Cult branding essay

What is Cult? The Oxford English Dictionary defines cult as " something fashionable or popular among a particular group of people".

But when we are talking in reference to Brands it is much more. It means fascination towards these brands not because they deliver distinctive benefits, trustworthy service, or innovative technologies (though they may provide all of these). Rather, this brand fanaticism is due to the reason that these iconic brands forge a deep connection with the culture. In essence, they compete for culture share.

Holt, 2003) It means being passionate and being proud to own them. It's not how the brand performs; it's about what the brand stands for. Icons are valued because, through them, people get to experience powerful myths. Even a seemingly unremarkable product like Mountain Dew – water, sugar, green dye, and carbonation-can take on iconic power and keep it. (Holt, 2003) In a net shell " Cult Brand – ' one's icon, one's ultimate desire.

'" When the consumers of a brand start feeling these kinds of emotions inside them, it can be said that the brand has started to emerge as a cult brand. Take for example, Harley Davidson or IPod or Mountain Dew, there consumers worship their brand not because they are the best or they are of most utility to them but due to the fact that their possession or usage gives them a feeling of pride, a feeling no other brand can give them. What is Brand? Many organizations use the term " product manager" interchangeably with " brand manager". While most of us could think through the semantic difference between a " product" and a " brand", it

seems that (with a few exceptions) the two concepts are not distinguished when used to describe their management. This is a mistake.

(Chevron, 1998) Defining Product The product is defined by its form and function, what it is and what it does. The product is physical attributes, such as formulation, performance, price, style, design and ease of use. What a product is can be relatively easily communicated, rapidly changed and effected in the short term using a number of tools: just add a new ingredient or change the shape of the packaging and you have a new product or, at least, a different one. A good product marketing tactician is one who can distil a large amount of data about the consumer, the market, the competition, distribution, and boil them down to the few essential premises that will form the backbone of a focussed marketing plan. He should be able to distil these premises even further to write an effective communication strategy which, as any honest advertising person will tell you, must be based on a single-minded selling proposition.

This ability to distil facts down to their simple essence presupposes an excellent knowledge and understanding of the product's buyers and consumers. Chevron, 1998) Defining Brand The brand is almost the opposite on all points. Whereas the product has a form, the brand does not have a physical embodiment: it is merely a promise, a covenant with the customer. Some say that " the logo is the brand"..

. but this is not so. A logo is a meaningless symbol if it does not communicate a brand's covenant with the consumer. And, whereas communication of a product's physical attributes is straightforward and fast,

communication of brand values is inherently circuitous and slow. Like the character of an individual, the character of a brand is most difficult to communicate proactively. The individual cannot declare what his character is; the observer must figure it out for himself, an indirect communications process which requires time and absolute consistency.

And, contrary to product communication which is best based on one single-minded forceful proposition, brand character, like the character of a person, becomes better defined as it gains in complexity. Lastly, whereas the product manager must gain a superior knowledge of his consumer to be effective, the brand manager's success is in great part based on a thorough knowledge of the idiosyncrasies and the values professed by his company and its long-term corporate players, i. e. its top management. (Chevron, 1998) ? The Brand Building Process Delphi Process We would first study a method developed by a consultancy firm JRC&A based in La Grange, Illinois, USA. JRC&A is a consulting practice specializing in new product development and branding strategy.

JRC&A have developed an introverted aspect of branding and have named their method for developing branding as ' Delphi Process' in reference to the inscription in the Apollo temple in Delphi which reads " Know thyself". (Chevron, 1998) Know thy brand's character You have character when another person is told about a situation which you face and which he has never seen you facing before and that person says: " He'd do this, but he'd never do that! " If this is said with confidence, then you have character in that person's eyes. (Chevron, 1998) Exploit Special OpportunitiesA corporation has values that the outsider discovers bit by bit. This unveiling

occurs slowly, as the consumer, a keen observer, builds his/her image of a brand's character based on the subtle signs which the brand reveals incidentally and often unintentionally in its communication. At times, the brand may have special opportunities, character-defining moments, which allow it to unveil more about its values and further its definition. This is what happened when Johnson & Johnson reacted to the Tylenol tampering scare by immediately withdrawing its product from the shelves.

By doing so, it took advantage of a rare " character-defining moment" and sent the world a message about some of its values, like " our customer counts more than protecting profits". Johnson & Johnson was able to do this either because: •It already knew what its set of Tylenol brand values was and simply applied them, or; •A highly placed executive was able to " call the shots" and reacted according to his own values, thereby injecting them into the brand. This had positive effects not only on the corporation but also on the Tylenol brand which, in many opinions, came out of the ordeal stronger than it was before. While the values of a corporation may eventually make their way through the brand's communication and then to the consumer's mind, there are many factors which can slow or interrupt the process: management change, company merger or acquisition by another, change in advertising agency, short-term tactical pressures, etc..

. Some of those factors can be terminal; any behaviour or message that is out of character, coming during that period when the consumer is trying to determine the character of a brand, brings the character definition process back to step one. (Chevron, 1998)Document Intended Brand Character It is therefore important for the corporation to create a document which reflects

what the intended brand character is, and then to create systems and organization to ensure the document is respected and complied with. Who can write this document? In theory, the character of a brand can be invented by anyone with a creative mind and some understanding of what character is. After all, product, brand name, packaging, and advertising campaign all are invented. Why not invent the character traits that will make the brand? (Chevron, 1998) Staying PowerIn order to have " staying power", the brand's values must be rooted in the long-term values held by the company which form the " corporate character".

To define the " corporate character", the documents called " corporate vision" and " corporate mission" are mandatory starting points. Additional valuable information can be found in the corporation's history (how was it created; by whom; what it was known for, etc.). Even the views of the company's competitors can be useful to establish a complete and balanced perception. How can all that information be translated into a brand character statement? The author, a consultant specializing in branding strategy, has turned to psychology and psychiatry.

He found, in the writings of Professor C. Robert Cloninger's group, a theory by which personality could be divided into seven discrete variables: four innate " temperament" dimensions and three acquired " character" dimensions (Cloninger, 1987; Cloninger et al. , 1993). After all, if the personality of human beings can boil down to seven measures, a similar construct should suffice to analyze and write up a rich-enough character statement for a brand. The author's tool is named the HBCQ orHepta-dimensional Brand Character Questionnaire in reference to Professor

Cloninger's early investigative tool, the Tri-dimensional Personality Questionnaire or TPQ (Cloninger, 1987).

