



# What We Can Learn from Iconic Brands

In today's complex and busy world, brand names are everywhere—plastered all over websites, inside subway cars, on the sides of buses, and even in public toilets. But most of the time, even though they're accepted as part of the scenery, these brand names don't signify much to those who observe them.



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Yet among the mindless white noise of modern marketing, a few brands stand out from the crowd. Admired and packed with meaning, these truly iconic brands inspire passion and fierce loyalty among their customers. They represent the gold standard of branding. Any marketer worth his salt would die to work with an iconic brand—or better yet, to help create one. But the process by which brands become iconic is often more accidental than designed.

In his book *How Brands Become Icons*, former Oxford University professor Douglas Holt sheds light on the nature and origins of iconic brands. In that work, he asserts that iconic brands respond to a society's desires and cultural tensions by drawing on their own unique myths and stories. However, the anecdotal nature of Holt's approach makes his findings difficult to apply to less distinguished brands. And most brands cannot hope that a societal trend or need will suddenly make their brand meaningful and result in its being adopted as a cultural icon. So what universal themes apply to *all* brands, not just those that are already iconic? What guidelines can be applied to make *any* brand more successful? This point of view seeks to address those questions.

## Beyond Recognition: Symbols and Meaning.

One characteristic of iconic brands is that they are instantly recognizable. In my 2007 POV on iconic brands, I cited the familiar shapes of Legos, the VW Beetle, and the golden arches of McDonald's. The Oreo cookie, which turned 100 years old earlier this month, is another example—the dark embossed biscuits sandwiching the white cream center make Oreos easily distinguishable from any other cookie. Powerful visual cues such as these confer major advantages, but recognition alone does not constitute iconicity. Advertising icons such as the Pillsbury Doughboy, the GEICO Gecko, and Aleksandr Orlov (the meerkat of [comparethemarket.com](http://comparethemarket.com)) make their brands recognizable without making them iconic.

Powerful visual cues confer major advantages for brands, but recognition alone does not constitute iconicity.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines an icon as “a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol of a culture, movement, etc.; someone or something afforded great admiration or respect.” I believe this definition works well for iconic brands; it suggests that



they must not only be easily recognizable, but also stand for something that people admire and consider meaningful.

In his book *Brand Meaning*, Mark Batey dedicates a lot of space to symbolism, which, according to Batey, is one of the constituents of brand meaning. Symbols like the Marlboro cowboy or the Harley-Davidson eagle stimulate the imagination and, through the power of suggestion and association, connect to ideas and values. It is the symbolic importance of an iconic brand's identity that enables it to leverage its recognition far beyond that of other brands. And, once recognition has been achieved, that symbolism helps ensure that a brand's meaning is understood and shared across a wide audience.

Meaning is critical to successful brands and to iconic brands in particular. Iconic brands are not just distinctive; they are *different* in a way that is meaningful. The Oreo has a characteristic appearance, but it also stands out in people's minds for the sensory rituals they associate with eating it (twisting the wafers apart and licking the cream, dunking in milk) and the warm feelings of sharing those experiences with family and friends. Those good feelings are kept alive with ads that show people interacting over Oreos: brother with brother, mother with son, grandfather with granddaughter. These idyllic depictions represent family life as we might wish to experience it, and they evoke a powerful response.

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The second of Douglas Holt's iconic brand principles is that iconic brands develop identity myths that address people's desires and anxieties. The Marlboro man represents the values of the Western frontier: He is strong, independent, and capable. By presenting a consistent image over time, the brand has come to embody the frontier myth that now proves particularly appealing in developing economies. But Marlboro's time as an iconic exemplar may be nearing an end because, in Marlboro's homeland, the nature of iconic brands has changed. Instead of presenting identities that they grow into, some of today's most iconic Western brands embody those identities from the start. Their identity myths have become experiential and vital. For example, Red Bull was designed

from the ground up to appeal to a specific mindset, and the energy drink has been marketed with unique advertising and a wide variety of adrenaline-inspired events.

### A Compelling Brand Experience

An iconic brand is recognizable not because it has invested in decades of heavy marketing spend, but because it delivers a powerful brand experience that is founded in the brand's purpose. Oreos would not be iconic if people didn't think they tasted good. And no matter how aesthetically pleasing Apple's devices are, Apple would not be iconic if its user interfaces were clunky. As Holt proposes, iconic brands transcend functional benefits, but that does not mean that they have ignored functional benefits (or that they can afford to ignore them in the future). Therefore, in terms of evaluating a brand's iconic potential, I would first look at the brand's ability to meet a specific functional need. A brand that can meet a need or gratify a desire in a unique and meaningful way has an opportunity to build the strong emotional attachment that is the cornerstone of iconicity.

### The "People's Car" That Became an Icon

In 1933, Ferdinand Porsche was charged by German chancellor Adolf Hitler to develop a car for the masses. Critical requirements in the specs for the Volkswagen (literally, "people's car" in German) included the ability to transport two adults and three children at 100 km/h (62 mph) and a price that would make it affordable for average working people.





First produced in 1938, the Volkswagen T1, later nicknamed the Beetle, became one of the most iconic vehicles of all time. The unique design was denigrated by some, but after World War II, the reliable, economical, and affordable vehicle was exactly what the impoverished people of Germany required. Those same characteristics later appealed to hippies and others who were pursuing alternative lifestyles during the 1960s. The Beetle appeared in many movies and spawned a number of other nicknames, a sure sign of a brand that's embedded in popular culture. The 1998 reintroduction of the Beetle was successful in large part because it tapped into those positive feelings while bringing the product up to date.

