

Think before you link...



Keith Lucas looks at the dangers of alienating consumers with inappropriate product tie-ins

WHAT DOES the man who plays a Steinway Concert Grand drive to the concert? Would you be surprised if it were a shiny black BMW 7-Series? Probably not. Now, what about the driver stepping out of his Bentley Continental, what do you suppose he's wearing on his wrist? A large and impressive-looking Breitling perhaps?

Some brands seem made for each other, and mutually reinforcing shared values seems natural. Others leave you wondering just what they were thinking. Can anyone, for example, make any sense of the 'Aston Martin Edition' of the 'Nike Hyperdunk Kobe Bryant' trainer? When Lady Gaga (pro-gay pop star) signed an exclusive tie-in with Target (US traditional values retailer) it seemed bizarre (even for Lady Gaga). Target's customers were as outraged as her fans. Had she sold out? 'I did it to reform them,' she later taunted, after the whole charade bit the dust.

IMAGE MAKERS MAKE MISTAKES

No one, it seems, is above making brand miscalculations. Branding titans Coca-Cola (ubiquitous American soft drinks) and L'Oréal (sassy French haircare and cosmetics) are each masters within their respective categories, but when they got together to concoct an improbable-sounding 'nutraceutical' drink called Lumaé (which sounds disturbingly like a potion from a Harry Potter story), audiences for both brands assumed it must be some kind of elaborate hoax.

Problems generally arise when rational analyses, based on objective measures (such as audience correlation data), are allowed to override an intuitive sense of what feels right for the brands in question.

David Ogilvy famously noted that brands are defined not only by their constituent parts (product, packaging, logo, advertising, etc) but by the people with whom they are associated. Brand stereotypes can be enduring and persistent. By way of illustration imagine, if you will, a young woman, dressed in a blue anorak, jeans and slip-on shoes, drinking a coffee outside a café, with a dog sitting at her feet.

Now, what if I told you that the woman in question was actually wearing a Barbour quilted jacket, Armani jeans and Gucci loafers and that she was drinking a macchiato outside Patisserie Valérie in Chelsea with a black labrador at her feet. I suspect you have a rather more focused picture in your mind's eye.

What if I said that she was wearing an FCUK parka, Bench jeans and Adidas slip-on trainers and



that she was drinking a latte outside Wimpy in Romford with a Staffordshire Bull Terrier at her feet, you might have another, similarly focused, but quite different image in mind.

In both illustrations the essential, objective, facts remained identical but the brands (including the place name and dog breed) are enough to change the mental picture and the inferred lifestyle of the young woman.

Would you sense the dissonance if I told you that the first woman was wearing 'Intimately Beckham' perfume and that her favourite drink was a Bacardi Breezer? Or that the second was wearing '24 Faubourg' by Hermès and her favourite tippie was Pimm's?

Of course, such a vividly polarised image makes it relatively easy to spot when something simply doesn't fit; perhaps because it overtly links the brand with the personality of its users. Unfortunately, many classically trained marketers often fail to take account of such apparently ephemeral sensibilities when signing-up brand partnerships, focusing instead on a theoretical overlap of target audience demographics.

Of course, some brand partnerships will be less critical than others; after all, either of our



caricatures might drive a Mini Cooper, carry a Visa card or use an iPhone. But an assiduous brand owner will not leave this to chance.

Marketers considering entering a partnership between their brand and another (or thinking about incorporating a 'brand inside' their own – such as Intel, Bosch, Pininfarina, etc) should ask themselves if they sense an instinctive emotional fit between the audiences of the two brands. If they can't decide, then perhaps they ought to get to know their brand better.

CONSIDER THE BIGGER PICTURE

There are ways in which any brand's distinctive emotional values can be teased out and captured for future reference. Whatever you do, don't rely on traditional audience demographics. For example, if you think your brand appeals to ABC1 females, aged 20 to 35, living in London, earning £30k+, who are Facebook users and listen to Capital FM, think again. Both women described earlier could fulfil such criteria and if one is a good fit for your brand, there is a reasonable chance the other may not be.

Ultimately, we should remember that brands do behave very much like people. We get on best with those who understand us and reflect our values

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(or sometimes the values to which we, perhaps secretly, aspire) and as the relationship grows so do trust and loyalty.

But when a friend suddenly acts out of character or announces a commitment to a third party, who is conspicuously unlike us, we can feel angry, confused, even betrayed. And that is how customers can feel when a brand they thought they knew behaves out of character and breaches their trust.

The picture broadens when we appreciate that brands are not the preserve of consumer goods marketing, they are also built around individuals, places and political parties, among many other things.

Consider, for instance, how passionately many Liberal Democrat supporters felt, perhaps irrationally, when their party appeared to have compromised its essential values by joining a coalition with the Conservative party.

However compelling the strategic rationale, many supporters felt betrayed and, as a result, the party was punished at the earliest opportunity; its share of the vote collapsing from 17% to just 4% in less than a year, resulting in an ignominious fall from second to sixth place.

Now, much of this is to do with the software of communications rather than the hardware of strategy and decision-making, but politicians seem no less guilty than marketers when it comes to understanding such ephemeral sensibilities.

To parody an old TV commercial: think before you link before you dive. ■

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