

## Why great brands grow their way to success

On October 6<sup>th</sup> 2010, Gap introduced a new logo designed to make the brand more contemporary, reducing the prominence of the iconic blue box associated with the brand. On October 12<sup>th</sup> 2010 after less than one week the original logo design returned.

A larger sales (and PR) disaster befell Pepsi in 2009 when they rebranded Tropicana Pure Premium. In the words of a company statement, the new pack was “designed to reinforce the brand and product attributes, rejuvenate the category and help consumers rediscover the health benefits they get from drinking America’s iconic orange-juice brand”. Between 1 January and 22 February, when Pepsi brought back the original design, sales dropped around 20% costing the company tens of millions of dollars.

In both cases, the distinctive visual assets of the brands were important for consumers to find their way to the right store or the right place in the aisle. Marketers should never forget that shoppers are time-constrained “cognitive misers” who have little time or patience in their busy lives. Most purchase decisions in store happen in the blink of an eye, relying on visual cues to recognize preferred choices and simplify decision making as far as possible.

While brands often try to shout loudly, if the shopper is not “tuned in” to the right frequency they will never hear the message. In the case of Gap, the fact that the updated logo was different enough from the original to make it difficult to make the mental connection led to online protests and the company’s quick capitulation. In the case of Tropicana, there was a more fundamental issue. The new packaging was not just sending a different visual signal, it was sending the wrong message about the brand.

Human memory works by association, building connections between sensory experience and the meaning that such experiences have for the individual, facilitating fast and simple decision-making that minimizes the need for mental “heavy lifting”. For example, colours have elaborate and entrenched sets of mental associations. In the case of orange, these go from the mundane iconic associations (such as an orange fruit) to the more symbolic and arbitrary (such as youth and vitality).

Moreover, orange fruit themselves are associated with natural taste and healthiness. Tropicana made the mistake of replacing an iconic symbol of an orange, with a large straw sticking through the fruit, to a more “classy and contemporary” image of a glass filled with orange juice. But does this have quite the same set of associations? And does it connote a healthy drink in the same way that the original visual icon did so powerfully?

Tropicana made a number of additional design mistakes too. Although the redesigned pack may have looked “attractive” and performed well in whatever market research Pepsi conducted, it had lost the connection between the message it communicated to shoppers and the messages that they were looking for. If you are concerned about healthy living and freshness, then you are

much more likely to notice and pick up a package that communicates those messages (through a beautifully imagined orange fruit and a colourful red and white straw).

This is not intended to knock all market research, but rather to challenge if Pepsi were asking the right questions about the new pack design (in the same way that Coca-Cola asked the wrong questions about New Coke). These issues apply to brands and advertising in general, and my own experience in advertising research is that too often new campaigns give too much thought trying to “stand out” and be different, and too little thought to trying to “stand for” the associations that are most relevant to customers and closest to how they think about the brand.

The most powerful and efficient messages that any brands can send are those that signal what they “stand for”. That is, what is their purpose, and what is the problem that they can help the shopper or consumer to fix (their brand story). For Nike, it’s the story of individual courage and performance, for IKEA it’s the story of giving access to good design for everybody, for Virgin it’s the story of having fun and being different, and for Dove it’s the story of nurturing a woman’s beauty.

Successful brands like Nike, IKEA, Virgin and Dove have never changed their brand story, but have modernized and adapted it, adding rich layers of meaning to their core values and initial positioning. For example, the core of Dove’s success was always the nourishing value of milk, made tangible through the sensory experience of the brand. They have added increasingly rich meanings to these origins by focusing on the brand’s role in nurturing female beauty, creating stronger and stronger associations with the emotional goals of their target audience (or at least a large number of them).

The same story could be told for Nike, IKEA and Virgin. Above all, great brands are consistent about what they stand for. Consistency does not mean being the same all the time, but it does mean having a consistent set of core values that can be seen in everything you do (from communication to user experience). Markets change and consumers change, and all brands need to update and refresh their message and their experience, but they should always do this based on an understanding of who they are, their role in people’s lives and the value that they bring to those lives.

Next time you need to change your brand, remember to honour your past, know your place in the category and, above all, understand the emotional goals of your customers. That is the right way to grow to success.

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