmic chant of the brand’s messaging, “Tastes great!, Less filling.”

Beyond brand messaging that effectively and memorably establishes a brand’s identity, another early life challenge for a brand is the challenge of creating...
Creating brand awareness is a challenge for brands established in developed markets that seek to penetrate new and emerging markets. Creating brand awareness is also a challenge for established brands offering new upgrades and extensions of their product line, or entirely new product categories.
When a company called Aflac began offering a new category of insurance called “supplemental insurance,” the challenge was to acquaint consumers with the new category, and to create an association between it and the Aflac brand. To assist in meeting this life challenge, a brand-building tool called a BRAND MASCOT was used.
DEFINITION OF BRAND MASCOT

- Here is a formal definition of BRAND MASCOT...
- In the case of AFLAC, a duck was chosen as the brand mascot because the verbalizations of a duck, “quack, quack,” were easily associated with the brand’s name, “Aflac.” In this commercial...
the brand mascot is used to inform, to entertain, and perhaps most importantly, to help strengthen consumer associations of Aflac to the new product category, supplemental insurance.

Beyond making consumers aware of a new product, brand, or brand extension, another life challenge for a brand entails stimulating...
BRAND TRIAL

- brand trial. Brand trial may be stimulated in many ways, such as promotional giveaways, free trial periods, and price-discounting.
PEPPER CASE STUDY 1

- Much like other new brands, a challenge facing Dr Pepper at an early life stage was to get consumers to try it. This challenge was met through a television campaign that encouraged consumers to take a nostalgic look backwards to consider previous, “first time” life experiences...
experiences where “trying it” almost certainly meant “liking it.”

As the Dr Pepper brand began to establish itself and develop a following, it faced a new life challenge: the challenge of building... brand loyalty.
Brand loyalty is achieved by converting those who have tried the brand, to be exclusive (or relatively exclusive) users of that brand.

So, how is brand loyalty built? A key component of loyalty is trust, and trust in a brand depends, at least in part, on how honest the brand messaging is. Continuing with the Dr Pepper example...
Dr. Pepper lived in a world of very stiff competition. It was a world where market share was overwhelmingly dominated by Coke and Pepsi.

Availability of Dr Pepper at social gatherings, retail establishments, and vending machines, was limited to non-existent. Dr Pepper could aptly be characterized as a minority brand that was generally viewed as being the choice of those with oddball, if not outcast, tastes. Simply requesting Dr Pepper at a social gathering (“I’ll have a Dr Pepper please”) was like speaking a foreign language.
Dr Pepper attempted to confront this state of affairs with advertising that frankly acknowledged that the consumer of Dr Pepper was different than most other people. However, this difference was attributed to greater selectivity, and a willingness to hold out for a taste that was clearly out-of-the-ordinary.

Sometimes, to serve the best interest of its people, a country’s government has a stake in creating brand awareness and product trial.

Such was the case in the United States during the dawn of the automobile safety belt era.
When safety belts were first introduced, many people voiced objections to their use. These objections ranged from “they wrinkle my suit” to “they’re too confining.” To counter such sentiments, the government launched a “Buckle Your Safety Belt” campaign that skillfully blended facts with humor. The humor was provided courtesy of anonymous and nameless, but still-capable-of-talking...
crash test dummies.

Later in the campaign, to further enhance the impact of the brand messaging, and to help viewers better relate to the message, a team of two crash test dummies took on the role of “leading men.”
Their names were Vince and Larry. Despite the fact that they were demolished, destroyed, and even sometimes decapitated, they were always likable, smart, and good-humored. Before long, their popularity on television led to personal appearances at schools and at various high profile media events.
VIDEO: VINCE & LARRY CAB RIDE

- In this sample commercial, our heroes hail a cab and are taken for a wild ride, of course, sans safety belts. [ROLL VIDEO]
This is a formal definition of BRAND PERSONIFICATION. Vince and Larry became synonymous with safety belt awareness as a result of a successful brand personification strategy. In general, brands may...
WHO PERSONIFIES

- ... be personified by human or animated spokespersons, fictitious figureheads, real people, and celebrities.
PROS AND CONS

- Brand personification as a brand-building tool has its pros and its cons. Here are 7 of each, in no particular order.
“It’s easier to understand something with a human-like look to it.” (Kool aid)

“Humans and human-like characters compel consumer interest in learning more about the personified character” (Debbi Fields)

“Humans and human-like characters can make brand-messaging easier to relate to” (Vince & Larry)

“Humans and human-like characters can make a brand easier to identify with” (Marlboro man) (Mr PC & Mr Apple)

Identification with a brand can bring consumers into the brand’s ecosystem, thus raising the likelihood that these consumers will also purchase brand-related accessories, and, where applicable, brand upgrades and extensions.

“Humans and human-like characters can increase a brand’s appeal to consumers who have limited language ability.” (Mr. Clean)

“Humans and human-like characters can increase a brand’s appeal to children” (Trix Rabbit) This is especially true in the case where the personification of the brand is depicted as having unique abilities or magical powers.