### The Power of Purpose

In combination with its quirky looks, the Beetle's ability to meet people's transportation needs kindled the public affection that ultimately made the car an icon. Look behind the symbolism of most iconic brands and you will find someone with a vision of how a product could serve a specific need better than the existing alternatives. When a brand's purpose or ideal resonates with a particular group of people, the brand moves one step closer to becoming iconic.

Google originated as a research project by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, an effort to find a better way to rank the relevance of search results than simply counting the appearances of a search term on a page. By redefining the way people used the web, Page and Brin addressed the need to "organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." The intersection of the widespread need to find information quickly with the better solution offered by Google, which included a simple and uncluttered user interface, resulted in Google becoming the success it is today.

In his new book *Grow: How Ideals Power Growth and Profit at the World's Greatest Companies*, former Procter & Gamble CMO Jim Stengel describes the common feature he identified across dozens of highly successful brands: a brand ideal. A brand ideal is a purpose that goes beyond a product or service. It's the higher-order benefit that the business provides to the world, the company's most fundamental reason for being. Pursuing a brand ideal may not make your brand iconic, but it can be one step along that road—a step that, by offering people something that makes their lives better, will also motivate your workforce and help to ensure a healthy profit.



### Five Principles for the Everyday Brand

Reaching iconic status is the Everest of the marketing world, and the vast majority of brands won't reach its summit. That said, continually referencing and seeking to improve your brand's performance against the following principles can only bring benefits.

#### *(Re)discover and stay true to your brand's purpose*

Many brands are founded and built around a specific purpose or ideal that subsequently fades from sight as leaders lose track of what originally made the company special. In these cases, restoring the original focus can often turn a struggling brand around. But sometimes a company's purpose has to change because the world around it has changed, as when 20 years ago IBM shifted its purpose from making computers and chips to building a smarter and more efficient planet. This sort of transformation requires a total commitment, as Louis Gerstner details in his book *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?* This commitment includes the willingness to make changes to align structure with strategy as well as ongoing reinforcement of the new purpose in both internal and external communications.

#### *Critically examine the experience your brand delivers*

You can have the noblest purpose in the world but still fail to deliver against people's expectations. For example, environmentally responsible ("green") brands want to ensure a better future for our planet, but all too often their functional performance fails to satisfy consumers, or their price is so



high that trial is inhibited. One brand, however, stands out from other green brands in the way in which it not only meets but exceeds expectations. The household cleaning brand Method packs a one-two punch: Its nontoxic and sustainable products are just as effective as traditional cleaners, and Method's unique design ethos enhances its products with packaging that is both distinctive and beautiful. These qualities could help Method become an iconic brand.

#### *Identify the iconic elements of your brand*

Iconic brands are instantly recognizable. How do people recognize *your* brand? What are the specific cues that trigger recognition? Does your brand have a distinctive design? Which senses does your brand engage beyond just the visual? A brand with powerful sensory cues has an intrinsic advantage over others. Those cues ensure that positive associations come readily to mind and are linked to the right brand. Provided the same recognition cues are featured in broadcast and in-store communications, they allow the brand to realize synergies across marketing and sales channels.

#### *Balance the authentic with the contemporary*

The power of a brand's authentic heritage is undeniable, but so too is the power of being in sync with popular culture. One of the biggest challenges for any brand is to stay contemporary without unnecessarily changing what the brand stands for. The brands that do this successfully manage to apply the stories and values of their heritage to contemporary circumstances. For example, Jack Daniel's, an integral part of today's pop culture, features its heritage in its advertisements with scenes of the whiskey being made. Company-sponsored musicians and concerts that bring people together outside of the bar also reflect the spirit and backcountry myths of the brand.

#### *Stay focused*

Faced with aggressive competition, fragmenting media, and ever faster feedback, brand marketers can be overly reactive. It may seem that doing something—even the wrong thing—is better than doing nothing. But if you keep in mind what it is that your brand stands for, you can avoid this trap. Knowing what is truly meaningful to your customers will help you choose

the right actions. By understanding the interests, desires, and beliefs of their core consumers, brands can bring people together and facilitate unprecedented levels of consumer engagement, pride, and activism. Red Bull, for example, focuses all of its events on the idea of uplifting mind and body, offering both a spectacle and an unparalleled experience that is true to the brand's purpose.

#### **Build on Sound Foundations**

Even if you never get to work with an iconic brand, as a marketer you can still apply the principles that underlie the success of iconic brands to help your own brand grow its financial value. But before you invest your time in trying to apply these principles, take a good hard look at your brand's product. Powerful symbolism and impactful advertising can't overcome a mediocre product experience.

Assuming the product foundation is sound, you can then safely turn your attention to building a stronger brand. Make sure you understand your brand's purpose, the character it presents to the world, and its unique set of sensory and symbolic properties. Then find ways to amplify what the brand stands for across all the potential touch points. The combination of a meaningfully different experience and distinctive brand assets will strengthen what your brand stands for in consumers' minds, and as that concept becomes stronger and clearer, your brand will be more attractive to new users and inspire more loyalty among existing customers.

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