The HBCQ consists of a battery of approximately 100 self-administered questions or statements which the respondent must answer as if the brand were a person. It is complemented by a one-hour face-to-face interview. (Chevron, 1998) Typical interviewees People to be interviewed typically include: •The corporation's top managers including only those who influence how the brand behaves (e. g. board members, chairman of the board, president, etc. •The senior vice-president or vice-president of marketing •International managers who get to choose and adapt advertising and packaging for their region, or who forge marketing alliances with other companies •New product strategists and top R&D personnel, since product formulation and new product introductions are an important part of the brand's speech •Senior advertising agency personnel (unless a change is contemplated) •And any other person who is a long-term influencer of the brand's communication Between five and 25 interviews are conducted and the results are analyzed by a team: a clinical psychologist, a conceptual copywriter and the author.

A brand character statement is then drafted and refined with the participation of the brand's management. Typical statements in the questionnaire include: Brand X prefers the old " tried and true" ways of doing things to trying " new and improved" ways, or, The brand can laugh at itself, which the respondent must answer with: Yes/ No/ Doesn't apply (Chevron, 1998) Rating brand strengths and weaknesses Those answers allow us to rate the brand strengths and weaknesses along the following axes: •High

novelty v/s low novelty; •Security v/s risk taking; • Seeks reward v/s does not depend on reward; • Persistence v/s irresoluteness; •Self-sufficiency/maturity v/s immaturity; Cooperativeness/pro-social v/s self-centred/anti-social; and •Integrity/conscience v/s lack of integrity. (Chevron, 1998) The Brand Character Statement (or BCS) Following is a hypothetical example of a Brand Character Statement: Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc. The firm wrote the document after taking the HBCQ themselves and trying to impersonate Ben & Jerry's management while answering the questions. To verify the accuracy of this BCS, they submitted it to a Ben & Jerry's PR person who found it accurate and requested only one word change.

In spite of this, they did not assume that their assessment of the Ben & Jerry's brand character is as complete as if they had been able to administer the HBCQ. Please note that this BCS contains a number of constraints or commitments which may not always be easy to live with. So it should: a character statement that does not commit much is not worth much either. ? Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream: Brand Character Statement Ben & Jerry's Homemade ice cream is ice cream as it should be, made with fresh and natural ingredients blended with something unexpected and original. It combines the tradition of Vermont where the company is, and the creative iconoclasm of hippies which Ben and Jerry were in the 1960s.

Ben & Jerry's ice cream brand begins with the best ingredients, like real fresh cream and fresh fruits, which are processed according to traditional methods of ice cream making. Everything that goes into Ben & Jerry's ice cream – ingredients, preparation, packaging, distribution, and service – bears the mark of its Vermont origins: friendly farmers with solid down-home values

and humour, attached to traditions that extol nature and good food. Ben & Jerry's ice cream makes ice cream fun to eat with unexpected mixes; it seems as if it had been made by two imaginative guys working in the farmhouse kitchen. Ben & Jerry's ice cream as a corporation is traditional, but not conservative: no starched shirts here, but flannel ones with funny and unexpected patterns. Everything Ben & Jerry's ice cream does reflects the strong values of Vermont tradition without compromising the creativity and progressive 1960s values of its two original entrepreneurs.

It was started by friends, with an idea and no means, not by food technicians blessed with financial backing. It represents entrepreneurship and the victory of the little guy against the big corporations (which it has contempt for). It is generous as only a small artisan without a large accounting system to control cost can be: There are lots of real chunks of brownies in the Chocolate Fudge Brownie Ice Cream and large amounts of dough in the Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough ice cream. Ben & Jerry's ice cream is committed to the environment in which we all live.

The brand is very active in several " green" political causes. While this may have its origins in the founders' hippie past, it is nevertheless a very current and very strong corporate commitment. Ben & Jerry's ice cream is corny as if corniness were an article of faith. It believes that seriousness only serves to protect the dim-witted. Ben & Jerry's ice cream product names often wink at its consumer: Cherry Garcia winks at its hippie past.

They do not aim to be taken seriously. They are just a way to foster a bond with like-minded people. Ben & Jerry's ice cream doesn't seek novelty for

novelty's sake: it is open to new ideas and doesn't have hidden preconceptions or prejudices. While it is creative, it doesn't hold creativity as an essential virtue. Nor does it hold " incongruity" as a vice either. (Chevron, 1998) Applying the Brand Character StatementFrom the time when a BCS is developed and agreed to, it must be used with absolute consistency and no exceptions.

It is important to understand that not all of the points it makes have to be included in the brand's communication all the time. What is essential, however, is to ensure that no point of the BCS is ever violated by any communication whatsoever. In the Ben & Jerry's ice cream example it says that: " Ben & Jerry's ice cream brand begins with the best ingredients, like real fresh cream and fresh fruits". This means that, wherever B&J uses cream or fruit, it must use fresh cream and fresh fruit.

But it also allows B&J to market sorbets (which do not contain cream) and vanilla or coffee ice creams (which do not contain fruits). Ben & Jerry could not, however, market a simple vanilla or coffee ice cream which would violate another mandate from the BCS which requires it to blend tradition with the unexpected. In practice, all its vanilla ice cream is mixed with fruit, and the " Coffee, Coffee! BuzzBuzzBuzz" is sure packed with unexpected ingredients and textures. (Chevron, 1998) The Brand Parent As detailed as a brand character statement may be in writing, it is still open to interpretation. Some of those inferences may be quite contradictory, particularly when they are made by managers who are under the threat of an immediate danger, or by the sophists of a far-away advertising agency.

It is best to appoint one person as " brand parent" with the responsibility of applying the BCS and of warding off threats to its integrity. Once installed, the brand parent must be the mandatory gate for all of the brand communication, including PR, packaging, promotion, etc. The parent's authority should be exercised worldwide. (Chevron, 1998) Attributes of a Brand Parent It is important to observe the following rules for the brand parent: •The person must have excellent teaching skills and have enough seniority in the organization to command respect. •The brand parent is not a marketing manager and does not interfere with local marketing plans other than those plans that run against the BCS. The brand parent reports directly to the top of the corporation (president or CEO) and receives frequent public demonstrations of support from his bosses: The assignment will be made very difficult by many, particularly international managers who may see the brand parent as encroaching on their authority, and advertising agencies who may see the BCS as hindering their creative freedom.

