

# Whose Brand Is It Anyway?

You can pick your brands and you can pick your friends. But if you're a marketer, can you pick your brand's friends? Should you even try?

As a brand manager, your first instinct may be to protect your brand from negative influences, but if you've endowed your brand with a solid set of values and associations, sometimes your best bet may be to "just let go."

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It's every parent's worst nightmare that a child should fall in with a bad crowd. Should the "parents" of brands — the creators, managers, and marketers — share this worry? Can a brand be damaged by the company it keeps? Conversely, can keeping good company enhance a brand's reputation? If a brand is embraced by a group that is younger, hipper, or richer than its original target, is the status of that brand improved?

If the answer to any or all of these questions is yes, one key question remains: Should marketers attempt to intervene in brands' relationships with consumers to maximize benefits and minimize ill effects? Is it even possible for them to do this effectively without doing more harm than good in the process?

While there is no hard-and-fast answer, in many cases marketers should heed that unfortunate new marketing mantra: "Just let go." Assuming that they have done their job — which is to establish what the brand stands for and ensure that the brand has forged a solid relationship with target consumers — marketers should stand back and stay out of the way as their brand encounters the wider world.

## Timberland: Hip-Hop Meets with Benign Neglect

Timberland is an excellent example of a brand encountering success among a completely unexpected market segment. In creating the Timberland boot, which was introduced in 1973, the company (then called the Abington Shoe Company) used their own innovative injection molding technique to produce a truly waterproof leather boot for workmen and outdoorsmen. Sales of Timberland footwear and outerwear had reached \$200 million by the early 1990s when suddenly the brand was adopted by inner-city youth and became a standard component of hip-hop attire.

Timberland CEO Jeffrey Swartz chose not to change the brand's strategy by overtly recognizing its new urban fans. "Timberland is being adopted by a consumer that we didn't know existed relative to our target audience," he said in a 1993 article in *The New York Times*. While doing nothing to disavow the brand's popularity among the group, he explained why he chose not to change the brand's course: "If you hear that hip-hop kids are wearing Timberland boots and women are wearing Timberland boots with sundresses . . . that's coin in current dollars. But how in the world is that sustainable?"



Keeping advertising focused on the brand's traditional target, Swartz openly expressed his intention to limit the availability of the brand. "We are making hip-hop come to our distribution," he said. Urban consumers continued to find Timberland products, and the brand continued to grow, achieving global sales of \$1.6 billion in 2007.

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### **PBR and Dunlop: Appreciation at Arm's Length**

Timberland was well established on the road to growth before it was “discovered” by urban youth. The famous American beer brand, Pabst Blue Ribbon (commonly known as PBR), also encountered unexpected popularity among young people, but for PBR this turn of events occurred after the brand had been in decline for a quarter-century. The brand’s surprising resurgence (sales increased 67 percent between 2001 and 2006) was first observed among bike messengers and students in the northwest U.S. city of Portland, Oregon. While other theories were offered, it seems most likely that young people were originally attracted by the brand’s cheap price — a dollar a can in many bars. When they were not disappointed in PBR’s taste, the young drinkers also seemed to enjoy the idea that they had “discovered” a brand that was not actively marketing to them. (PBR had done no television advertising for 25 years.) Enthusiasm for the brand spread across the country by way of alternative groups including skateboarders, artists, and musicians.

The Pabst Brewing Company appreciated the newfound popularity of PBR but realized that the young beer drinkers had adopted the brand for their own reasons. Sensing that overt marketing could only damage a brand image it had done nothing to create, the company held off on heavy-handed marketing efforts, choosing



instead to build relationships at the most local level with micro-sponsorships, such as a gift of \$1,750 to sponsor a bike polo match. Even these were handled with a light touch — that is, a very low profile for the sponsor.

Timberland acknowledged but did not approach their young urban customers, while PBR courted their new drinkers with great restraint and discretion. Another brand that chose to work very carefully with unexpected success among young people was Dunlop Volley.

The leading brand of tennis shoe in Australia in the 1960s, Dunlop was outmaneuvered by Nike and Adidas until, by the mid-1990s, the brand had lost mainstream relevance. Finding its status reduced to that of a bargain brand sold in discount stores, Dunlop developed a long-term plan to reposition and revitalize the brand.

### ***Marketers do not decide a brand's ultimate meaning — consumers do.***

In 1999, while the company was in the midst of executing that plan, something unexpected and inexplicable happened. Dunlop Volleys became a hot item among the hip teens in Australia, prized both for their “retro” value and their low price. However, Dunlop management did not abruptly change course in an effort to capitalize on this turn of events. They realized that aggressive marketing would only alienate their young fans. Instead, the company set out to maximize the benefit of their newfound popularity among young people by making a deliberate effort to slow the diffusion of that popularity. They advertised in underground publications and limited distribution of the brand, avoiding blatant appeals to their new and influential customers. Then, when these influential teens turned away from Dunlop to the next big thing at the end of 2002, the company completed the brand’s repositioning in the mainstream marketplace.

