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Article

Mythical Marketing – The Holy Grail of Today's Ueber-Brands

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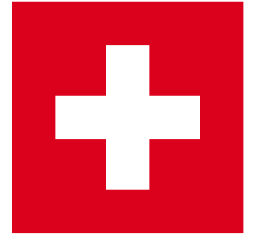
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Storytelling in Marketing & Sales



Universität St.Gallen

Mythical Marketing – The Holy Grail of Today's Ueber-Brands

Storytelling has become the hot topic in marketing for many reasons. Truly successful marketers however try not to just build their brands around stories but imbue and elevate them through myths. In the course of the past four years, the authors have analyzed more than 100 cases across all price tiers and product categories and spoke to an uncounted number of experts and practitioners. The result: Today's strongest and most price-insensitive players use meta-narratives to give their brands depth and gravitas while at the same time catapulting themselves to superior heights and long-lasting stature. Most apply one of two strategies: They try to 'reach beyond', allowing their targets to feel as if they were connecting to a higher truth. Or they use the 'guiding power' of myths, projecting archetypes that inspire and which many can aspire to, no matter their realities.

Wolfgang Schaefer, JP Kuehlwein

In their book (Schaefer/Kuehlwein, 2015) the authors term brands who apply this form of mythical marketing Ueber-Brands, very intentionally connoting the long-standing philosophical concept made famous by Nietzsche, where the Ueber-Mensch establishes his/her own values, inspiring and leading others to a higher or meta-level. This is similar to what successful mythical marketers do: They build their brands on big ideas – often ideals – and they express them with compelling meta-narratives. Where standard brands, especially FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods) ones, usually follow their markets and targets, trying to fulfill needs and please as many consumers as possible, Ueber-Brands turn this marketing mantra of “the consumer is boss” on its head. They are much more self-guided, pursuing their mission and attracting their followers with strong principles and convictions. They know their story, they write it themselves unerringly and they try to coax all their stakeholders, from employees to investors to trade-partners and consumers, along on their ‘legendary’ journey. Through this they morph more and more into mythical fixtures, creating narrative constructs that inspire our public discourse, provide meaning to rally around or to reject – influencing and guiding their targets as well as our economies and societies as a whole not just materially or functionally but emotionally, ethically and sometimes even spiritually. And, through this they manage to reach their Ueber-Status, the ultimate dream of any brand: Being valued beyond prize and respected beyond size, hovering way above their competition in esteem and staying outside of price- or any other ‘p’-contests.

Apple is certainly something of an Ueber-Example, having built a cult not only around their superior design and innovative products, but around their mission of making technology for ‘the creative class’. And they’ve exalted this mission into a myth, starting with the iconic commercial “1984”, which aired during Super Bowl XX and established Apple as the David against the then Goliath IBM: A hammer-swinging young blonde runs into a cinema filled with brain-washed lemmings enraptured by their big brother, launches the hammer into the gigantic screen, shattering and crushing the whole aura and power of the establishment at the same time. This very instant, a countercultural icon was born. And although Apple as highest valued brand globally has become the establishment itself in the meantime and most customers today don’t even know about that infamous commercial anymore, the spirit of the brand still lives on, beguiles and guides people around the world to ‘Think Different’. During all its growth, Apple has done an outstanding job of maintaining and re-creating their iconoclastic attitude again and again, may it be by starting the flag-

ship trend at a time when this was distribution-sacrilege or by re-inventing the music-industry with single-song downloads. They stayed true to their archetypal character and that’s why so many consumers have stayed true to them, enjoying the benefits of a well-catered lifestyle while still feeling a bit like the creative rebel-rousers they once were or always wanted to be. It’s this spiritual or attitudinal promise that made Apple the ultimate Ueber-Brand and its fans loyal beyond reason, pushing the company’s worth well beyond 145 billion US\$ (Forbes.com) and still forming long lines for the launch of every new product, no matter how over-priced it is.

The Power Of Myths

According to the Oxford Dictionary a myth is defined as “a traditional story, especially one ... explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events”. Of course, there is also the secondary meaning of “a widely held but false belief or idea”, which is how the term is often popularly used. But the best and in our context most eye-opening definition comes from Joseph Campbell, the great mythologist of the 20th century. He calls a myth simply “a public dream” (Campbell, 1988, p. 48). It’s what collectively drives a people, what we all aspire to. And this is what makes myths, or mythical storytelling so interesting and important for marketing and Ueber-Brand building. By ‘mythologizing’ their story, brands will take the idea of writing a compel-

