



By DOUGLAS HOLT

Brand nirvana is to build an icon – to create a brand like Coke, Harley or Nike that generates huge market value over long periods because it serves as a container for cultural ideals. But the path most companies follow in the pursuit of the iconic grail is a dead end. Marketers misunderstand how icons work, because, for over three decades, they have been taught to think in terms of what the author calls the ‘mind-share’ model. Mind-share principles are irrelevant in the building of icons. Instead, as Snapple shows, marketers wanting to build icons must think in terms of ‘culture share’

How to build an iconic brand

THE ‘MIND-SHARE’ branding model took off in the US in the 1970s. In a series of articles in *Advertising Age* – later expanded into the best-selling book *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind* – Al Ries and Jack Trout put forward a simple argument: for a brand to succeed in a society in which the volume of mass communication far exceeded what consumers could digest, it must own a simple, focused position in the prospect’s mind.

This position should be based upon what was important in the product category, usually a valued benefit or aspirational identity. This provocative image – of brands contesting for scarce mental real estate, staking out adjectives in the customer’s mind – has been the foundation for the most influential writings on branding ever since.

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Management books on branding today seem to push the subject into new (and often new-age) territory, flaunting terms like brand essence, brand soul, DNA and brand identity. But they too are rooted in the taken-for-granted principles of mind share. While the new breed of brand guru emphasises the softer, emotional, more personable side of the brand, the idea is the same. Marketers are told to act as stewards of the brand's timeless abstracted identity: learn the transcendental truth of the brand, and then stay true to the course, consistently communicating these associations in everything the brand does.

Stripped of the new-age rhetoric, these ideas are no different than the positioning statements that have filled marketing textbooks for decades. The essence of the brand is the strength of associations between the product and its benefits, personality and user imagery. Some variation of the ubiquitous onion model, in which 'hard' product attributes at the core of the brand are attached to valued category associations and feelings, is today found in virtually every brand strategy document used at the world's largest consumer marketing companies and advertising agencies.

The problem with the mind-share model is that it's a one-size-fits-all solution. Branding experts throw all brands together and call what their managers need to do 'brand management'.

However, the catch-all term 'branding' hides considerable diversity in how customer value is created, and therefore how brands should be managed for success. For low-involvement, functional brands such as Colgate or Gillette, mind share works reasonably well. But for brands in 'lifestyle' or 'identity' categories – such as food, clothing, beauty products, soft drinks, alcohol and autos – mind-share thinking is irrelevant at best.

These brands compete for 'culture share'. They vie with other popular culture products – films, books, music, television, sports, video games – to create stories that people will identify with and use in their everyday lives. To understand iconic brands, we must leave the consumer's mind and enter the

world of culture and society, for this is the realm in which iconic brands create value.

The myth economy

Consumers place such high value on iconic brands because they play a crucial role in society. Iconic brands use their products and consumption occasions as a platform to perform a special kind of story – a myth. These myths are performed primarily through advertising, though all facets of marketing – product design, retail environment, packaging, public relations, product placements and service delivery – can contribute to the myth.

Myths are stories people rely on to organise their understanding of themselves and the world. They work to shore up fragile world-views and identities. What was previously the work of the great religions has been taken over in large part by commercial substitutes – the products of mass culture of which the brand is one important type. Myths are neither fact nor fiction. They are neither arguments that must be tested for veracity, nor fables from which we learn moral lessons. Rather, myths present a way of understanding the world so compelling that believers feel it must be true.

Just as each religion has its iconic prophets, saints and martyrs, today's commercial myths have their own icons – political leaders, athletes, actors, businesspeople and, increasingly, brands.

Brand genealogy

In my forthcoming book, titled *Culture Share* (Harvard Business School Press), I outline a new theory that describes the social conditions that create demand for iconic brands and the branding principles that lead to successful icon building. This theory was constructed using detailed historical studies of some of the most successful iconic brands in post-war American business history, including Marlboro, Coke, Pepsi, Volkswagen, Levi's, Budweiser, Mountain Dew, Disney, Apple and Harley-Davidson. Similar principles are at work with European brands – Levi's rise to iconic stature in the 1980s is an

exemplary case.

The theory relies on a new method for studying brands. The mind-share model insists on abstracting the brands from the social contexts that give them value. It wishes, against all evidence, that brands should have identities that are timeless, that stand apart from the march of history.

But understanding how brands engage and contribute to a nation's culture as it changes over time requires methods used in cultural history and cultural studies to explain why important cultural products (such as Western films, Elvis Presley, Martha Stewart or Princess Diana) resonate at a particular historical juncture and how their resonance ebbs and flows over time. This method, which I term 'brand genealogy', combines careful textual analysis of a brand's performance with a close examination of a nation's cultural discourses and social tensions as these unfold over time.