•The brand parent disposes of a research budget which serves to measure progress made in each country towards linking in the consumer's mind the values of the BCS with the brand. The results of this research should have some impact on the compensation of local marketing staff. In addition to creating a " brand parent" function, a successful branding strategy must carefully create buy-in within an organization. This is made all the more necessary by the " top-down" approach used in the Delphi Process.

The author and his team recommend that one of the first tasks of the brand parent be to implement local research with the HBCQ so as to find the brand's " character gaps" or the brand's character traits which local

communication needs to reinforce. The brand parent should then challenge the local marketing staff to develop an action plan to bridge those gaps and, if at all possible, tie a reward to the achievement of these greed-to objectives. In addition to furthering the goal of communicating the values of the BCS, these actions will help develop a sense of ownership for the project among the local marketing staff. We cannot over-stress the importance, from the outset of the execution of a branding strategy, of establishing the organization which will direct its execution. The concept underlying the creation of a brand character statement is a powerful one and most managers will readily agree to use it.

Yet, experience shows, once the pressures of running the day-to-day business resume, those good intentions can vanish quickly. (Chevron, 1998) Measuring progressProgress made in establishing brand character must be measured. If no measurements are made, the BCS exercise is likely to remain just that – an exercise. The basic principle for this monitoring consists in comparing the brand profile as it is expected to be, based on interviews conducted among the brand owners, with a brand profile based on consumer interviews. An initial measurement will permit determination of the initial " brand character gap" while subsequent research will (hopefully) show how this gap has been reduced.

Brand profile measurements among consumers can be accomplished rapidly and at a relatively low cost with a shortened version of the HBCQ. This research tool has the advantage of being self-administered, and, because of the internal redundancy of its questions, of providing reliable test-retest data on the seven scales it measures. In addition, it allows measurement of the

remaining " character gap" along its seven scales, thereby providing invaluable direction to those in charge of its communication. Some had warned that the questionnaire would be hard to use if people had difficulty " anthropomorphising" the brand. For some reason, qualitative researchers use these anthropomorphic analogies for research in most European countries (except Germany), but the same techniques are strongly criticized and seldom used in the USA.

Our experience using HBCQ research in the USA, as well as abroad, has been very positive and has shown no problem of understanding, even in pilot tests of consumer perceptions of an ice cream brand conducted among rural Midwest respondents. The monitoring effort should be biennial and sponsored and closely supervised by the brand parent. We strongly recommend that the results be used to allocate special rewards within the company and its advertising agency. (Chevron, 1998) Yearly Review Suggested Note that while progress in establishing brand character should be measured once every other year, the brand parent would be well advised to conduct a yearly review of the process used to implement the BCS.

(Chevron, 1998) ? The Brand Building Process Contd…. Brand Architecture Process Brand Architecture is an organizing structure if the brand portfolio that specifies brand roles and the nature of relationships between brands. The brand architecture schemes have been referred to brand equity charter, leverages and brand profitability and the new rules of brand management leading to the efficacy of the attributes, derived advantages and brand system emerging in relation to the buying power of the customers.

The first step in establishing a brand equity management system may be focussed towards finalizing brand equity into a document, the brand charter that provides relevant guidelines to the marketing managers. Such documentation strategy requires defining the firm's view on the significance of the equity concept, describing key brands in terms of associated products or names and the manner by which they have been branded and marketed the second step in establishing a successful brand equity management is to integrate the results of the brand track survey performed periodically. While architecting the brand strategy, it is important to understand the preliminary definition of brand equity is not the same for the firm named brands that have their own names. In case of firm owned brands, ? Case Studies – Case Study 1 Marlboro " Marlboro.

You get a lot to like, filter, flavor, flip-top box. " " Where there's a man… there's a Marlboro-with a filter that delivers a smoke of surprising mildness. " " Better ' makins'.

Marlboro… More flavor…

More filter… More cigarette. " If you think flavor went out when filters came in-Try Marlboro.

" " Make yourself comfortable-Have a Marlboro" " Marlboro. Why don't you settle back and have a full flavored smoke" " Settle Back. You get a lot to like here in Marlboro Country. " " Come to where the flavor is. Come to Marlboro Country" " Come to where the flavor is.

" " Come to Marlboro Country. " " Marlboro. " A Western landscape, a rugged cowboy and the colour red have come to embody years of advertising tag lines for Philip Morris' Marlboro cigarettes. These three elements, combined or separate, are recognizable as the American call to Marlboro Country even without the brand name, sales pitch or slogan. The brilliantly designed campaign, the strong image of the mythical American hero, the cowboy, and a successful series of responses to market challenges by the Marlboro team has created an immediately and universally recognized icon representing an idealized and appealing American lifestyle out of possibly the only " product on the market (aside from weapons) that kill and injure when they are used as they are intended to be used. " (08Ja) Background In the 1920s, Marlboro was first advertised as a premium cigarette for women, a milder version of the smokes well dressed men might puff on after dinner.

But the brand never took hold, and by the 1950s concerns over the connection between smoking and cancer drove many smokers to filtered brands. Philip Morris didn't have a filtered cigarette, so it scrapped the old campaign in favour of re-launching Marlboro as the company's filtered alternative. After deciding to introduce filters to the brand, Marlboro executives still had the brand's feminine image to deal with. It didn't help that filtered cigarettes were considered softer versions of the real thing, cigarettes for sissies.

For help, Marlboro turned to Leo Burnett's advertising company. In a 1972 documentary, Burnett recalled the brainstorming session in which they stumbled upon their icon. " I said, ' What's the most masculine symbol you can think of? ' And right off the top of his head one of these writers spoke up

and said a cowboy. And I said, ' That's for sure. '" (08Fe) Burnett

remembered a cover of Life magazine (Aug.

22, 1949) of C. H. Long, a range boss for the JA Ranch near Amarillo, Texas.

A model was posed like Long, some cowboy-sounding words were added,

and the ad was slapped into print in a Dallas newspaper. It was the birth of

the most successful advertising campaign in history, the " icon of the

century," according to Advertising Age. (08Fe1) The first Marlboro men

weren't limited to cowboys.

They were all sorts of rugged individuals who smoked their cigarettes while

performing equally manly tasks, from fixing their cars to fishing or hunting.