“Personifications of a brand may be better than an image of the brand alone at pressing consumer hot buttons”. After all, a battery is just a battery. However, the Energizer Bunny may tap a hot button related to aspirations of longevity, and fantasy related to the ability to keep going and going, far beyond expectations.

Now, for the cons of brand personification...
"Humans, as well as characters who personify brands, age."

Let’s briefly elaborate on this point about aging personifications of brands. Consider our old friend, and I do mean old...
“OLD DOC”

...Dr Pepper. At left, is “Old Doc,” the name the brand originally gave to a personified image of Dr Pepper. To the right is a photo of an actor making a personal appearance as “Old Doc” early in the brand’s life. Neither of these dated personifications would be recognizable today as representative of the Dr Pepper brand. As an aside...
ELUDING THE STIGMA

...there are ways that characters who personify a brand may elude the stigma of age. It is even possible to turn the issue of age into a product benefit of sorts. This may be accomplished through brand messaging that positions the aged or dated look of a personification as “classic,” timeless, or even iconic.
FRESH IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

An alternative, anti-aging strategy, is to periodically face-lift or update the personified image so that it maintains a contemporary look. In other words, packaging may be used to keep a product fresh... in more ways than one. Speaking of which...
NEWMAN’S OWN EXAMPLE

The Newman’s Own brand could have easily failed in 2008 when the actor who personified the brand passed away. Instead, the brand has been kept very much alive by a strategy that entails the regular offering of new products, all supported by fresh and creative images of Paul Newman on the packaging. Additionally, all profits are donated to charity, just as they were when Paul Newman was alive.

But getting back to the “cons” of brand personification, let’s confront a sad reality of personified brand life...
Death is an inevitable fact of human life, and that fact can be all the more problematic to a personified brand. Dave Thomas, the founder and former CEO of Wendys, was a spokesperson for the brand in over 800 commercials. After he unexpectedly fell ill and died, sales declined and the decline continued over several years. Subsequently…
WENDY & WENDY

- ....the company initiated two new advertising campaigns. One campaign featured Dave Thomas’ daughter, Wendy, now grown-up, replacing her father as the brand spokesperson. The other introduced a new actress who seemed to be Wendy Thomas in her younger days. Consumers found this dueling tale of two Wendy’s confusing. On a somewhat related note, another potential “con” of brand personification is that...
“Caricatures of real people that are not mindful of consumer expectations regarding the brand’s personification will be rejected.”

As an example...
THE COLONEL

…after Harland Sanders died in 1980, KFC attempted to fill the void, first with a look-alike actor in a 1984 campaign, and then with this animated version of the Colonel in 1999. The acrobatic, hyper-speeded cartoon personification was not received well by consumers and the campaign was dropped.
Sometimes, to put it bluntly, creatives create “bad” personifications.

This was certainly the case with “Bad Andy” a mischievous teddy bear who turned out to be bad news for Dominos Pizza…as well as “Digger,” a personification of a nail fungus that really did get under the skin of viewers. And then there were the Quiznos “spongmonkeys…”
Quiznos VIDEO

- ...rat-like creatures who sang off-key to praise a sandwich chain called Quiznos.
- Apparently, the intent of the irritating audio and video was to break through the clutter of television advertising. They probably succeeded in breaking through, but in no way that benefitted the brand.
It is by now well known that affiliating a brand with a celebrity works for the brand only to the extent that the celebrity’s public image remains positive. After celebrity chef Paula Deen reportedly uttered a racial slur, Deen struggled as she watched her empire of culinary products, including her own brand of butter, melt away.
In 1988, the RJ Reynolds Tobacco Company attempted to revitalize the Camel brand, which had first appeared in 1913. The ensuing advertising, which featured a hip personification they called “Joe Camel,” was perceived as being very successful in prompting people, especially young people, to start smoking. In fact, it may be said that the campaign was a little too successful. RJ Reynolds was sued, and the result was a court-order prohibiting them from using Joe Camel to personify their brand. In the end, the Joe Camel campaign cost RJ Williams millions in damages, attorney fees, and related costs. This brings us to our next point; one that has to do with the pivotal role of a brand’s values.
Joe Camel failed to thrive because his values were perceived as being at odds with a health-conscious subculture that promoted a tobacco-free lifestyle, especially for the nation’s youth. Indeed, the success of any brand messaging, whether personified or not, and whether commercial or charitable in nature, is dependent, on the brand’s core values being viewed as culturally and personally consistent with the values of consumers in the targeted demographic.
Having discussed some of the pros and cons of brand personification, it’s time to get back to addressing some other life challenges for brands. At some point in a mature brand’s life, for example, advertising that worked well for a very long time just seems to stop working. How can that be dealt with? More generally, how can a brand be re-vitalized?
OLD MIL SNAKE RIVER COMMERCIAL

