

Heritage Brands—Treasured Inheritance Or ‘Over the Hill’

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There is a dilemma facing the strong heritage brands today. Heritage brands are sometimes described as the oldest brands in their respective categories. Some synonyms for heritage brands include legacy brands, icon brands, vintage brands, and even enduring brands. This research study seeks to identify ways that heritage brands might be maintained, revived, and perpetuated without becoming liabilities to the organization, or outdated entities to the consumers. If the heritage brand’s strength continues to provide both current customers and future consumers with reason and desire for the product, its heritage continues to be a key asset of its overall brand equity. If, however, the heritage brand maintains its appeal only to its current (and past) consumers, its heritage has shifted from being a benefit to a liability. This paper provides insights from successful heritage branding examples as well as concerns from some heritage branding failures.

HERITAGE BRANDING

The search for a fountain of youth continues today, not only by aging baby boomers but also by organizations anxious to capitalize on past success as they woo the current generations (Aaker 1996). This age of technological explosive growth and cutthroat competition has found organizations searching for lost treasure from their past, especially as their future becomes increasingly uncertain.

Brand names, especially those considered to be strong or ‘well-established,’ are often viewed as high in brand equity—that is, cherished by consumers who loyally return for future purchases. The risk here, like that facing an aging actress, is that the roles may be there, but become fewer and farther between as age increases, just as past appreciative audiences most likely are also dwindling.

Shockwaves rippled through the automotive industry in late 2000, when General Motors announced that its Oldsmobile division would be phased out. This 103-year-old brand, begun in 1897 by Ransome E. Olds, and

supported by an older, affluent customer base, had resisted efforts by GM to attract the younger consumers (Chevro 2001). The concern that swept through the industrial sector did not just affect other automotive companies, however, but raised great concern in regard the ongoing value of such heritage brands. This action by GM and the entire situation surrounding the Oldsmobile brand was another reminder that past success was no guarantee of a future existence. Corporations with their well-established brands who are not able to appeal to a younger audience face a bleak future as their aging supporters quietly fade away.

This, then, is the dilemma facing the strong heritage brands of today. If the brand’s strength, based on its past, continues to provide both current customers and future consumers with reason and desire for the product, its heritage continues to be a key asset of its overall brand equity. If, however, the heritage brand maintains its appeal only to its current (and past) consumers, its heritage has shifted from being a benefit to a liability. This paper explores the realm of heritage branding, providing insights from successful heritage branding examples as well as concerns from some heritage failures. This research seeks to identify ways that heritage brands might be maintained, revived, and perpetuated without becoming liabilities to the organization, or outdated entities to the consumers. We see this study as the starting point for future research in the area of heritage branding, an area that calls for further exploration and application as our new brands of today turn into the heritage brands of tomorrow.

Defining Heritage Branding

What exactly constitutes a ‘heritage brand?’ Aaker describes such brands as, often, the oldest brand in their respective categories. He views heritage brands as having the ‘sincerity’ characteristics of being honest, authentic, wholesome, trustworthy, friendly familiar, caring and unassuming (Aaker 1996, 230). Aaker notes that the identity equity in such brands is extremely strong and valuable. There are synonyms for heritage brands, such as legacy brands, icon brands, vintage brands, even enduring brands, although general similarities, different connotations emerge

among this group. This research will focus on heritage branding, as this identification appears to be the most widely recognized.

Joseph Benson (2005) observes that “heritage (brands) are born and nurtured over time. Customers need time to buy and use the brand, time to make the brand a part of their lives, time to endow the brand from one generation to the next.” Heritage brands are seen to have status, character, social class, a history. Benson notes that heritage brands express their heritage in the form of a narrative, or a brand story. He brings out Disney, describing the Disney brand story as “the ideal American community with clean streets, high moral values, happy families and a future where you never grow old, you never get sick, and you never die. Visit a Disney theme park and you will experience the safety, security, and enjoyment of a small American town.” Benson also notes that “what makes these (heritage) brands great, what they all have in common, is that they have had the time to build a meaningful and relevant past—a heritage” (Benson, 2005).