(08Fe) The rather abrupt advertising about-face sparked a similar turn in

sales. By 1957, Marlboro's sales were skyrocketing. Unfortunately for Philip

Morris, however, 1957 also brought with it one of the first rounds of negative

publicity.

A study published in Reader's Digest linked smoking with cancer. (08Fe) In

response, Marlboro once again turned to show its softer side. But this time it

made sure to do so in a way that might retain the masculine appeal the

company had worked so hard to cultivate, while calming the nerves of

anxious smokers. Instead of focusing on the mysterious tattooed Marlboro

Man, it turned the camera to sultry singer Julie London, who would share a

smoke with her lucky male companion in between verses of the dreamy new

" Settle Back with a Marlboro" theme. 08Fe) These commercials, paired with

print ads that showed apparently wealthy men relaxing for a smoke, lasted

for a while. But as American politics became more complicated in the 1960s,

Jack Landry, the Marlboro brand manager at Philip Morris, saw an opening into which the cowboy fit like a glove.

(08Fe) " In a world that was becoming increasingly complex and frustrating for the ordinary man," Landry explained, " the cowboy represented an antithesis — a man whose environment was simplistic and relatively pressure free. He was his own man in a world he owned. " (08Fe) Marlboro's television advertisements in the '60s reflected the idea of freedom in wide-open spaces, especially once he theme from the movie The Magnificent Seven was added to the scenes of cowboys leading their herds through dusty canyons of " Marlboro Country" or charging off to rein in a stray colt. (08Fe) Part of the success of the campaign might be attributable to the fact that Marlboro forged some credibility by using real cowboys in some of the ads instead of actors just playing the part.

(08Fe) The image took hold with enough force that even through a ban on televised tobacco advertisements that began in 1971, the Marlboro Man survived unharmed. Instead of riding off into the sunset, the image turned up in print ads and on billboards all over the country. (08Fe) Today, Marlboros are smoked by 40 percent of U. S.

mokers over 11, some 25 million people, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health. They consume 154 billion Marlboros a year. (08Fe1) Analysis Marlboro is not only an iconic brand in United States of America, but in other countries too. But this is contrary to the common perception that a cult brand needs to be in line with culture of the consumers.

So ideally a brand icon such as ' Marlboro Man' should not be an icon in other countries of the world except United States because he took birth because cowboy is a symbol of masculinity in USA. The reason behind this is ambiguity. This is further discussed by taking examples of different countries and perception of the people over there. The American cowboyThe Marlboro man which was initially identified with recognizable personalities later became an anonymous icon representing a way of life associated with the wilderness, not a specific individual.

The setting for the ads is the untamed frontier, the American hinterland. The Marlboro man is portrayed as both a product of the frontier and as a role model representing the idealized American spirit. As such, he stands for a sloughing off or a rejection of the trappings of the modern civilized world and an embrace of the frontier spirit. He chooses to live as a " true American" and, thereby, emerges as superior to the bureaucrats and organization men of the civilized world who pervert or ignore the heritage and birthright of all Americans. Through the Marlboro man, Americans are able to participate vicariously in the myth of America and its greatness.

By using the brand, people can link themselves to that tradition; conforming " yes men" may triumph when climbing the corporate ladder, but during a smoking break the true American prevails. (A. H. Walle, 1997) When analysing the response of American audiences, therefore, the Marlboro man is best explained as a brand image which taps and replicates a basic paradigm by which Americans view and judge themselves. It is niched in the American self-image and it is clearly linked to the supposed beneficial influences of the frontier on both national character and personal worth.

(A. H. Walle, 1997) The Westerner goes East A. H.

Walle, a professor at University of Buffalo, USA, in his research paper " Global behaviour, unique responses: consumption within cultural frameworks" recites an incident during one of his visit to Germany. Back in the 1980s when the cold war was still frigid and the Iron Curtain was still a bastion, I drove to Berlin and in the process had to cross through a section of what was then East Germany. During the trip, my companion wanted to stop at one of the East German " duty free shops" along the way in order to get some luxury goods at low prices. (A. H.

Walle, 1997) Walking into the store, I was met with a life-sized picture of the Marlboro man, which was carefully positioned so it would exert a visual impact on all entering customers. I told my companion that I found all this to be quite ironic; here I was, beginning my first interaction in an Iron Curtain country and I find myself being greeted by a classic icon of American capitalism, not by German communists. (A. H.

Walle, 1997) Fairly quickly, a young female clerk at the store came over to us and urged us not to draw attention to the poster; she then confided that she was planning to steal it as soon as an opportunity presented itself. The woman went on to say that she intended to put the poster in her bathroom so she could see it every morning when she got out of the shower. She observed, " look at the picture, there's not a fence anywhere". (A.

H. Walle, 1997) To this East German woman, the Marlboro man was a seductive icon, but to her it did not represent the heritage of the American frontier. Juxtaposing the image of a man who lived without fences to the

realities of her own life and the shadow of the Berlin Wall, she viewed the Marlboro man as an alternative to the oppressive dictatorship in which she lived. We both saw the same ad; I interpreted it as an American while she processed it in ways which fit into her life. The product and its promotion were homogeneous; the meaning and response were not. (A.

H. Walle, 1997) A Return to the Hinterland It is well known that the tobacco companies are increasingly marketing their products in Third World countries. It is also well known that many of the advertising symbols used in the Western world are also employed in Third World advertising and promotion of tobacco products. The Marlboro Man is an example of that tendency. (A. H.

Walle, 1997) This fact, however, does not necessarily indicate that those who live in Third World countries respond to these images in ways which parallel the response of Western consumers. Consider the following observation of David Sokal who worked for the Medical Care Development Inc. in West Africa in the 1980s: While working in West Africa...I encountered many cigarette advertisements...During one [conversation with a young man] he remarked that the Marlboro man was really impressive...Consider the picture of a sun-bronzed cowboy on a handsome horse rounding up fat, healthy cattle. To a rural African child this is wealth and prosperity. In many villages if there is a horse at all it belongs to the village chief. Most herdsmen go on foot, and most cattle are very thin (Sokal, 1985, pp.

467-8). The key point Sokal makes is that in the African cultural milieu of which he spoke, the Marlboro man represents high social class, economic

success, and the mainstream establishment. In North America, in contrast, the Marlboro man is a marginal individualist who accepts a working-class status in order to reject the confines of an " organization man" existence. By doing so, he can live as a real man and he achieves personal fulfilment as a result of his sacrifice. To the East German, in contrast, the Marlboro man represents a generalized freedom evaluated against a backdrop of political repression at home. To the African, the same image represents status, wealth, and material success.

