

## CHAPTER 3

# BRAND MEANING

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Imagine this chapter as an exercise in brandthropology. As an anthropologist who uses ethnographic methods to conduct cultural analysis, my view of branding departs from the conventional marketing perspective. Traditionally, marketers have framed branding as a cognitive or structural enterprise in models of strategic management, slighting the lived experience consumers have of brands, neglecting the cultural complexity that animates brands in so many distinctive ways, and treating the consumption experience as a reactive, idiosyncratic after-effect of marketers' efforts.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past two decades, work in consumer culture theory has encouraged practitioners to understand marketing as a semiotic venture. That is, the principal obligation of the marketer—and at once its chief source both of unintended and unanticipated consequence—is to shape the experience of stakeholders engaged in transactions. That marketers are behavioral architects or social engineers is denied as often as decried, but it is the central tenet of our discipline. Marketers, consumers, public policy makers, and consumerists are engaged in a perpetual game of discovering, creating, translating, transforming, and reconfiguring meaning. This quest for meaning drives marketplace behavior.<sup>2</sup>

The brand is a principal repository of meaning in consumer culture, in both a residential and generative sense. It is both a storehouse and a powerhouse of meaning.<sup>3</sup> In a universe of functional parity, as we move beyond a features-and-benefits understanding of our offerings to plumb their collective experiential soul, the way meaning is managed becomes crucial to the brand's success. The art of meaning management, as well as the detection of its antecedents and consequences, are exercises in applied anthropology—in

brandthropology—driven by a narrative view of the brand that braids the filaments of everyday empirical and eternal truth into a common strand. That braiding is a communal effort, the plait a joint outcome of stakeholder negotiation.

In this chapter, I argue that we have always lived, and will always live, in an experience economy, despite the recent volume of the imagineering brandwagon.<sup>4</sup> I illustrate how brands help make the categories of culture stable and visible, facilitating change in the bargain, an especially important consideration in an increasingly globalized marketplace.<sup>5</sup> I describe branding as a holistic combination of marketers' intentions, consumers' interpretations, and numerous sociocultural networks' associations, a co-creation and co-production of stakeholders from start to finish. I assert that brands shape and reflect cultural trends. Finally, I emphasize throughout the chapter that the foundations of brand meaning are personal, tribal, and mythic.

## ETYMOLOGY, DEFINITION, AND ROOT METAPHOR: A PERSPECTIVE

A treatise on meaning rightfully begins with a lexical focus. The word *brand* has a tripartite etymology. One emphasis clusters around *burning*, with connotations both of fiery consummation and of banking the domestic hearth. A second emphasis clusters around *marking*, with connotations of ownership and indelibility, as well as paradoxical allusions to intrinsic essence, whether of merit or stigma. A third emphasis clusters around the delivery of, or deliverance from, danger (stoke, anneal, cauterize; conflagration, possession, aggression). The brand embodies the transformative heat of passion, properly tended. It is bestowed, and it is earned. The brand bespeaks the forging of family.

Definitions are another direct avenue into meaning. A brand is a differentiator, a promise, a license to charge a premium. A brand is a mental shortcut that discourages rational thought, an infusing with the spirit of the maker, a naming that invites *this* essence to inhabit *this* body. A brand is a performance, a gathering, an inspiration. A brand is a semiotic enterprise of the firm, the companion spirit of the firm, a hologram of the firm. A brand is a contract, a relationship, a guarantee; an elastic covenant with loose rules of engagement; a non-zero-sum game; improvisational theater at best, guerrilla theater at worst. As perceived vessels of exploitation, brands provide the impetus for generics and voluntary simplicity, as well as targets for demonstrations of cultural nationalism. McDonaldisation, Coca-Colonization, and Disneyfication

are simultaneously courted and countered, imported and deported.<sup>6</sup> The *swooshtika* becomes a badge of infamy, Ronald McDonald is toppled and graffitied, and iPod adverts are morphed with images from the infamous Abu Ghraib prison to protest the war in i-Raq.<sup>7</sup> The brand demands an antiphonal, overlapping call-and-response patterned singing among communicants. It requires collusion, collaboration, and the willing suspension of disbelief.

As a brandthorologist, I am attuned to marketing mythopoeia, the creation and perpetuation of deep meaning through narrative. Marcom is most effective when it resonates with the universal types and motifs of folklore, with archetypal patterns in poetry, with the deep play of cultural forms, as each of these is grounded at the local level and revealed, not through simple anthrojournalism, but through ethnography.<sup>8</sup> My present understanding of branding is best conveyed by a root metaphor.