The National Geographic Society (NGS), based in Washington, DC, might well be considered such a brand. When the Society conducted its first ever brand study in 2002 to see how it was perceived, its conclusion was that it was a heritage brand (Rabasca 2004). According to NGS Director of Creative Services, Karen Rice Gardiner, NGS is “well-known, trusted, and has been around for generations.” The benefits of a heritage brand, Gardiner believes, include having a trusted product, name recognition and well-established relationships. The drawbacks, however, involve the possibility of being viewed as ‘stogy, old, and irrelevant.’

Heritage brands can be found throughout our society, in numerous product categories. Think cigarettes, and such brands as Marlboro come to mind—the stoic American cowboy, wide open spaces, a time of simple choices and heroism (Benson 2005). The brand and its story are often part of the same package, and, in the case of movies, even part of the product, with examples such as *Forrest Gump*, *The Godfather*, or *Gone with the Wind*. Consider higher education, and heritage branding spans the world: Harvard, MIT, Stanford, Oxford, Cambridge, La Sorbonne. People themselves can be seen as heritage brands—Muhammad Ali, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa; these names not only represent individuals, they have come to represent stories that speak of the lives and actions of these people, and even of the followers behind these leaders (Benson, 2005).

Time actually appears to be quite relative in regard to heritage branding these days. Winkler (1999) identifies six myths of branding, with the first myth being that a brand is built over a long time. Some brands have been with us for decades, even centuries (think about Ivory Soap—125 years old, Tide-50, Crest-40), but the Apple brand is just a bit over 20 years old, having made its splashy entrance in 1984 in its Superbowl commercial. More recent examples are found in connection with the internet. Among the relative

newcomers to the heritage branding arena are AOL, with 80% awareness in American households, Amazon.com, eBay, and the list goes on. Brands can be built over time, but as Winkler notes, “time for high-tech products can be measured in nanoseconds” (Winkler 1999).

Sometimes, it does not even take a high-tech product. Look at Starbucks. The coffee house brand that has been sweeping the globe may have been a high-touch consumer reaction to the high-tech stresses of daily life, but awareness of the Starbucks brand has come not only through the ever-increasing views of the Starbucks coffeehouses themselves, but has been communicated to consumers via the various channels of information as well as through sales of Starbucks branded products in diverse locations.

Heritage branding appears to have strong global roots. It has been observed that “in a world of increasing over-choice, consumers are seeking out brands with genuine history and authenticity (Stewart-Allen 2002). Part of this issue or aspect of the heritage branding area involves luxury goods branding. Riley, Lomax, and Blunden (2004) emphasized the heightened benefit of heritage branding in the luxury goods area when they conducted their research involving brand extensions for luxury goods.

Such strong consumer luxury goods brands such as Vuitton or Chanel, for example, may bring a special aura from their country of initial origin, but the strength of the brand often stems from a consumer perspective steeped in heritage as well as luxury branding. This would appear to be an ongoing benefit, but some challenges also arise here. While luxury heritage brands may be somewhat fortified against pressure to always be new or different, upholding a luxury heritage brand also means that the brand has to live up to its past heritage. This may be especially difficult if the product creation has a propensity to vary, such as the challenges facing wine producers in their ongoing production (Beverland, 2005, 193). This could also be true for luxury automobile brands as manufacturers are expected to bring out new and ever better models.

Nostalgia and the Brand

Nostalgia advertising and branding has been an especially popular strategy for over the past decade. Nostalgia, ‘an individual’s longing for the past, a yearning for yesterday’ (Holbrook, 1993) has seemed to rise in direct proportion to the consumer uncertainty about the future (Muehling and Sprott 2004). In fact, marketers have been accused of ‘manufacturing memories,’ or creating an environment of ‘going home again,’ by using nostalgia in the very beginning to give credibility to a new brand, so that consumers did not feel like it was coming from nowhere. Examples of manufacturing memories have included Ford rolling out 1920s film footage of the Model T to confer its history of quality auto making, or Gap’s launch of Old Navy through a series of old time black and white ads and store décor recalling the 1950s (Aiken, 1999).