It is obvious that the same advertisement can trigger completely different responses among various audiences. Although the Marlboro advertising strategists may have thought that they were marketing a product in global ways, they merely provide various markets with what amounts to a Rorchach " ink blot test" in which people project their own personal hopes, dreams, and fears on to a neutral image which can suggest several things; it means nothing until interpreted by the viewer. (A. H. Walle, 1997) Ambiguity/Transformation Theory Certain messages possess a degree of ambiguity (intended or unintended) which facilitate multiple interpretations. To whatever degree ambiguity exists, specific groups and individuals will be free to use the message as a blank canvas on which to paint their own vision.

To whatever degree a communication is concrete and unambiguous, in contrast, the greater the propensity for the receiver to interpret the message according to the " meaning" which is intended by the communicator. Actually, of course, there is always a degree of both concreteness and ambiguity in all communications; it is possible, however, to place a

communication on a continuum with concreteness and ambiguity as polar opposites and the specific communication lying somewhere on that continuum. Such a model is useful in considering the Marlboro man. (A.

H. Walle, 1997) The Cowboy as Ambiguous Icon As has been shown, the cowboy (as represented here by the Marlboro Man) is an ambiguous character which is subject to multiple interpretations. Its image does not possess a universal and concrete meaning. As a result, individual people and groups are able to invest the icon with interpretations which are meaningful to them. This ambiguity allows a universal and homogeneous icon, the Marlboro man, to address different markets in a uniform manner even though each group interprets this familiar icon according to its own needs and orientations. No doubt, this ambiguity was not intended by those who created the Marlboro man; these promotional specialists were obviously seeking to link the American vision of the cowboy (and its mythic links to the American psyche) with the Marlboro brand.

Nonetheless, an ambiguity did creep into the icon, which allowed various audiences to transform its meaning in ways which were uniquely relevant and appropriate. Indeed, the cowboy is a multi-dimensional character. From the perspective of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the concept of the " noble savage", the cowboy represents a superiority which results from living close to nature. As an opposite vision, the " natural man" can also be viewed as someone who sloughs the benefits of civilization and devolves down the rungs of cultural development to barbarism or worse. Both visions have been thrust on to the image of the cowboy in heroic depictions, on the one hand, and antiheroic portrayals, on the other.

In addition, the cowboy can be viewed from a distinctively American perspective or as a generalized icon dealing with human universals. Both orientations have been embraced by different groups at different times. And finally, the cowboy can be viewed in hyper-specific manners as was the case in East Germany and Africa. This flexibility was not foreseen or intended by the strategic planners of Marlboro; yet it ultimately served the brand's purpose very well.

This flexibility can be viewed as a windfall which allows and facilitates effective international promotion. Ambiguity/transformation theory provides a way to deal with this phenomenon. By recognizing that the ability for an image to be transformed lies in the degree of ambiguity which exists within it, the analyst and strategic planner will have a way to predict the degree to which an advertisement can be transformed by specific groups. By so evaluating the communication, it is possible to develop tactics which mesh with the overall goals of the organization.

(A. H. Walle, 1997) DiscussionAlthough the ambiguity inherent in the Marlboro man was an accident, the example points to the strategic value of ambiguity under certain controlled conditions. Having observed Marlboro's accidental success with ambiguity, it is possible to discuss the option of engineering promotional messages which consciously embody an ambiguity. By doing so, a homogeneous brand image can be merged with specific responses by distinct target markets.

As argued above, some communications are fragile and ambiguous. The Marlboro Man is an ambiguous icon which can be interpreted in multiple

ways. It lacks an inherent, concrete meaning; as a result, different groups are able to interpret it in ways which mesh with their needs and world views. Although the ambiguity in this example was accidental, it demonstrates the strategic potential which can exist in forging images which are imprecise; by presenting homogeneous campaigns based on ambiguous images, uniform corporate communications can be mated with unique local response.

Marketing managers need to appreciate the potential value of such ambiguous campaigns. Juxtaposed, the polar opposites of the continuum of ambiguity and concreteness can be discussed as shown in Table. ? Table 1 Ambiguous V/s Concrete communication compared (A. H. Walle, 1997) AmbiguousConcrete CharacteristicsThe communication can be interpreted in a no. of ways.

The way in which a communication is interpreted is a function of needs, wants, feelings, etc. of those who receive the message. The communication is explicit and will generally be interpreted in a specific way which is inherent in the communication itself. The meaning is largely determined by the communicator, not the receiver of the message. ValueOrganizations often want to choose a uniform means of communicating with consumers and potential consumers because of the efficiencies involved in doing so. By choosing ambiguous, yet uniform, tactic of communication, the organization can gain homogeneous recognition in the market place, on the one hand, and allow the individual markets to respond to the product in their own way, on the other On some occasions the organization wants to express a precise and explicit message that all consumers and possible consumers will interpret in identical ways.

By choosing a concrete strategy, the organization will achieve the goal of explicit and unambiguous communication at the trade-off cost of preventing individual target markets from responding to the product in unique ways. DiscussionAs indicated, ambiguity and concreteness are polar opposites on a continuum. As such, many points exist between the poles. Nonetheless, it is possible to envisage a communication as embracing on orientation more than the other and to conceptualize a strategic value of having a communication which lies on some particular point of that continuum. ? Implications It is possible for homogeneous communications to be interpreted in diverse ways by various target markets. In view of the fact that this option can result in effective organizational communications, it deserves strategic consideration.

Although ambiguity/transformation theory can be used to explain unintended results of organizational communications, it can also be used by those who seek to engineer ambiguity into homogeneous advertising campaigns. In the case of the Marlboro man, the ambiguity which exists was unintended. Nonetheless, Marlboro benefited from the ambiguity. Some communications are more ambiguous than others.

To what extent does the organization want specific target markets to forge unique interpretations of homogeneous commercial messages? In view of the fact that the degree of ambiguity in promotional campaigns can be viewed as a matter of strategic choice, the question is more than merely academic. (A. H. Walle, 1997) ? Case Studies – Case Study 2 Mountain Dew People have always needed myths. Simple stories with compelling characters

and resonant plots, myths help us make sense of the world. They provide ideals to live by, and they work to resolve life's most vexing questions.