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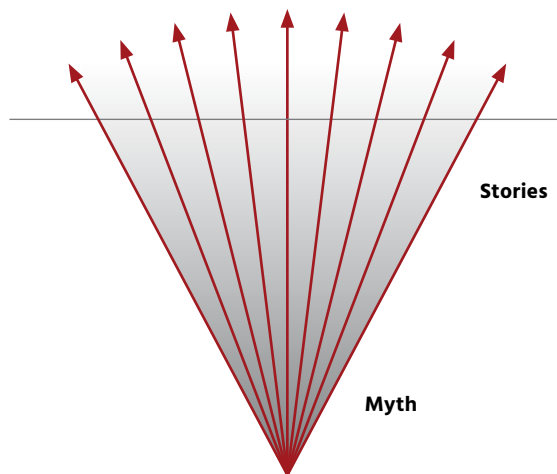
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ling narrative to the ultimate level. If done well, the brand will be shrouded and enshrined in tales and legends, which lift it to 'supernatural' iconic status while at the same time giving it depth and meaning, providing a script for all fol-

Illustration 1 – Myths as an Inverted Iceberg



Mythical Marketing is about reaching deep to go up. Brands applying this advanced form of storytelling translate their mission into a myth. Connecting to a deep seated truth, where 80% is beneath the surface, but the 20% visible are so alluring they pull consumers in without end. Essential for this is that the underlying macro-story (myth) gets continuously re-told and updated in the form of myriad micro-stories.

Illustration: Schaefer/Kuehlwein, Rethinking Prestige Branding – Secrets of the Ueber-Brands

Management Summary

Storytelling has become the hot topic in marketing for many reasons. Truly successful marketers however try not to just build their brands around stories but imbue and elevate them through myths.

lowers to believe in and for the rest of society something to admire or aspire to.

Ultimately it's thus a brand's audience and society at large, which decide if a brand story becomes mythical. If consumers don't 'hold the belief', embrace a narrative as meaningful, and don't view it as aspirational, a brand will never reach mythical power, no matter how beautifully its story is spun. But, in all their comparative studies Schaefer and Kuehlwein found that there are two clear patterns, closely linked to Campbell's four functions (Campbell, 1988, p. 38), which seem most conducive in taking a brand to Ueber-Status: Either brands should try to 'Reach Beyond Through Myths', following the "metaphysical-cosmological" function or they should 'Guide With Myths', pursuing the "sociological-pedagogical" path. Because most successful Ueber-Brands are either more 'mystical-spiritual' in that they give their customers a sense of connecting with a higher power or truth. Or, they are a bit more 'down-to-earth', providing guidance or support in the here and now. Beauty brand Avea with its Zen-ecological philosophy could be an example for the former, Apple and their different thinking and acting for the latter.

First Route to Ueber-Status: Reaching Beyond Through Myths

"For our true fans, going to the Cirque is a spiritual, transformative experience. For others it's just stimulation, beauty and fun and that's ok too" says Florent Bayle-Laboure, Senior Director Marketing of Cirque du Soleil, "We want to be accessible ... but we take it to the mythical."

Cirque du Soleil has certainly made 'Reaching Beyond Through Myths' its business – and a very successful one, as the Canadian company is currently considered the largest theatrical producer in the world. And they've nicely spun their own mythical story accordingly: "Long before Cirque du Soleil became the company you know today, it was a group of young entertainers and dreamers who presented their acts in the streets. As time passed ... people with means and influence took a chance on them in spite of their youth, their image and their profession as itinerant acrobats." (CDS website)

The company takes great pain to stay true to and re-energize its street-fair roots and mystic mix of free wheeling imagination, unbridled artistry and cosmic spirituality in everything they do. The brand name refers to its universal span as well as the out-in-the-open origins. Their

fantasy show themes like ‘Ka’, ‘O’ or ‘Amaluna’ are as enigmatic as they are evocative. And even their founder’s name, Guy Laliberté, fits the brand’s free-spirit ideal. All their products are daring blends of circus, commedia dell’arte, global street and other art forms from Brazilian capoeira, to Australian didgeridoo, African dancing to Wushu, Peking Opera and Kung Fu. And they forgo curtains or a ring to let the audience be part of the story. Music and motion, mystery and imagery are the language of CDS, making it a universal experience, attracting and inspiring all sexes and ages to reach a ‘higher’ state of enjoyment if not awareness. Or in the words of their fans, this one from Mexico: “I was shaking a bit in the beginning ... but it was absolutely amazing. The show was dreamy and stunning.” (Allxuita, 2015).