Imagine the brand as a Thai spirit house. A ubiquitous structure in residential and commercial neighborhoods, often mistaken by tourists as a bird house, this tiny building resembles a temple, and acts as a dwelling for spirits of the land and household, who are plied with offertory gifts by petitioners in search of favors or assuring pledges. The spirit house is often piled high with gifts of flowers, food, and currency, left by suppliants in hope of intercession by the residents. As will be evident in the following pages, I view branding as the creation of household gods, the mythic charter of our consumer culture. The brand is also a habitat in which consumers can be induced to dwell. In that dwelling, consumers domesticate the space, transforming it, and themselves, to essence. The resulting glow emanating from the dwelling is the brand's aura.

As the marketer's offering moves from undifferentiated homogeneity to distinctive difference—that is, as the brand individuates—consumers experience both therapeutic and salvific results, and grace is returned to the firm in the forms of consumers' willingness to pay a premium, and to repeat purchase over time. Thus, the brand is both a physical and metaphysical presence, an economic and festive fixture that binds stakeholders in a multifaceted relationship. It is the corporeal and noncorporeal webwork of postmodern existence.

## BIOSOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF BRANDS

A thumbnail sketch of brands in evolutionary perspective is instructive. An early hallmark of humanity resides in the symbiotic co-evolution of the thumb and the brain. Over millennia of manipulating objects in the environ-

ment, our reach eventually exceeded our grasp. In short, the opposability of our thumb allowed us to interact with the material world in a way that enhanced enormously the sophistication of our brain. Manual dexterity and sapience potentiated one another, our paleolithic technology eventually permitting people to make themselves. Materiality is intrinsic to this process.

As humans evolved, we developed an extremely plastic conception of the self. In particular, our perceptions of our body's boundaries grew very fluid. This fluid body boundary, so evident at the subatomic level of electron sharing, when, for instance, we rest our palms upon a desktop, has eventually come to be described as a cybernetic self. We regard technology and its traits as extensions of ourselves, and we incorporate the material world into our sense of self.<sup>9</sup> As acculturated creatures, we are not simply sentience borne in meatsacks, nor wetware encased in hardware. We are cybernetic systems, simultaneously of and in the environments we manipulate. We are the art effects of artifacts.<sup>10</sup>

Artifacts are instrumental and expressive manifestations of our humanity. Humanity is predicated upon artifactuality, our ability to make things the vehicles of projection and introjection. Perception—or, rather, apperception, as anthropologists understand the culturally mediated interpretation of sensory input, the theory-ladenness of our facts—has a prelinguistic foundation. Artifactuality is the bedrock of apperception. Things literally shape our ability to think. Things make the categories of culture stable and visible.<sup>11</sup> Artifacts are sedimented behavior with which, in turn, we furnish our minds, providing us views of realities and endless opportunities for remaking ourselves.<sup>12</sup>

As we have moved from flint-knapping to imagineering, our mental infrastructure has become essentially postmodern paleolithic. We live less in a natural world than we do in a supermediated world, where goods have become "good to think."<sup>13</sup> That is, we interpret our realities through a screen of images arising largely from the artifacts—material and virtual—that marketers have proliferated. Among our primary artifacts, hence apperceptual furniture, in contemporary life, are brands. Our built environment is suffused with brands.<sup>14</sup> We literally see the world through branded lenses. Brands have become powerful material vehicles of thought and emotion.<sup>15</sup> Brand names are among children's earliest lexical acquisitions. These lenses are long-lived as well.

Recall, if you can, the climactic encounter of the Ghostbusters (from the eponymous film<sup>16</sup>) with Gozzer, the demon who demands they choose the form of their own destruction, wherein Bill Murray instructs his comrades to let their minds go blank, so they might avoid annihilation. To Dan Aykroyd's dismay, the image of the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man pops,



unbidden, to mind, and thence materializes on the streets of New York to wreak havoc. The marketecture of Aykroyd's mind mirrors our own. In an era where the aphrodisiacal Green M&Ms brand character runs second in recognition only to Santa Claus (himself a brand incarnation and patron saint of consumption), and a parade of brand icons (Ronald McDonald, Tony the Tiger, Mr. Peanut, Miss Chiquita, Mr. Clean, and others) in Times Square kicks off Advertising Week 2004 in New York, it is easy to imagine the household gods of Aeneas, borne out of Troy to ease the burden of his exile, having been transmogrified into this symbolic economy of reassurance. Brands are the used gods that facilitate our accommodation and resistance to the culture of consumption.<sup>17</sup>

## BRANDS AS SECULAR RITUAL

Brand-based behaviors are the principal forms of secular ritual in contemporary social life.<sup>18</sup> To a large extent, the brand has been the ritual substratum of consumer behavior from time immemorial. Insofar as culture is reproduced in and through material objects, branding has always been a vehicle of human agency. Again, an evolutionary perspective is instructive.