Icons are encapsulated myths. They are powerful because they deliver myths to us in a tangible form, thereby making them more accessible. Icons are not just brands, of course. More often, they are people.

We find icons among the most successful politicians- think of Ronald Reagan- artists and entertainers like Marilyn Monroe, activists like Martin Luther King, and other celebrity figures, such as Princess Di. People feel compelled to make these icons part of their lives because, through them, they're able to experience powerful myths continually. Iconic brands operate similarly. When a brand creates a myth, most often through advertisements, consumers come to perceive the myth as embodied in the product.

So they buy the product to consume the myth and to forge a relationship with the author: the brand. Anthropologists call this " ritual action. " When Nike's core customers laced up their Air Jordans in the early 1990s, they tapped into Nike's myth of individual achievement through perseverance. As Apple's customers typed away on their keyboards in the late 1990s, they communed with the company's myth of rebellious, creative, libertarian values at work in a new economy. Holt, 2003) As these examples suggest, iconic brands embody not just any myth but myths that attempt to resolve acute tensions people feel between their own lives and society's prevailing ideology. Such tensions are widespread.

An ideology, by its nature, presents challenging moral imperatives; it lays out the vision to which a community aspires. But, inevitably, many people

live at a considerable remove from that vision. A national ideology may, for example, promote the ideal of a family with two parents, even though many citizens contend with broken homes. The contradictions between ideology and individual experience produce intense desires and anxieties, fueling the demand for myths. That demand, in turn, gives rise to " myth markets.

" It's in these markets, not in product markets, that brands compete to become icons. Think of a myth market as an implicit national conversation in which a wide variety of cultural products compete to provide the most compelling myth. The topic of the conversation is the national ideology, and it is taken up by many contenders. (Holt, 2003) The winners in these markets become icons; they are the greatest performers of the greatest myths, and they bask in the kind of glory bestowed on those who have the prophetic and charismatic power to provide cultural leadership in times of great need. More often than not, in America at least, those who win in myth markets are performing a myth of rebellion.

No matter the era or the ideological climate, Americans are resolutely pragmatic and populist in spirit, deeply distrustful of political dogma and concentrated authority. For guidance and solace, Americans turn to those who stand up for their personal values instead of pursuing wealth and power. The country's myths draw on its stockpile of rebels, people who are often a threat to the prevailing ideology. The most successful icons rely on an intimate and credible relationship with a rebel world: Nike with the African-American ghetto, Harley with outlaw bikers, Volkswagen with bohemian artists, Apple with cyberpunks. And even before these, there was the soft drink Mountain Dew. Let's take a look at how, back in the 1950s, a small

bottler in Tennessee succeeded with a rebel myth that addressed one of the most potent ideological contradictions of the day.

(Holt, 2003) The Case of Mountain DewTo understand the early iconic power of Mountain Dew, we must hark back to the American ideology of the 1950s and 1960s, which was deeply influenced by World War II and the Cold War. The success of American military operations – executed according to a rationalized, hierarchical model – and the nation's ability to " out-science" the Nazis in the race to develop the atomic bomb announced the beginning of a new era. Ideology lauded scientific expertise, the power of which would be unleashed by professionally managed bureaucracies. Popular culture was filled with visions of technology used to create fantastic futures and to help the country conquer new markets and beat back the Soviet bloc. Ideas about rugged individualism had become anachronistic; manhood was now to be earned in a corporate environment. The man who was mature enough to subsume his individuality under the umbrella of corporate wisdom was praised.

Outside of work, these ideals found expression in the new " modern living" practiced by nuclear families in planned suburbs. These values produced a litany of contradictions. For men, these ideals felt coercive and emasculating when measured against America's historical populism. Books like William Whyte's The Organization Man and David Riesman's The Lonely Crowd, which damned the new conformity of corporate America, became best-sellers. Myth markets soon sprang up-using the Western frontier, the Beats' bohemia, and the hillbilly backwater – to provide salves for these tensions. The hillbilly first caught the public's attention in the 1930s in Li'l Abner, a

comic strip in which Al Capp exaggerated the hillbilly's lack of civility to create biting social satire.

As the 1950s unfolded, the hillbilly- a figure who was in touch with his innate animal qualities- seemed powerful and dangerous, the exact opposite of the corporate man. Elvis Presley, the poor Mississippi hillbilly who brought " primitive black music" to a white audience, oozed a titillating sexuality and sent young people in search of rock-and-roll records. CBS's The Beverly Hillbillies, a populist allegory that championed pragmatic knowledge over " book learning," character over self-presentation, and traditional hospitality over proper etiquette, became one of the most popular television shows of the 1960s. Mountain Dew's inventors named their product after an old-time Appalachian folk song that told of the pleasures of " mountain dew" – moonshine liquor.

They filled the beverage with caffeine and sugar so that it would deliver a heart-pumping rush and gave it fewer bubbles than most sodas so that it could be chugged. They then created a comic hillbilly character-Willy-who drank Mountain Dew to " get high. " Invoking Appalachian stereotypes like the blood-feuding Hatfields and McCoys, the bottle's label featured a barefoot Willy pointing his cocked rifle at a neighbour running away in the distance. Tied to Willy's hip was a stoneware jug, the type usually associated with homemade booze. When PepsiCo bought the brand in 1964, the company kept the hillbilly character, renamed him Clem, and put him in animated television ads. One ad, called " Beautiful Sal," features a cast of barefoot country folk.

Two bumpkins court Sal, a buxom redhead in a brief, tattered dress. Sal refuses flowers from both men and tugs their hats down over their faces before she struts away. Enter Clem. Half Sal's height, Clem seems like an unlikely mate.

But from under his ten-gallon hat, Clem reveals a tall bottle of Mountain Dew. Sal swipes the bottle and takes a few gulps. As Clem gazes lustily, Sal lifts a leg and hollers. " Yahoo, Mountain Dew! " Her long hair snaps into curls beside her head. If the audience failed to understand that Dew has the power to change attitudes in a heartbeat, the muzzle flash that explodes from Sal's ears seals the deal.