The research revealed that companies did not have an explicit understanding of how their efforts worked to build iconic brands. Even the most successful brands have continually swerved from the icon-building path. The reason became clear in interviews with managers at many of the clients and ad agencies of these brands. The power of mind share is overwhelming: managers continue to interpret their actions in mind-share terms even while their branding activities routinely defy these principles.

How Snapple became an iconic brand

Founded by Brooklyn entrepreneurs, the Snapple line of teas and juices blossomed from a small New York concern into a powerhouse national icon in the space of less than a decade. Through its new products, advertising, promotions, distribution and even customer service, the founders authored a quixotic script about a radically different kind of company, run by amateurs who shared their customers' cynicism toward how large firms were managed.

Everything the company did was antithetic to marketing as practised by Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and other sophisticated marketing

heavyweights.

For product, the founders rolled out odd and seemingly ill-conceived blends, a few of which became hits. They relied on their most zealous customers for product and packaging ideas, rushing oddball requests into production without so much as a focus group. For example, customer Ralph Orofino's affinity for melons inspired 'Ralph's Cantaloupe Cocktail', a drink that featured Ralph's face on the label. Customers took to these strange drinks, even the bad-tasting ones, as they offered surprises compared with the lowest common denominator of corporate marketing.

For advertising, the founders hired 'celebrities' they liked and could afford. The ads were so poorly produced and odd they became cult classics. In one ad, for example, less-than-charismatic tennis player Ivan Lendl mispronounced the brand's name through his thick accent as 'Schnahpple'. Another spot featured Richie Sambora, the not particularly noteworthy guitarist with rock band Bon Jovi, because one of the owners was a fan.

Especially critical to Snapple's rise was the hiring of 'shock-jock' talk-radio personalities Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern as spokesmen. Both personalities conveyed real affection for Snapple and gave the drink extra airtime in addition to the paid-for sponsorship.

It would be hard to pick two more different advocates. Limbaugh was the self-righteous voice of the reactionary right, leading a loyal following of 'angry white men' who attacked the liberal tendencies of Washington politicians and the use of political correctness. Stern, on the other hand,

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thrived on a nihilist attitude that involved celebrating whatever polite society considered tasteless and insulting whatever it considered important. Stern loved to call the bluff of America's puritanical tendencies by stuffing as much sexual innuendo into his programme as possible.

While diametrically at odds in terms of politics and tastes, the two radio personalities were united in that they were America's most provocative populist voices denouncing the priorities and tastes of American elites.

Snapple gained ultimate credibility as an amateurish company because its two entrepreneurs knew nothing about professional marketing and had no interest in learning. They ran the company according to what made sense and seemed like fun. Snapple's customers knew as much and loved them for it.

When a Boston private bank bought a majority interest from the entrepreneurs in the hope of expanding the Snapple magic to Americans across the country, it faced a huge risk. How could it apply professional marketing to a brand that attracted legions of devoted followers for its amateurism? The new owner avoided brand management orthodoxy by hiring a young copywriter to run the marketing department. He, in turn, hired an upstart New York ad agency, Kirshenbaum & Bond, to create a national branding platform for Snapple.

This unorthodox brand team did not attempt to reduce Snapple to a set of brand essence adjectives, seek out deep consumer truths of the brand or plumb Snapple devotee's emotional connections. Rather, it looked carefully for ways to extend Snapple's odd, amateurish performances further. At the time, Snapple's New York followers were so touched by the brand that they flooded Snapple's small office with fan mail. Over 2000 letters a week poured in, not to mention original videos, songs, artwork and poetry, all dedicated to Snapple.



Snapple has expanded from iced teas and fruit drinks (above) to product extensions such as Elements (left)

The team found a promising approach in a woman named Wendy who did clerical work for Snapple and had taken it upon herself to respond to mail as best she could. The brand team cast 'Wendy, the Snapple Lady' as the letter-reader in dozens of TV ads. The ads opened with Wendy seated behind the real-life Snapple receptionist's desk, throwing out an unselfconsciously friendly 'Hi from Snapple!' It was clear to viewers that the chatty and plump Wendy was the real thing, not a Hollywood actor. She would then read a letter from a customer with a fussy question about one of Snapple's products, a question that could only be of concern to a devotee.

After Wendy answered the question, the ad would cut to a camera crew shooting in the style of a documentary in the customers' homes to capture their reactions. None of the spots was scripted and various mistakes were often left unedited on the film. The tagline '100% Natural' captured the idea that Snapple was not only a natural product, but, even more important, it was a transparent company run by well-meaning amateurs. The company was run by eccentric people who shared their customers' enthusiasm for frivolous pleasures, not by MBAs and their spreadsheets and market research.

