Brand Revitalization
Looking to the past to breathe new life into heritage brands

by Mark Gallagher and Laura Savard

When a brand begins to lose its market share, its parent company is faced with the difficult decision of harvesting the brand or revitalizing it before it fades from store shelves and consumers’ minds. It’s often more effective to breathe new life into a failing brand than to harvest its value, sell it off, or launch a new brand from scratch. The key to resurrecting these heritage brands lies in the untapped value locked within their histories. What made these brands great years ago was often based on their functional, rational benefit. Today, if a heritage brand is to remain relevant it must express emotional benefits. These nine brand drivers: Story, Authenticity, Ritual, Icons, Community, Specialization, Lore, Language, and Rivalry are each keys to unlocking the value trapped within your heritage brand.

Decade by decade, generation by generation, heritage brands maintain their authority by staying relevant to an ever-evolving consumer audience. Heritage brands don’t just happen, they’re a result of keeping a respectful eye to the past and a hopeful eye to the future. When properly managed these brands live on to be the preferred brands of children, parents and grandparents alike. When mismanaged, these brands quickly fade from retail shelves and consumers’ minds.

Revitalizing brands requires introspection. Heritage brands require retrospection. You shouldn’t discard your brand’s history when building its future. The keys to unlocking its hidden value are often trapped in its past. Retrospection can provide the 20/20 hindsight needed to reveal opportunity. Heritage brands have history that new brands are incapable of attaining straight out of the gate.

Harley-Davidson is a heritage brand that transcends social and economic boundaries. Harley owners don’t just buy a motorcycle; they buy into a lifestyle based around a shared set of values. The Harley-Davidson brand’s Story, Authenticity, Ritual, Icons, Community,
Specialization, Lore, Language, and Rivalry have made it more than just a motorcycle. Harley has become what all great brands aspire to be. Harley is an icon that has been firmly imprinted in the minds of consumers. One of the oldest and perhaps the strongest brands in the motorcycle market, Harley riders often wait for months to get their bikes and are willing to pay a premium for that privilege.

What’s true of Harley-Davidson can’t be said about all heritage brands. Not because they don’t have great history, but rather that most fail to successfully tap into their brand drivers. When properly managed your heritage brand can obtain icon status.

**STORY**

Great brands are built on great stories and heritage brands have more history to draw from than their newbie competitors. The most popular British-made car ever produced, the Mini Cooper, pioneered front wheel drive. To prove the merits of this new drive train, Mini entered the Monte Carlo Rally. Most cars don’t finish the rally. Those that do, gain a great deal of credibility and publicity. The Mini not only finished, it won—three times! A new brand could never make such a claim. When BMW purchased the Mini brand, this story was told to the world. This helped to turn a failing brand into one of the most successful relaunches ever to hit the market.

**AUTHENTICITY**

Consumers are heavily influenced by their associations with where and how a product is made. Based on their convictions, consumers believe authenticity provides a certain unequivocal value. When deciding to buy, consumers judge a brand’s authenticity as much as, if not more than, price, quality, and availability. No one is willing to pay a premium for Japanese wine, any more than they would for Italian electronics. Take a position of authenticity and you will trounce imposters just entering the market.

**RITUAL**

Ritual underscores authenticity by exemplifying the consumers’ overall experience. Religions have used ritual as a means for bonding individuals together for centuries. The effects of ritual can bond consumers with brands as well. The very act of removing the top from an Oreo moves the brand from being category typical to occupying uncontested market space. Placing a lime in the neck of a Corona has given this Mexican beer premium status in a market led by European and American brewers. There are rituals within all heritage brands. You just need to extract them.

**ICONS**

Too often when companies “update” or “revamp” their brands they trade a valuable icon steeped in history for a trendy design. This strips the brand of its identity. Heritage brands have identities that are not only synonymous with the categories that they built and defined they are also cultural icons. Imagine Wonder Bread without the polka-dots (a graphic representation of hot air balloons) or McDonald’s without its golden arches (inspired by the architecture of the original restaurants). Your brand has value trapped within it, waiting to be identified, unlocked and revitalized. By digging deep into your brand’s heritage, you can resurrect your brand’s most significant signals (its icons) to gain competitive advantage. It may be a logo, a jingle, a slogan, sponsorship or endorsement. Any signal that consumers once attributed to your brand can be resurrected and reignited. There is a good reason that Ford brought back its classic Mustang.

**COMMUNITY**

A closely knit community is a powerful brand signal. Heritage brands are, in a sense, cult brands. Their members live and die by their convictions. They believe that their brand of choice is superior to its rivals in every way, despite the facts. Often, these individuals take their devotion to extremes. If actions speak louder than words, then a Harley-Davidson tattoo screams. These communities exist. Support these groups when it support’s your position. They are your best spokespeople, your best salespeople.

**SPECIALIZATION**

Too often companies mistake specialization for limitation. They overextend their brands to stand for more things to more people and soon end up meaning nothing to no one. Heritage brands like Porsche have extreme focus. Porsche’s position of performance allowed the company to extend the brand into seemingly unrelated, yet highly relevant categories, such as SUVs. Focusing the brand on a singular concept not only defines its area of expertise, but tells consumers that there is no substitute. While the extension seems abstract at its inception, in retrospect the connection becomes obvious. Specialization is not about limitation but rather focus. When you focus
your brand’s efforts on one thing, you concentrate your efforts on success.

LORE
Many heritage brands were founded on product differentiation that required trade secrets and rumors ran amuck. Coke has its secret formula, KFC has its 11 secret spices and Zildjian has its secrets of metallurgy. While these Brand Signals were not the product of intention, they have underscored their respective brands’ value. If it’s worth keeping a secret, it’s worth telling people about it. In a world of product convergence, the brands that claim irrefutable points of differentiation stand out above the crowd to claim their market.

LANGUAGE
Heritage brands have a vernacular all their own. Jarhead, Leathernecks, Unit-God-Country… these are far more than slogans and marketing speak. They exemplify what it means to be a Marine. When expressing the brand, written or spoken language can be as powerful as images. The right brand-speak can captivate and engage consumers. Proprietary language allows a brand to articulate its personality through a distinct vocabulary system. If a key word or phrase originated with your brand, then you must reclaim it.

RIVALRY
Coke would not be what it is today if Pepsi did not exist. Rivalry strengthens the brand community. It helps to define what the brand is, by stating what the brand is not. This intense competition forces brands to work harder to differentiate in the battle for market space, mind-share and consumer preference. An antagonist strengthens the consumer’s bond with the brand. A great antagonist has helped many a ball club unify its fans—Think: Red Sox vs Yankees.

These brands of yesteryear have tremendous value locked deep within their history. When deciding whether to harvest, sell or launch anew, your brand team should explore your brand’s past. Deciding which specific Brand Signals to reignite and which to jettison may be a safer bet. If you decide to move the brand forward, not everything will make the trip and new signals will surely need to be developed. When expressed with simplicity and consistency the chosen signals will tell a believable and compelling story steeped in history.

Consumers are creatures of habit. They find great comfort in consistency. But, consistency is not about doing the same thing every time. It’s about properly managing consumers’ expectations. Brands achieve this by consistently maintaining market position. They act proactively and dynamically to deliver on their brand promise. The consistency of GE’s promise is consistent innovation. If GE were to stand still in such a fast paced world they would, in effect, be moving backwards and lose their innovation position.

No new product offering or new brand can make an authentic claim of heritage. For heritage brands to succeed we must look back to reclaim what made them great, rebuild that foundation and move forward. The question to ask is: Where is brand value still active and where is it dormant?

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