She growls like a panther in heat, embraces Clem passionately, and smothers him with a kiss. The spot then cuts to a single-toothed old man who reaches behind his head, wiggles his finger lasciviously through a bullet hole in his hat, and says, " Mountain Dew'll tickle yore innards, cuz thar's a bang in ever'bottle. " Sales took off like a shot in eastern rural areas. Mountain Dew had succeeded in creating a kind of manhood that rivalled the buttoned-up emotions and routines of the organization men.

Its hillbilly was a devilish prankster who called on male viewers to let loose their own wild man. Traversing Cultural DisruptionsMountain Dew's success as an icon becomes all the more impressive when one considers how it outlived the ideological tension it was initially positioned to address. National ideology works something like Stephen Jay Gould's idea of punctuated equilibrium or Clay Christensen's and Michael Tushman's descriptions of innovation cycles in technology markets, which have extended periods of

incremental innovation disrupted occasionally by radical technological changes. As an ideology loses its relevance, people lose faith in its tenets. Experimentation ensues, historical ingredients are reworked, and society finally arrives at a new consensus.

When such a shift in ideology occurs, people are forced to adjust their aspirations and their views of themselves. Myths provide a powerful sense of structure at these junctures, and they grow up spontaneously around the emerging ideology, forming new myth markets. These are the moments when we see new icons take off and incumbents struggle to remain relevant. Mountain Dew, which has enjoyed dramatic growth since the 1960s, is one of only a few iconic brands that have been able to increase their market power across disruptions in national ideology, cross – cultural chasms instead of being dismantled by them. In 1978, a new television serial ' The Dukes of Hazzard', quickly became a huge hit outside major metropolitan markets.

And Mountain Dew took the cue as well, retooling its wild man to deliver a redneck rebuttal to Wall Street's incarnation of the frontier myth. A look at Mountain Dew's 1981 television ad " Rope Swing" shows how the brand moved into this new mythic territory without betraying its constituents' understanding of what the brand stood for. The ad depicts an informal teen outing in lush, hilly terrain. A sinewy young man dressed only in shorts and running shoes stands with his buddies on a ledge high above a river.

He waits for the perfect moment to swing out, Tarzan-style, over the water on aknotted rope. On the opposite bank, four teenage girls swing an empty rope out to meet him halfway. Filmed in slow motion, he executes the

switcheroo perfectly, his body taut and rippling as he releases the first rope to grab the second, after which he swings safely to the other side. The girls cheer his crossing a clear rite of passage – and greet him, bouncing excitedly. Intercut with the action, the hero appears in close-ups chugging a bottle of cold Mountain Dew. By the spot's end, he's polished off the entire bottle without coming up for air.

Shaking water from his hair, he faces the camera, eyes shut but mouth wide open. The film freezes with him seemingly shouting, " Ah! " As corporate executives donned cowboy gear in the mid-1980s, Mountain Dew responded even more assertively with a campaign called " Doin' It Country Cool. " A dozen vignettes show our redneck studs, this time decked out in cowboy regalia, once again showing off their athletic talents and buff bodies to cheering young women. Mountain Dew argued, through myth that virile guys live to play dangerously, not to sweat it out at the office. The brand retained its iconic power by reinterpreting the wild man to fit the new ideological reality. Again, Mountain Dew championed the wild man against the emasculation of corporate work, but this time by asserting physical toughness and derring-do over the flaccid cowboys of Wall Street.

From Redneck to Slacker By 1987, Mountain Dew was again an endangered icon as the nation's ideology underwent another shift. The country became disenchanted with the ideals of the Wall Street frontier in a matter of months as Reagan left office, scandals rocked the financial world, and the stock market crashed. A deluge of popular books and films excoriating arbitrageurs for their greed and indulgence marked the end of this era. Before long, it became clear that the very nature of the economy was changing: Companies

had to be more agile and aggressive to compete globally, and workers faced an increasingly Hobbesian, winner-take-all labour market. In the new era of the " free agent," in which seniority systems were thrown out in favour of performance driven meritocracies, every job was up for grabs to the most talented and most tenacious worker. During this period of cultural disruption, a new, turbocharged version of Reagan's frontier myth took hold, this one lauding heroic individual achievement.

Now manhood was defined by the ability to tackle extremely difficult and sometimes dangerous challenges that demanded both mental and physical toughness. Myths of the day defined heroes as those who competed most ferociously, such as rebel athlete Michael Jordan with his brand of " in your face" basketball. Professionals no longer savoured expensive dining and Rolexes. Now they headed into the wilderness for tests of will against whitewater and mountains, and the must-have item was an SUV-if not a ranch in Montana. This new version of the frontier myth galvanized both male and female professionals and those who competed in the labour market to join their ranks. But most people ended up in a secondary labour market with depressed wages and no job security, or in service work that promised only stifling, micromanaged employment.

Contradictions between the free-agent frontier and the realities of work were extraordinary: While many young people were moving into jobs as telemarketers and retail clerks, popular culture was lauding executives who in an average week conquered markets, technology, Whitewater, and rock walls. To make matters worse, in households across America parents pushed their kids ever harder to " make it" in this fiercely competitive environment

The myth market that sprang up to feed these anxieties centred on a new rebel figure, the slacker. As glorified by Richard Linkletter's film of that name and by Douglas Coupland in his quasi-novel Generation X, the slacker is a character who would rather pursue quixotic activities than " grow up" and get serious about a career. Channels such as Fox, MTV, and ESPN2 immediately picked up on the slacker ethos and delivered programming that emphasized its do -it- yourself sensibility, extreme version of manhood, and iconoclastic tastes.

Slacker heroes excelled not at rule-bound professional sports but at improvisational sports like skateboarding, which they pursued on their own without rules and without corporate interference. In the music industry, rap, techno, and alternative rock all emphasized the do-it-yourself ethos: Anyone can and should make music, with a turntable and some old records, a computer, or a beat-up guitar. So-called " extreme sports," in which guys fearlessly risk bodily harm to perform never-before-attempted stunts, became the rage. The professional wrestling program Smack-Down! , featuring enormous costumed men spilling fake blood on each other, was the entertainment choice of the day.

Ultraviolent video games enticed guys to spend hour after hour revelling in over-the-top conquests- without getting off the couch. The slacker myth market had taken the masculine expressions of the free-agent frontier myth and turned up the adrenaline to an extreme. Slackers made fun not only of the ideals of the free-agent nation (particularly in the comic strip Dilbert) but also of the people who tried to dictate their lives: marketers. The rock band Nirvana came on the scene with its jab at youth branding " Smells like Teen

Spirit," and the hit film Wayne's World proposed an ironic kind of one-upmanship over corporate marketing. Instead of buying what corporations sold, slackers reclaimed old stuff-TV programs, music, clothes – that industry had given up on. Professionals may have had the power and money, but they couldn't force slackers to buy their wares.