A very different example of ‘Reaching Beyond Through Myths’ in every respect, except that its name is also French, is Cire Trudon, the 17th century Parisian candle brand that has re-gained global notoriety and success in recent years. As with CDS, and most successful Ueber-Brands actually, it’s all in the brand’s name and logo. In this case it’s a bunch of bees and a beehive under the motto ‘Deo Regique Laborant’ – For God and the King They Work. On surface perhaps nothing but a fancy ‘By Royal Appointment’ credentialing, but in the hands of co-owner and brand artist Ramdane Touhami a way to reach ultimate heights: Cire Trudon becomes a labor of love, made by nature and crafty hands with regal qualities for eternity and thus with infinite value (see also Cire Trudon case study on www.classtomass.wordpress.com for a nice dive into brand and legend). Touhami dug deep when he re-invented the brand, formulating 22 new candles that all reference the brand’s past. He named them “Roi Soleil”, “Mademoiselle de la Vallière”, “Carmélite” or “Trianon” – each telling a legend in their own right and adding to the storied status of the brand. He commissioned drawings that capture the essences of each fragrance from British painter Lawrence Mynott to and succeeded in convincing Sophia Coppola to show his candles lighting up Versailles again in her film ‘Marie-Antoinette’. Today Cire Trudon candles play on anything from revolutionary heroes (“Abd El Kader”), to cultural movements (“Dada”) or the tales of the Grimm Brothers. But they always promise to transport and elevate their customers beyond the everyday to a realm of infinite beauty and fantasy, starting with a beautiful sales ritual as one of the brand’s most loyal retailers, Thomas Kuball, shows: Lift the glass cloche in the store and

Main Propositions

- There is a new kind of brand emerging that turns many of the traditional marketing mantras on their head.
- In their book ‘Rethinking Prestige Branding’ Schaefer/Kuehlwein define these brands as Ueber-Brands because they are valued beyond prize and respected beyond size.
- Ueber-Brands are built on big ideas – often ideals – and they express these with compelling meta-narratives (myths).
- They don’t follow consumers but lead them by inspiring our public discourse and providing meaning to rally around or to reject.

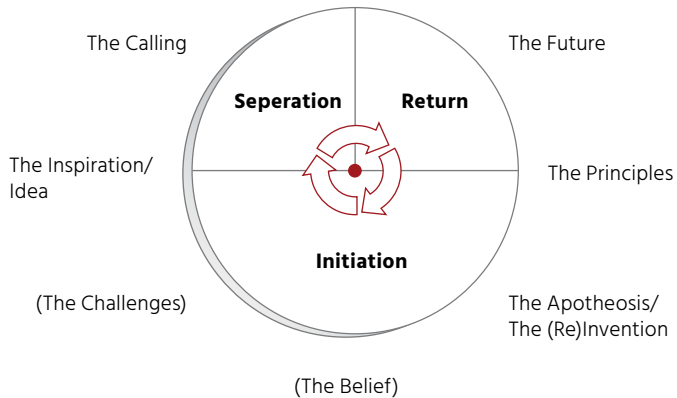
you will smell the moon (“Odeur de Lune”) or another far-away place (Kuball, 2014).

Second Route to Ueber-Status: Guiding With Myths

“When a person (or a brand) becomes a model for other people’s lives, he has moved into the sphere of being mythologized.” (Campbell, 1988, p. 20) That’s the thought behind Ueber-Brands which ‘Guide With Myths’.

There are many brands trying to project some kind of idealized version of their customers. The term ‘lifestyle’ branding is often used in this case, and many have tried to build brands around archetypes (Mark/Pearson, 2001). Particularly in prestige beauty and fashion this makes a lot of sense, as these brands are first and foremost identity offers. One of the best examples to be found these days is certainly Chanel. It’s impressive how this Ueber-Brand has over the past years re-strengthened and expanded its mythical guiding power and pull. There have been two full feature movies, “Coco before Chanel”, with Audrey Tautou and “Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky”, both released in 2009, the latter with the brand’s explicit support. In 2008, there was also a made-for-TV movie starring Shirley MacLaine. And there has been a whole slew of mini-films made by the brand for online-release, including “Once Upon a Time” about its famous Deauville beginnings or the “Inside Chanel” series (Inside.Chanel.com).

Illustration 2 – Seven Steps to Heaven



Based on Joseph Campbell's "Mono Myth Model" (Campbell, 1978) most marketing myths are constructed along seven steps: They start with a 'Calling', a challenge in need of a hero, which sets the brand's mission and purpose, e.g. "computer technology is not user-friendly" (Apple). This is answered by an 'Inspiration', the brand's product or service idea, e.g. "re-invent the circus with global street artistry" (CDS). Then come 'Challenges', the struggle to make the idea come real, which are important to give the myth drama and credibility, e.g. all the personal and professional trials of Gabrielle Chanel (insidechanel.com). These shape the brand's 'Belief' leading to its 'Apotheosis', the seminal moment when a brand proves itself and becomes acknowledged as the hero it set out to be, e.g. Patagonia's 'Dirt Bags' climbing Cerro Fitz Roy or the brand's founder replacing mountain defacing pitons with chocks. The 'Principles' then form the mantra and the 'Future' closes the circle, with the vision having become reality – and the beginning for the next 'Calling'.

