

What Makes an Iconic Brand?

Brands are an accepted part of our daily lives. But some brands seem to transcend their product or service categories to become part of the popular culture. What distinguishes these iconic brands from the rest of the pack, and what can marketers learn from them?

M I L L W A R D B R O W N ' S P O V

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In today's world, brands are everywhere, a familiar part of daily life for most people. But a few brands, such as Coca-Cola, Nike, and McDonald's, have set themselves apart. These brands have come to represent something more than a product or service. They are embedded in our culture and our consciousness. They are icons.

Iconic brands inspire an enduring form of affection that any marketer would want for his brand. But iconic status, which has traditionally been built over decades, is enjoyed by relatively few brands. What can we learn from these brand icons that might be useful to all brand marketers today?

Icons: You Know Them When You See Them

Iconic brands are instantly recognizable: the shape of a VW Beetle is unique, Lego bricks are familiar from childhood, and the McDonald's arches are readily identifiable in any landscape. A brand with such powerful visual cues has an intrinsic advantage over others, not least because it ensures that marketing communication is linked to the right brand. When large replica pints of ice-cold Guinness were added to shelf displays in the U.K., the familiar image of dark beer with a white, creamy head reminded people of the brand and helped to increase sales by 27 percent.

Using the WPP BrandZ™ database, we compared the properties of iconic brands with those of other brands that are merely large and popular. Our analysis found that brands considered iconic enjoyed far higher top-of-mind awareness: 58 percent versus 36 percent. This suggests that iconic brands are strongly associated with their specific categories. To borrow a phrase from cognitive neuroscience, it seems iconic brands are "super-familiar." A brand that is super-familiar will beat out other brands for access to the brain's mental workspace; thus it is more likely to be considered for purchase*. Critically, however, recent findings in neuroscience suggest that the strongest mental representations of brands are those that are well balanced across physical cues, functional benefits and emotions evoked.

Rooted in Culture

In his book *How Brands Become Icons*, Oxford University Professor Douglas Holt proposes these three principles.

1. Iconic brands address acute contradictions in society. By tapping into a collective desire or anxiety, iconic brands develop a status that transcends functional benefits. They challenge people, either directly or subtly, to reconsider accepted



Nigel Hollis

Chief Global Analyst
Millward Brown
nigel.hollis@us.millwardbrown.com
www.millwardbrown.com
www.mb-blog.com



thinking and behavior. The famous Coca-Cola ad from 1971, “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing,” voiced a desire to overcome the deep divisions in American society created by the Vietnam War.

2. Iconic brands develop identity myths that address these desires and anxieties. By creating imaginary worlds, they offer escape from everyday reality. The Marlboro man represents the values of the Western frontier: strong, independent and capable.
3. Over time, the brand comes to embody the myth. It becomes a shorthand symbol that represents far more than just a brand of soft drink, cigarette, or car. While there are now many expensive watches to choose from, Rolex still symbolizes success and status around the world.

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Making the Most of Your Origins

When we looked across a number of iconic brands, we found that they all had deep cultural roots. A strong association with a particular time or country can provide a positive halo to any brand, provided that its provenance is understood and appreciated by the wider audience. In the U.K., Foster’s borrowed the values of Australia to give that brand its personality, linking into the success of the “Crocodile Dundee” movies by employing Paul Hogan as spokesperson. As a result, Foster’s is now inextricably linked to Australian humor in the minds of many Brits (even though the brand languishes Down Under).

Cultural roots can provide iconic brands with resilience, allowing them to remain attractive decades after they were withdrawn from the market. The Mini of the 1960s became iconic through its ingenious design, its association with flower power and its starring role in films, notably the original *The Italian Job*. Though BMW’s reinterpretation of the Mini is a far cry



from its tiny predecessor, the German car maker has tapped the Mini heritage in both design and marketing. It projects the brand’s fun-loving British image through color combinations, styling details and smart, tongue-in-cheek advertising.

Boxed in by Culture

If iconic brands come into being by tapping into cultural tensions, it seems likely that some iconic brands will be limited to a particular culture, country or era. For example, the VW Combi van speaks of hippies, surfers and an itinerant lifestyle. Benetton, once readily identified by its color palette and challenging advertising style, now reminds us of the angst of a previous decade. Other brands may be successful at crossing country lines and time periods, but will be relevant only to a particular subgroup of the population.

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Food and drink brands seem to be limited by local culture more than other product categories. For example, while Brits and Aussies will argue vehemently over the relative merits of Marmite and Vegemite, to most other cultures the two brands are indistinguishable forms of brown gunk. The soft drink brand Irn-Bru has



a fanatical following in Scotland but very limited appeal elsewhere.

Brands that thrive on an anti-establishment sentiment, like Greenpeace, Virgin Airlines, or Harley-Davidson, are limited by their very nature, since only a minority of people buy into their “tribal” values. The majority of people do not—but they do recognize exactly what these brands stand for, even if it is not relevant to their values or desires.