Sometimes, however, nostalgia as evidenced by products or brands has become desirable on its own account. The growing baby boomer generation latched onto a number of retro brands, seen as one way to recapture their lost youth. However, Generation Y is also adopting some of these retro brands on their own. Although these consumers were too young to have experienced these brands earlier, the appeal for these brands out of the past seems to be strong. Some have described this situation as ‘Generation Y looking backwards to go forwards’ (Nurko 2003).

One intriguing study of brand purchasing behavior among the 18-24 age group has found that a significant difference in the degree of brand loyalty in this age group across product categories. Speculation is that brands in certain product categories incorporated strong parental influence such as evident in coffee and toothpaste purchases while other brand selections reflected more of an individual’s self-image such as clothing brands (Wood 2004). Thus, this illustration of heritage branding uncovers brands desired by the younger generation through the opinion leadership of parents, but the parental influence appears limited to certain product/brand categories.

Icons are seen to be a key part of heritage branding. An icon has been described as a symbolic image, rooted in the consumers’ external world, but which takes its meaning not only based on people’s experiences but also by conveying private meanings based on the consumer’s experiences with the branded product. Brand names, packages, logos, and other symbols can become icons. This process constitutes the social origin of a special memory (Zaltman 2003, 196-197). Zaltman has also noted that these memories, in turn, create stories, and successful brands are those which have helped consumers create stories full of promise (Zaltman 2003).

Stories appear to play a huge role in the overall establishment of brands, with heritage brands benefiting from a growth of stories (real or ‘manufactured’) over time. Martin Lindstrom calls these stories the “secret of branding...where the histories (underlying these brand-related stories) create an emotional bond between you and the product (Lindstrom 2006). The Burberry brand is one of his examples—the story of styling, consistent materials, and even the company’s connection to the Queen of England. Burberry’s comeback was based on its heritage of quality and authenticity, as well as its updated styles and classic but trendy offerings.

However, these stories do not have to be real. Fake heritage branding ‘stories’ can provide consumers with an ‘anchor’ point and differentiate the product. Even the selection of a brand name can imply a ‘story’ or bring a form of ambiance to the product or brand. Examples include the Scandinavian sounding ice cream name, Haagen-Dazs, or the Australian beer, Fosters, which is actually brewed in the UK. Baileys, the ‘Original Irish Cream’ was dreamt up by a group of people overlooking the Bailey Hotel in London (Williams 2006). Such fictional historical branding

‘stories’ “give newly launched products a background or heritage of several of decades in order to establish a sense of authenticity and credibility. (This strategy’s) effectiveness is based on the resulting symbolic inferences made by consumers through ‘hyper-reality’ (Griffiths, Zimmer, and Little 1999).

Foundations for Heritage Branding

So, what does it take to create and maintain a successful heritage brand, with profitable longevity? Research has produced key insights, but no finite consensus. Here is a selection from the literature.

In his discussion of heritage branding foundations, Mike Moser states that “all the best companies have a core value system that drives all their decisions.” Moser uses the example of the United States of America, a heritage brand that has been around for more than two hundred years. He identifies its core values as “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Moser points out that the greatest flag design in the world (an icon or symbol of the USA brand) would not be successful if it were not backed by strong core values (Moser 2003, 12). Using Moser’s observations, a heritage brand that has run into trouble either needs to re-adjust its core values to a changing marketplace, or perhaps has departed from its core values to the detriment of its future success.

Other researchers echo the insight that a brand’s successful existence needs to be built upon a foundation of sound core values. Patricia Seybold has found that strong brands have four key elements in common: a unique brand personality; a ‘core-driving idea;’ ways in which the specific brand is differentiated from others; and ongoing innovation that keeps the brand’s offerings current and desirable (Seybold, 113). Customer experience is the essence of any brand, states Patricia Seybold. “Your customer’s experience with your brand includes how that customer *feels* when he is in your brand’s presence” (Seybold 2001, 14-15). Seybold reiterates that the “establishment of a strong brand identity is crucial for success, but that companies need to ensure that their brand is one to which customers can relate.” Given this perspective, these four elements have presumably provided the foundation for the heritage brands of today, those brands which have withstood the test of time and the thrusts of competition. However, tomorrow may be a different story.