To complement the advertising, Snapple sponsored several events, but not the usual blockbuster sports and celebrity spectacles of Coke and Pepsi. Instead, Snapple staged events that mocked big corporate promotions: cherry spitting in Minnesota, yo-yo tossing in New York and the Miss Crustacean contest in New Jersey were among the sanctioned contests.

What the founders had stumbled upon, and what the new brand team nimbly ampli-

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fied, was a new national myth that responded to burgeoning discontent in American society. To understand why Snapple connected so profoundly with a large slice of the American public, we must place Snapple's amateurish brand performance in the context of the social tensions in early-1990s American society.

During the 1980s, most Americans, particularly men, had signed up to Ronald Reagan's call-to-arms to get tough again, like the frontiersmen of the West, to revive the country's economic and political stature. With gung-ho entrepreneurs, tougher business practices and painful but necessary

But while companies and elites profited handsomely, the constant restructuring left many American workers in service-economy 'McJobs'. This growing imbalance became widely understood around 1991. These same Americans expressed particular disgust in their elected officials, who seemed to be pawns of corporate America rather than protectors of their interests.

Snapple jumped into this powerful current of discontent and devised a blissful rebuttal. Through its marketing activities, Snapple authored a myth suggesting that big corporations and the overpaid elites who ran them were not needed at all. In the utopia Snapple acted out, companies were run by amateurs who cared more about having fun with their customers than in generating profits to stockholders. They inspired their customers and they played around with products and promotions, however crazy. Drinking a bottle allowed customers to experience this fantasy as a salve for the excruciating identity problems they faced.

As Snapple's myth engaged this emerging social discontent, sales rose rapidly from under \$50 million in 1987 to over \$200 million in 1992. Hardcore devotees were inspired by Snapple's voice in the wilderness. Then, as mass culture took up the populist revolt, Snapple sales soared, approaching \$700 million in 1994.

Quaker Oats purchased Snapple at this juncture, believing the company could greatly improve on Snapple's successes with its professional marketing operations. The company's actions reveal that its managers completely misunderstood what had generated Snapple's culture share – its myth of anti-corporate amateurism. The new owner fired Limbaugh and Stern, scrapped Wendy and the '100% Natural' campaign for a more professional and conventional treatment, and instituted a rationalised new product development process.

The company thought it could optimise Snapple's value by applying its expertise in mind-share branding. Instead, Quaker killed Snapple's myth and, soon enough, Snapple was no longer treated as an icon in American society. Because Quaker marketers did not understand the principles of icon-building,

A brief history of Snapple

- 1972:** Leonard Marsh, Hyman Golden and Arnold Greenberg set up the Unadulterated Food Corporation and begin selling fruit drinks to health-food stores in New York. The name Snapple comes from a carbonated apple soda that was part of the original line-up.
- 1989:** Snapple sales total \$24 million.
- 1992:** Boston-based investment group Thomas H. Lee & Co. buy Snapple. Three months after taking the company public, Snapple's value has tripled.
- 1993:** Snapple sales climb to \$516 million. Quaker Oats buys Snapple for \$1.7 billion.
- 1997:** Quaker Oats sells Snapple for \$300 million to Triarc Beverage Group. The new owner introduces product extensions such as Elements and WhipperSnapples.
- 2000:** Cadbury Schweppes buys Snapple for an estimated \$1 billion.
- 2003:** Snapple has over 30 different flavours and is sold in 80 countries around the world.

reorganisations, Reagan promised that America would lead the world again.

By the early 1990s, the US had largely been transformed into a more dynamic but also more cut-throat economy, with the constant threat of downsizing and re-engineering disrupting the labour markets. Profits surged, and the country found a new set of heroes in its swashbuckling entrepreneurs (Ted Turner, Bill Gates) and athletes (Michael Jordan) who exhibited the 'Just do it' spirit.

the group lost some \$1.4 billion when it had to sell off the Snapple brand in a fire sale as sales came crashing down.

Snapple's subsequent brand owners, first Triarc and now Cadbury-Schweppes, have done their best to recapture the magic of Snapple's halcyon days by echoing its original communications. Snapple's myth of the company of amateurs, which took aim at the particular populist sentiments that erupted in the USA of the early 1990s, has now been distilled as 'quirky and alternative'.

American culture and society have moved on, but Snapple performs a watered-down version of a story whose resonance peaked a decade ago. As a result, Snapple has become a conventional lifestyle brand. A strategy that has pulled Snapple out of history continues to dilute its stature as an icon.