Illustration: Schaefer/Kuehlwein, Rethinking Prestige Branding – Secrets of the Ueber-Brands.

Although the topics of these works differ, they more or less pay all into the single, overarching narrative: Gabrielle Chanel, born to a single mother, raised in a convent, fiercely independent by nature or fate, revolutionized fashion and liberated the modern woman – from corsets all the way to romantic or social conforms.

Consequently, there is hardly a classic Chanel item that avid or even just casual users of the brand cannot connect to a bit of 'CoCo lore', constantly rehashing and building the brand's Ueber-Status. How Coco Chanel chose the name for

her most famous and lucrative creation, Chanel No 5, as a statement of stark modernity, why the chain strap of the Chanel bag and the little black dress is reminiscent of her convent days and how the tweed costume broke with all conventions, appropriated masculine materials and became an icon of female liberation. Or, how the new 'boy-friend' watch is an ode to Gabrielle's big love Boy Capel: "If you don't love this watch, we have to have some serious talk!" (eyeswatch.com)

Gabrielle Chanel, and by extension her brand and all its products, have become the icon of modern femininity and emancipated elegance. Not a role model in the traditional sense, but certainly a 'guiding light', even for today's women and certainly for the industry as one of the worlds most valuable brands (Forbes.com, 2015). An Ueber-Brand guiding with its myth – and being guided by it.

Quite a different 'guiding myth' comes from another fashion brand – though one that literally considers fashion the 'f' word: Patagonia. The myth of Patagonia is that of a hedonist-explorer turning activist as he discovers the negative consequences of his adventures and our collective consumption. The brand logo shows the Andes with Cerro Fitz Roy at the center, one of the most challenging mountains to climb and a monument to the brand myth. It was 1968 when Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia, went with some friends on an exhilarating journey to its top.


Lessons learned

1. Be very clear about a brand's mission and elevate it into a mythical story.
2. Don't make the consumer boss, but let the brand and its ideal lead.
3. Constantly re-tell and update your macro-story (myth) in the form of micro-stories.
4. Use one of two mythologizing strategies: connect your consumers to a higher truth or project archetypes that they can aspire to.

The films and stories they brought back were to become part of the lore of the ‘Dirt Bags’, a group that to outdoor enthusiasts has become legend: People who commit themselves to scaling the outdoors to the point of abandoning civilized life. While some might dismiss them as ‘hippies,’ many city dwellers will find their choices courageous and liberating and will want to be part of that group – even if only through the faint association of wearing some of their outfits.

Chouinard and the brand consistently relate the Dirt Bag myth for example through reports that the millionaire founder still drives a beat-up car, doesn’t own a cell phone or computer and rather spends his time fly-fishing or hammering away in his forge than go to the office (Seth Stevenson, 2012). And the brand website serves as a forum for the Dirt Bag community to relate their thoughts and feats, abound with pictures of people heating cans on a camp fire, dipping in mountain streams, climbing a sheer face or playing hacky sack on a ledge. All however with a distinct sense of calling and pride in the mission to ‘save our earth’ – and all in building the brand to one of the most successful outdoor providers with over US\$ 600 million in sales 2014. Always challenging and guiding their followers with a resounding mission and myth as many consumers confirm, for instance in this ‘Ode to a Vest’: “This vest. Oh this vest ... This vest has climbed countless mountains with me, it’s been to ranges in California ...” (wornwear.patagonia.com)

Transcending History and Reality

No matter if a brand wants to ‘Reach Beyond Through Myths’ or ‘Guide With Myth’ – the first step is to transcend history and reality and enter the realm of the legendary, a twilight zone where collective dreams or beliefs and eternal truths reside. Most researched Ueber-Brands applying mythical marketing build their legend with sincerity, but they do take liberties when it comes to historical or functional facts. Blending and enhancing their ‘truths’ with elements of fiction or at least a healthy dose of imagination to open people’s hearts and souls. And that’s exactly the point. It’s the power and the privilege of myths to step out of the real. That’s how they become more than just stories but larger than life and something to believe in. That’s how they capture us and how they can guide us. And that’s how mythical marketing can elevate brands from ordinary to extraordinary or from mass to Ueber-Status, beyond rational reproach into a sphere of their own – in price, position and prestige. 

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