Branding appears to start with a mass communication approach to the consumer, acquainting the consumer with the existence of the (new to the consumer) brand. If the consumer successfully recognizes and utilizes the brand, incurring a positive experience, this results in a personal connection between the consumer and the brand. “There’s a paradox to branding,” reports Michael Solomon. “The more

intangible your product or service, the more you need to brand...Consumers are bombarded with messages, but they're also looking for brands that speak to them as individuals." Solomon continues, "Think in terms of brand equity. If someone is willing to pay a dollar extra to get the same food at (your restaurant) than they would at any other place, that's the value of (your brand)" (Solomon 2003). Heritage brands appear to be those brands that have been able to establish this connection earlier or more strongly, providing a more durable relationship.

Being durable is definitely an asset for many brands. Coca Cola continues to be number one on Interbrand's annual list of top brands despite its debacle several years ago regarding the introduction of its disastrous New Coke product into its line. The Pepsi brand, although also a strong brand, remains down the list, currently ranked at #22. Coca Cola's maintenance of its stellar brand position, despite its New Coke challenge, probably was due to ongoing consumer appreciation for its regular beverages, as well as the company's continuing innovative attempts to provide additional beverages for current or future consumers.

Perceptions of a brand, including brand image and associations, are vitally important aspects of branding. Keller (2003) stresses that consumers' perceptions of brands consist of both brand awareness and brand image. Brand image may be imparted by the brand name itself, but more often the power to create and reinforce a visual image of a great brand has required a great amount of advertising (and other marketing communications) to "imprint the brand image into the hearts and minds of the company's customers (Marketing Momentum 2006). One example here might be the BMW Mini (now the Mini Cooper). Part of the success of this Mini Cooper brand appears to stem from the importance of maintaining the consumer perception of this brand's British origins as well as keeping the product's core appeal (Simms and Trott, 2006). Even brand awareness and image, by themselves, do not ensure success, because successful brands "must offer superior value to consumers and differentiate an offering from those of competitors (Fill, 2002)."

Heritage Branding and Loyalty Issues

"What does it really take to cement brand loyalty?" asks author Ted Mininni. "In addition to time, patience, commitment, and sound brand management, what else can marketing executives do to build and maintain brand loyalty? Especially in an age when the consumer has so many choices—too many choices—in an increasingly global marketplace?" (Mininni 2006). Mininni's solution for a brand to remain viable is to have it be "nurtured and remain consistent at every touch point, inside the company and outside." He feels that each and every employee must be a brand ambassador; and that all customer touch points need to work together to create a cohesive brand experience—emphasizing that a positive experience in one

channel does not create total experiential branding—this must be accomplished by the sum of all customer touch points (Mininni).

Kevin Clark coined the term, 'brandscendence;' that is, brands that "have the quality or state of being transcendent—brands that surpass, exceed, and are superior over time. Clark's three essential elements of these brands include the following:

1) relevance—primary idea and character that drives the brand experience; 2) context—purposeful innovation and adaptive behavior that drives the brand's evolution through time, space and meaning to specific cultures; and, 3) mutual benefit—the brand delivers reciprocal advantage for two or more parties and ultimately leads to sustainable interdependence relationships (Clark 2003, 4).

Being a heritage brand may have benefits, but Aaker notes that there are two variants of heritage branding age-related problems. The first problem facing heritage brands, involving such consumer brands as Jell-O and Levi's, is the need to appeal to the younger generations-- often kids, teens or those in their early twenties. The second variant, according to Aaker, is "typically encountered by firms marketing high-tech products or durable goods. These (older) companies are often viewed as not being on the cutting edge" (Aaker 1996, 231).