Instead, slackers could use their own creativity to make the refuse of popular culture valuable. And where did all this leave Mountain Dew? In the face of the new American ideology Mountain Dew's redneck was reduced to irrelevance just like the hillbilly before him. So Mountain Dew's wild-man ethos was reformulated once again, this time within the new world of the slacker. A TV ad called " Done That," part of Mountain Dew's " Do the Dew" campaign, was the company's breakthrough into this new mythic territory. The ad opens with a hair-raising shot of a guy jumping off a cliff and free-falling toward a narrow canyon's river bottom. Accompanied by a thumping thrash-metal soundtrack, a stomach-tightening shot trails behind the jumper's feet as he falls away from the cliff.

The music stops abruptly, and the camera zooms in on four young men, dressed like low-rent gym rats, standing in the Mojave Desert. The guys hang on one another in a kind of casual street camaraderie. In rapid succession, each mugs for the camera and comments on the skydiving the viewers have just seen: " Done that "" Did that," " Been there,"" Tried that" The camera cuts back to live action, showing an athlete diving off a 20-foot waterfall on a boogie board and surfing the rapids. The four dudes return, still among Mojave cacti, and quickly announce their boredom with that high-risk activity as well. But the dudes' dismissive statements paint only half the picture.

Their cocky body language betrays no fear of the camera, as each leans toward it to make his feelings absolutely clear.

The guys, parodying the jockeying of young bucks in business, play at being cocksure daredevils. The soundtrack resumes as abruptly as it had stopped, and we cut to a Mountain Dew dispensing machine in a jungle setting. " Whoa! " " Never did it," " Never guzzled it. " Cans blast like cannon shells from the machine's opening. Each dude snatches a can from midair and chugs it down under the desert sun. Sated, they say in rapid succession: " Did it,"" Done it,"" Liked it,"" Loved it" In the three sequels to " Done That," the stunts become increasingly fantastic and absurd: waterskiing behind a helicopter past icebergs in the Arctic, rollerblading off the Sphinx in Egypt, wrestling a crocodile in the Amazon, taking a platform jump off London's Big Ben clock tower.

And the dudes become harder and harder to impress. After a skier shoots off a cliff and falls with no landing in sight, he somersaults and opens a parachute. The dudes appear in front of a sand dune to dismiss him: " Blase," " Pass^," " Okay," " Cliche. A rock climber rappels headfirst, a mountain biker leaps in front of a wall of flames, a surfer launches off a sand dune, a scuba diver feeds a voracious shark by hand, and a snowboarder tumbles head over heels down a steep slope, but the dudes' posturing grows only more indifferent: " Obvious," " Frivolous," " Tedious,"" Whatawuss! " With the " Do the Dew" campaign.

Mountain Dew reinvented the wild man as a slacker. In these spoofs of extreme sports, all presented as do-it-yourself quests, the brand asserted

that the real men of America's free-agent frontier weren't the most buff or competitive athletes but the creative guys who pursued their stunts as whimsical art. Slackers didn't just face down dangerous situations that came their way. They sought out insane life-threatening risks.

The Dew guys upped the ante on masculine risk taking to absurd levels, which, in the end, made fun of the idea that manhood has anything to do with such feats. The people with real power, in Mountain Dew's worldview, were people with extreme-and very particular tastes. Slackers had no power as workers, but they could assert their will in the corporate world by asserting their opinions. Companies and their managers would have to take notice. How to Build an Icon Today Mountain Dew is a $5 billion brand, surpassed in size only by Coke and Pepsi. During the past two decades, its sales have risen faster than those of any other carbonated soft drink.

Key to this phenomenal growth has been the ability of managers at PepsiCo and its ad agency BBDO to reinvent the Mountain Dew myth each time American ideology ruptures and is remade. But Mountain Dew's experience is not unique: The same principles apply to the other iconic brands I've studied. In brief, a brand becomes an icon when it is able to do the following five things. Icons don't target consumer segments or psychographic types. They go after veins of intense anxieties and desires running through society, the psychological consequence of the national ideology. While market fragmentation is the rule in many sectors of the economy, icons necessarily speak to a mass audience. Unlike conventional branding, icons don't mimic pop culture; they lead it. They create charismatic visions of the world to make sense of confusing societal changes in much the same way as have

Marilyn and Elvis, JFK and Martin Luther King, Ronald Reagan and Rambo, Steve Jobs and Bart Simpson. Icons earn extraordinary market power because they deliver myths that " repair" the culture when it's particularly in need of mending. They put existing cultural materials to new purposes in order to provoke audiences to think differently about themselves. Mountain Dew was a breakthrough success in the 1990s because, in the midst of a labour market shake-up, the brand provided a symbolic solution to young men who weren't stars of the new free-agent nation. Icons don't seek to mirror the thoughts and emotions of their customers. They speak as rebels. To assemble a credible populist challenge to the national ideology, iconic brands draw on people who actually live according to alternative ideals. And icons don't simply borrow the trappings of rebel lifestyles, mimicking their clothing or language. Rather, they understand the rebel's point of view so well that they can speak with the rebel's voice. Mountain Dew didn't simply offer up extreme sports or retro clothing. Instead, by creatively mixing and matching slacker elements, the campaign evoked the slacker Zeitgeist. Unlike conventional brands, icons don't behave as if they have a certain DNA, an essential truth that must be maintained. Icons must be reincarnated when ideology ruptures because the value of their myth is erased. What remains intact as an artefact of the original brand, however, is its political authority. When an icon's myth loses value, its constituency still looks to the brand to shed light on the kinds of contradictions it has addressed in the past. Because the brand has been a trustworthy and committed advocate, consumers believe that it will speak for them again. Mountain Dew's " Do the Dew" campaign, for instance, appears to be worlds apart from the hillbilly and watering-hole ads. Yet the brand's remake was welcomed because it

drew on a deep reservoir of political authority. Mountain Dew was, once again, championing the id over the ego for young men who felt excluded from manhood as defined by the nation's ideology. Icons " own" an imaginative politics that can be reclaimed virtually at will, even if the brand has