- Old Milwaukee Beer is an example of a brand that had advertising that worked very well for a very long time. Geared to a demographic of young to middle-age males, the commercials followed a set formula. Show a group of guys having fun, doing things guys stereotypically do (like fishing), and drinking Old Milwaukee beer. Then, end the commercial with the tag line “It just doesn’t get any better than this.” Here’s a sample commercial. [ROLL VIDEO]
OLD MIL CASE STUDY  When this faithful formula began to falter, Old Milwaukee had to come up with a way to re-vitalize the brand. The strategy they devised called for the introduction of a brand-building tool called a BRAND AMBASSADOR.
This is a formal definition of a brand ambassador... The brand ambassador Old Milwaukee introduced to their demographic of primarily men, was a group of buxom blondes they called...
THE SWEDISH BIKINI TEAM

- “the Swedish Bikini Team.” For continuity with the old campaign, the new campaign illustrated how, yes...
VIDEO: OLD MIL SBT COMMERCIAL

- it really could get better than this.
Highly effective brand ambassadors, the Swedish Bikini Team made personal appearances, were featured on the cover of Playboy, and appeared on widely watched and highly rated national television shows (like Married with Children). Obviously, Old Milwaukee beer had pressed a consumer “hot button.”
What we mean when we say a “consumer hot button” was pressed, is that consumers in a targeted demographic were given what they need...

[read definition from slide]
HOT BUTTON CASE: WORKPLACE

- One powerful consumer hot button that is touched on by a variety of products and services has to do with that uniquely human need to avoid embarrassment and humiliation. Here is a sample of highly effective advertising designed to press that hot button in a workplace context.
FEDEX VIDEO
HOT BUTTON CASE STUDY: PERSONAL/SOCIAL

Avoiding embarrassment and humiliation in a social situation is a common hot button touched on in advertising for many personal hygiene products. This range was extended to candy when one chewable mint was positioned as the “fresh-maker,” capable of minimizing the frustrations of everyday life, and keeping its consumers so fresh and so cool that they won the admiration of peers.
MENTOS VIDEO
Another hot button touches on the need that you have... to be you.

This hot button is pressed in advertising for products like one popular, chocolate-caramel candy. The logic goes that “you aren’t you when you’re hungry,” so, by quelling hunger, the product “lets you be you.”
SNICKERS VIDEO
Some destination brand advertising may attempt to press the same sort of hot button.
For years, advertising for Las Vegas has touched on the need for visitors to free a side of themselves that may be suppressed by the routine of everyday life.
In fact, Las Vegas has taken the “you need to be you” ideology to an extreme, and a seemingly paradoxical one at that. Some of its brand messaging seems to suggest that “If it takes being someone else... in order to be you...that’s okay too.”
There is little doubt that an understanding of potential hot buttons in the brand’s target demographic is essential. The failure to identify the CORRECT consumer hot button, or, worse yet, pressing the WRONG consumer hot button, can be disastrous. For example...
In 1985, to better compete with longtime rival Pepsi, Coke pressed the WRONG consumer hot button when it changed its iconic formula.
This attempt at improvement was tantamount, in the eyes of many American consumers, to “trying to make the flag prettier.”
Coca-Cola recovered from its near death experience by reverting back to its classic formula, while quietly phasing-out New Coke.
TOMBSTONES

- But other major brands have not been so fortunate. Rather, they have found themselves unable to recover from fatal life challenges.
POSSIBLE CAUSES OF BRAND DEATH

Possible causes of death for a brand can vary widely. Brands can die from:

- BRAND MISMANAGEMENT (poor marketing, illegal practices, etc.)
- A CELEBRITY MIS-STEP (Paula Deen, Gilbert Godfried for Aflac)
- TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES (Polaroid, Kaypro)
- UNANTICIPATED CONSUMER RESPONSE (New Coke)
- LITIGATION (Old Milwaukee)
- MARKET REJECTION (Edsel)
- CHANGING ECONOMY (popularity of gas-guzzling cars varies w oil price)
- TERRORIST ATTACK (brought down Pan Am)
Some brands flat-line, die, and disappear, but somehow rise again. We can refer to such brands as....
As an example, Hostess Bakeries went out of business in 2012. However, Americans would not be denied their Twinkies. The company was resurrected in 2013.

“ZOMBIE BRANDS”
Some brands live a rich, full life, and die of “natural causes.” Here’s an obituary for one such brand. [read]
VINCE & LARRY

- Of course, we’re talking about--who else--Vince and Larry. During their 14-year career, these two dummies saved an estimated 85,000 lives and roughly 3 billion dollars in costs to society.
In one of their last commercials, Vince and Larry were hailed as the guests of honor at a celebrity roast. [ROLL VIDEO]
In summary, we overviewed a number of challenges faced by brands in developed and emerging markets. We overviewed a sampling of those challenges by stage of life as they related to brand identity, brand awareness, brand trial, brand loyalty, brand messaging, brand culture, and brand values.
We saw how it's useful to speak of brands from BIRTH to DEATH, and to examine the assorted life CHALLENGES(2) that may lie in between.
Much like people during the course of their lives, brands will have their UPS, and their DOWNS.

In the end, if a brand is lucky, it will AGE GRACEFULLY, and then fade into the SUNSET, as naturally, as peaceably, and as joyfully, as VINCE and Larry. It just doesn't get any better than that.