How to build an icon

Snapple's extraordinary success is inexplicable when viewed through the lens of the mind-share model. Snapple did not take on Coke and Pepsi by capturing category benefits like refreshment or youthfulness. Nor did the brand grab hold of desired lifestyle imagery. Snapple did not plumb a deep product truth or a profound consumer emotion.

What Snapple did was to ignore category competition and, instead, enter foreign territory for conventional brands – the realm of cultural politics. Snapple represented a populist challenge to the new-economy labour market and the elites in government and business that were installing it. While Snapple's myth was highly innovative, the principles underlying it are identical to those previously established by brands such as Marlboro, Volkswagen and Nike. These principles are radically different to those that underpin the success of mind-share brands such as Pampers, Gillette or Colgate.

1. Target a cultural contradiction

Icons do not target demographic groups or psychographic clusters. Rather, they take aim at the most important cultural tensions in society. Icons target emerging contradictions because it is the contradiction that cre-

ates the powerful desires and anxieties that mass-cultural myths address.

The populist backlash of the early 1990s was given political expression in the massive defection from Republican and Democratic parties to the populist candidacies of Ross Perot, Pat Buchanan, Jessie Jackson and Jerry Brown. It was given cultural expression in the form of what could be called a 'myth market' – a new genre of myths that sprung up to feed off the contradiction.

In what can be termed the 'slacker myth market', Americans suddenly gained an appetite for highly cynical and nihilist counterpoints to Reagan's version of American ideals. Television programs such as *The Simpsons* and *Beavis and Butthead* became hits. The film *Wayne's World*, grunge band Nirvana and the cartoon strip Dilbert painted culture-leading myths that responded to these tensions. Snapple's great success begins with the fact that, rather than compete on benefits or trends or lifestyle, it targeted this extraordinarily powerful myth market.

2. Act as a cultural activist

Snapple not only targeted an expansive myth market, it actually was one of the instigators of these myths. It ran its satirical ads and introduced playful flavours long before the myth market took off. Icons act as cultural leaders, as activists encouraging people to think and act differently through their stories. The most powerful iconic brands are prescient, anticipating changes in society.

Snapple earned tremendous loyalty from consumers because it crystallised a tension that had not yet been articulated, then provided a compelling symbolic resolution to this tension. Icons are charismatic leaders

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that advance a change in the culture. They do not simply evoke benefits, personalities or emotions; they advance causes. Icons are resolutely political in their stance, using stories to evoke new ideas, new ways of living.

3. Create original expressive culture as an artist

Iconic brands have charisma: people are drawn to them and pay attention to their point of view because they act as artists. They invent new culture. Iconic brands do not follow trends or attach themselves to hot celebrities. Mimicking existing culture conveys that the brand is a follower rather than an inspirational leader. Instead, iconic brands use cultural developments as a palette with which to create. All of Snapple's branding activities – from new product development to advertising to promotion – were startling in their originality, but all expressed a unified political voice. Iconic brands avoid attributions of cultural parasitism because they always add value to the culture they encounter.

4. Develop an authentic populist voice

For a brand to become an icon, it must be perceived as a credible spokesperson for the myth. People must trust that the brand has a deep understanding of the point of view it is articulating and that it is committed to its views rather than playing a game of impersonation for commercial gain. American iconic brands earn this authenticity by speaking with credibility from within one of America's populist epicentres. Populist epicentres are non-commercial places (subcultures, folk cultures, social movements) where new culture is created untainted by commercial interests.

Snapple's authority was cemented by the fact that Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern not only endorsed the brand, but really seemed to love it. That Snapple was a favourite of muckrakers at opposing ends of the political spectrum was definitive proof that Snapple inhabited the same space as its politically disaffected customers. Twenty-first century customers are deeply distrustful of opportunistic brands that swipe public culture for private purposes. Snapple and



Two more brand icons: Budweiser's famous lizards and frogs ads (above) and David Beckham in Pepsi's latest campaign (right)



other iconic brands avoid these attributions by becoming committed insiders in the populist worlds from which they speak.

Conclusion

Icons cannot be built with mind-share principles. Mind-share strategies are exercises in intensive abstraction. After months and months of haggling between brand managers, ad planners and market researchers, the strategy is boiled down to a handful of catchphrases and adjectives, augmented perhaps with some pictures or a video. But what this internal distillation accomplishes is to squeeze out of the brand the cultural specificity that is essential for icon status.

As they struggle to burrow deep into consumers' minds, marketers have ignored the fact that the value of culture-share brands is created and transformed in society itself. To ensure that strategy fits with history, strategy must move beyond abstract benefit descriptions to an understanding of how the brand fits into what is taking place in culture and society. ☺