Aaker's solutions for companies to strategically overcome the heritage brand age barrier range from radically changing the brand's identity (tear down the house and rebuild a different structure) to just evolving the brand identity (remodeling) or augmenting to it (adding on another structure), thus allowing the brand to be perceived as different without a total makeover. Aaker notes that such branding evolutions can be accomplished through changes in the brand's symbols, name(s), slogans, or new products. Such brand symbols as Betty Crocker, an icon of General Mills, have followed this approach, as her image has received numerous 'face lifts,' and other enhancements over the years to make her image more in line with current homemaker images. Kentucky Fried Chicken became KYC, in part to avoid references to 'fried foods,' which brought a negative, unhealthy taint to the franchise's food offerings. Subway restaurants adopted the 'eat fresh' slogan, also reinforcing the trend toward healthier eating. The Jell-O 'Jigglers' provided a new type of jello dessert that kids, and moms, found fun as well as good tasting.

Augmentation, Aaker points out, can be accomplished through adding user imagery, product extensions, emotional benefits, or creating sub-brands. Aaker stresses that the greatest challenge throughout any of these changes, is to maintain the benefits of the heritage brand while continuing to incorporate the changes that keep the brand desirable. Sometimes, user imagery does not even have to take a new direction, as the brand, Turtle Wax found out. Its initial packaging, with the 'hard shell' turtle complete with top hat on a white background, continued to 'speak' to the consumer—the company only needed to update the vehicles

pictured on the containers. Many companies have sought ways to provide faster cooking time, or easier preparation as part of their new product offerings or line extensions, accommodating consumers who are facing growing time pressures.

Many heritage brands today are providing the same products, but with a different slant. Fast food ads from several companies show working families eating together—a switch from the ‘treat’ of eating out to the ability of working spouses able to be with their children without the time or hassle in the kitchen. Sub-branding also supports a shift in the original brand, like Dell computers with Intel inside, stressing the classic brand, but providing a high-tech update as well.

So what is the National Geographic Society doing to maintain the desirability of its heritage brand yet encourage its appeal to upcoming generations? Rice-Gardiner’s suggestion for maintaining the heritage branding of the National Geographic Society, yet providing future relevance for the organization is that “the key for a heritage brand is to be innovative, (because) innovation is the cure for an image that’s perceived as ‘your father’s Oldsmobile’” (Rabasca 2004). Innovation, in the case of the National Geographic Society, is taking several directions; from subtly changing the textual font on its flagship yellow-bordered magazine covers, to offering a new magazine targeting the 18-34 year old reader, unlike its traditional magazine reader who averages 56 years of age.

Is the demise of Oldsmobile, a classic heritage brand facing a dwindling line of buyers, indicative of the future for most heritage brands? Paul Temporal (2002) examined four issues regarding this brand’s situation that General Motors failed to conquer. First, the name issue (the word ‘old’ isn’t the best one to use in a brand name). Second, the product issue (the image of an Oldsmobile with its ‘rocket’ engine suffered when the price of gas started to rise). Third, the image repositioning issue (attempts were made to reposition the brand as a luxury one, but major discounts were used to encourage sales, confusing consumers. Plus, the heritage brand image of Oldsmobile as a sporty, innovative vehicle worked against both of these perceptions). Fourth, the consumer issue (based on the above actions, consumers fled from the brand. They saw no benefits, no differentiation, and no longer had an emotional association with Oldsmobile). From this assessment, it is possible that General Motors could have salvaged the brand if it had provided the consumers with some real and/or emotional reasons to buy the brand, but this obviously did not occur, and the Oldsmobile brand was dissolved, except for historical reminiscences.

Are other heritage brands destined for a similar fate? Coca Cola, which has recently entered into a venture with another heritage brand company, Procter & Gamble, to jointly provide drinks and snacks together, does not seem headed down the road to retirement any time soon. These heritage brands appear strong and successful, with ongoing

innovative products brought out under that veritable brand canopy. Both ‘treasured inheritance’ or ‘over the hill’ appear to be possible for heritage brands; but, it appears more likely that such brands need to continuously analyzed to avoid becoming not relevant, out of context, or without mutual benefit. Such heritage brands need to strive to keep an updated connection with their consumers, as well as providing the benefits sought by those consumers. If this is not done, however, the slide into oblivion becomes an increasing reality—regardless of the heritage from the past.

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