### **Burberry: If You Don't Have Anything Nice to Say...**

In stark contrast to PBR, Timberland, and Dunlop, the venerable English brand Burberry saw no benefit in being adopted by one particular group of young people in Great Britain. Since the 1990s, Burberry has been plagued in its home country by its association with



“chavs,” a downmarket group associated with rowdiness and hooliganism, who adopted the famous Burberry check as part of their uniform.

***The fact that brand perceptions must be shared does not mean that the same perceptions must be shared universally.***

While a number of British commentators lamented the damage to the brand, Burberry management stayed on the high road and kept the public response very limited. Under the leadership of the American CEO Rose Marie Bravo, the company discontinued production of the checked caps and reduced reliance on the overexposed trademark plaid, but they issued no piqued statements of distress at the brand being co-opted by such an undesirable element. (However, some company representatives did imply that most of the caps worn by chavs were counterfeits.)

This strategy appears to have worked for Burberry. While the brand may have suffered a bit in class-conscious Britain, that country accounts for only 15 percent of Burberry's sales. The brand's distinctive English positioning retained its appeal around the rest of the world, and the company's revenues have increased steadily over the past four years.

### **Consumers: The Ultimate Deciders**

If the principal job of marketers is to help build brand associations in the minds of consumers, how can brands like PBR and Timberland thrive while deliberately choosing not to build or reinforce these associations? And how could Burberry have avoided damage in the face of what seemed a very negative association?

It's all about consumer control — and that's just as it's always been. While marketers do their best to imbue brands with positive, motivating values and associations, marketers do not decide a brand's ultimate meaning. Consumers do — and sometimes consumers find relevance, purpose, and significance that the brand's creators may not have seen or intended. For example, in the 1993 article on Timberland's emergence in the inner city, *The Times* quotes one urban customer in

Harlem who attached his own values to the brand. Pointing to the brand's tree logo, he said, “It symbolizes the world today . . . The Last Judgment will be based on the weather and earth and how we treat it”



Early in his book *The Global Brand*, Nigel Hollis develops the idea that the meaning of a brand is based on broadly shared perceptions among consumers. It is not enough for a brand concept to exist in the mind of an individual consumer; rather, a consistent brand idea must be shared by many. But the fact that brand perceptions must be shared does not mean that the same perceptions must be shared universally. Different groups may interpret a brand in the light of their own needs and lifestyles, embracing a brand for its positioning or for some functional benefit. As long as each brand “meaning” is relevant to a large enough audience to deliver profit for the brand, it is rarely of any consequence that different groups experience the brand in different ways. To Timberland customers engaged in working-class occupations or outdoor pursuits, the uniform of the hip-hop element is irrelevant. Similarly, to consumers of Burberry outside of England, the chavs' uniform is immaterial.

The success of many of the world's greatest brands actually lies not in the tightness with which they are defined, but in the extent to which their promise is open



to interpretation. Many of the world's most iconic brands have values that offer universal appeal but can be interpreted differently by different groups. Harley-Davidson, for example, has long been regarded as a symbol of freedom and rebellion. But rebellion from what? For the Hell's Angels and hard-core tattooed bikers, the Harley represents rebellion against the norms and values of conventional society. But for a financial analyst or a patent attorney, a Harley might represent rebellion against the strict protocols he or she adheres to during the workday. For a female biker, a Harley might represent rebellion against confining ideas of femininity.

Timberland drew on this principle, seemingly without realizing it, when they treated their new urban fans with a policy of benign neglect. CEO Swartz may not have understood the appeal the brand held for them, but he made no efforts to dissuade them, instead letting them continue to draw their own meaning from the brand.

### **Tiffany: Please Don't Return**

When, however, a brand's association with a particular group actually interferes in some way with what the brand is meant to deliver to its core customers, some intervention may be called for. For example, luxury retailer Tiffany introduced a low-priced "Return to Tiffany" line of sterling silver jewelry in 1997, and though sales were up in subsequent years, the brand developed an image problem among its traditional clientele. Sales associates could not provide the level of service that long-standing customers were accustomed to in the face of increased volume.

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To address the problem they had created, Tiffany's management set out to deliberately reduce sales. During the period from 2002 through 2004, they systematically eliminated low-priced items and raised prices until the "less desirable" customers went away. Overall revenue went down and both profits and share price took a hit, but by 2006 Tiffany's reputation for luxury and exclusivity had returned. In his column for the UK magazine *Marketing*, Mark Ritson made this comment on the retailer's action: "It's better to have 20 percent of the market forever than 60 percent for five years."

### **Conscientious Marketers Should Just Relax**

While we recognize brands as precious assets to be supported and nurtured, we must also remember that they are not vulnerable children in need of protection from harmful influences. If marketers have succeeded in attaching a truly relevant and well-crafted meaning to a brand, they have little to fear when their brand encounters an unfamiliar audience or a strange environment. Should a new group interpret a brand in an unexpected way, marketers should welcome the opportunity to consider new possibilities; perhaps the brand's promise has broader relevance than they first imagined. But that doesn't mean that every new group that adopts the brand should be actively pursued, particularly if doing so might undermine relationships with the brand's established clientele.

By all means, nurture your brands; support them and keep them fresh, current, and relevant. But don't stifle or micromanage them, lest you inadvertently limit their appeal, their potential, their long-term health, and your company's profit.

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