Transcending Cultural Origins

Iconic brands may be born in a specific place and time, but some manage to transcend cultural boundaries. Brands like Coca-Cola, Lego, and Mercedes have been able to do this not only because they have broad appeal, but because they have tapped into universal needs and values: Coke offers happiness to the masses, Lego facilitates imaginative play for children of varying ages, and Mercedes satisfies a yearning for status.

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Like Levi’s and Marlboro, Coca-Cola has leveraged its mythic American status to good effect in other countries, and has succeeded in bridging one of the biggest cultural divides in the world, the one between North America and Asia. In many Asian markets, brands are used to flaunt wealth and status. Because they are so recognizable, iconic brands can leverage this to their advantage. However, they must be willing to adapt to the local culture. For example, in China, Coke still comes in its familiar red can, a color which is regarded as propitious in China, but the familiar Coke logo was replaced long ago with Chinese characters, which loosely translate to “make mouth happy.”

An iconic brand must adapt to more than just different regional cultures. It must also evolve over time to maintain a spirit that is fresh and contemporary. Coke will always have a rich heritage to draw on, but Coke’s biggest challenge of late has been projecting its core values of happiness and togetherness in a way that resonates with cynical modern consumers. The campaign “The Coke Side of Life” succeeds at reinterpreting

these values in a contemporary way. Like the “Hilltop” ad of the 1960s, the “Videogame” commercial is about sharing happiness and joy. However, “Videogame” starts on a menacing note. The protagonist appears to be a gangster in a tough part of town, until he pays for his Coke and starts committing random acts of kindness.

Can Icons Take Root Today?

Brands like Coke took decades to achieve their current status. Their fame grew and spread as consumer markets and modern communication channels developed. What does this mean for contemporary brands? Does the pace of change in modern life hamper or hinder brands hoping to achieve iconic status?

We can point to a number of relatively new brands (less than two generations old) that have achieved this goal. Included in this elite group of brands are Nike, Starbucks, Absolut, and the most recent brand phenomenon, Apple’s iPod.

The iPod phenomenon

In 2005, in an interview with the German daily newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Microsoft chairman Bill Gates said, “I don’t think the success of the iPod can continue in the long term, however good Apple may be.” While it is true that technology seldom offers a sustainable advantage, Gates seemed to overlook the tremendous affinity that owners have for their iPods. In an age when high-tech gadgets come with a dizzying





array of buttons and features, the iPod offers simplicity: of design, of use, and of packaging. The advertising exploits these properties by using stark silhouettes depicting people enjoying the music provided by their sleek white iPods. To someone who owns one, an iPod is more than a portable music player. It is a sanctuary from a noisy and intrusive world.

Google: a brand for our time

In a cluttered Internet world of logos, banners and feeds, that simple white page with the colorful logo could only be Google. But can Google, a virtual brand that can't be purchased, held, or worn, be considered iconic?

To answer that question, we look back to the principles laid out by Douglas Holt. Does Google, a brand which is already global, address some universal need, value, anxiety or desire? We would suggest that Google does address a contemporary problem, a tension unique to our time, and therefore it does have the potential to be an iconic brand.

At a time when people feel overwhelmed by information and choice, Google offers empowerment, promising "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." In the United States, the brand's growth was fueled initially by word of mouth. People were eager to tell friends and family about a new search engine that performed better than others. Yahoo!, Lycos and HotBot struggled to adapt to the changing standard that Google represented.

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What's more, the story of how Larry Page and Sergey Brin founded the company is a true garage-to-riches story. Today the company's innovative, egalitarian, and playful image is in tune with the times but at odds with that of many major corporations, which, because of the spate of scandals in recent years, are regarded with distrust by most people. So Google does seem to be well on its way to achieving iconic status.

In a complex world, iconic brands will offer a welcome shortcut to decision making.

Looking to the Future

Iconic brands possess three important features that separate them from other big, well-known brands:

1. They have strong cultural roots that tap into society's values, sometimes even inspiring a shift in those values.
2. They possess physical or symbolic features that make them instantly recognizable.
3. They have a compelling story and manage to remain true to their original values while reinterpreting them in light of contemporary culture.

It is precisely because of these features that iconic brands are likely to become even more powerful in the years ahead. As the pace of change accelerates and the number of choices offered to consumers multiplies, the opportunity for brands to achieve iconic status is likely to increase, even though opportunities may be limited to one of a wide array of niches. In a complex world, iconic brands will offer a welcome shortcut to decision making.

While most brands cannot hope to attain iconic status, they can still leverage the benefits of strong, clear positioning to their advantage, so marketers have nothing to lose from thinking big. By keeping track of shifting cultural agendas and understanding how their brands might be positioned to address the tensions observed, a lucky few may enable their brands to transcend their product or service categories and become an integral part of the popular culture.

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