The original hallmark of humanity was once believed to be the ability to use tools. From the handprints in blown ochre on the prehistoric cave paintings at Pêche Merle, to the signed casting blocks of the Meidum Pyramid, to the rabbit *hao* brand of the Northern Song (A.D. 960), to the medieval European trademarks of guild hegemony, makers have marked their creations as distinctive.<sup>19</sup> Gradually, the mark defined the maker. Eventually, *Homo faber*—people who make things—was demoted, as tool use was discovered throughout the animal kingdom.

*Homo narrans*—people who tell stories—has been promoted as our true hallmark. Storytelling is now regarded as our signature talent. Consequently, a narrative theory of branding is emerging among consumer researchers. Effective brand management involves the discovery, creation, and constant revision of stories. The brand is regarded as an allegory, suffused with aura and touched by paradox, that lives in the oral tradition of interpretive communities to the extent that the brand remains relevant to consumers' core cultural concerns.<sup>20</sup>

Theorizing ranges from top-down models of culture industry hegemony to bottom-up models of brand community creativity.<sup>21</sup> Product placement advances story lines (and avoids consumer ire) even as it returns marketers to the early days of television advertising. American Brandstand tracks brand mentions in *Billboard*'s Top 20 Singles chart, as rappers embellish their lyrics

with verisimilar references. The polymorphously perverse Axeman sends consumers on a hermeneutic quest for the essence of deodorant. Members of the iPod brand community post images of themselves on the Internet morphing into MP3 players or lamenting the death of their machines, or they post images of their playlists titled with the names of ex-girlfriends or nostalgic hometowns. Authors such as Alex Shakar, William Gibson, Max Barry, Victor Pelevin, and Jonathan Dee, among others, push K-Mart realism to its limits, writing as evocative and insightful analyses of brand dynamics as can be found in the scholarly literature.<sup>22</sup>

Revision of reception theory to recognize the active production of consumption by consumers formerly regarded as passive (or worse, miscomprehending) has led to yet another contender for hallmark status in our bid to define human agency. *Homo ludens*—people who play—is an interesting hybrid of the ancestors.<sup>23</sup> When playfulness is seen as agentic motive, consumption as bricolage, and lifestyle as mosaic, marketers must build space into their offerings within which consumers can create, innovate, and deviate in pursuit of satisfaction.<sup>24</sup> Themed flagship brand stores that harness the interactive power of retail theatre and retail therapy capitalize effectively on this ludic impulse.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the dominant developmental sequence I have presented, each of these modes of agency has been active through time, and, as a result, marketers have engaged brand ethos selectively. These agentic motives have been trained primarily on three ritual domains: brand as fetish; brand as totem; brand as kinship alliance. Again, these ritual domains have been invoked throughout time, and none has a monopoly on consumers' imaginations. Each, however, implies a distinctive orientation toward brand management.

As a nation of unchurched seekers for whom denominational religion has become increasingly unsatisfying, and yet for whom the idea of a spiritual quest continues to provide direction to life, Americans have elevated the brand to the status of fetish, and not simply the commodity fetish that conceals the symbolic codes of capitalism from consumers.<sup>26</sup> Recall photographic images of Freud in his consulting room, surrounded by hundreds of African fetish statues, some of which he would fondle in contemplation as his clients held forth on problems. Brands have been invested with the numinous, as the interiority of the artifact has been more effectively unpacked. As a making sentient of the external world, the brand has become a portal to exalted experience. Consumers employ brands to achieve the experience both of transcendence and immanence, to infuse their lives with a lived experience of the sacred. The blurring of the boundary between conventional

religion and secular consumption, a paraprimitive postmodern paradox of the first order, is at once a source of cultural stability and cultural dislocation, as ideologies contend on a global stage.<sup>27</sup>

As a totem, the brand performs the crucial social function of symbolic classification. It acts as both a beacon and a badge, a dashboard and a billboard.<sup>28</sup> Imagine the majestic Kwakiutl totem poles of the Pacific Northwest, whose carved frogs, whales, ravens, wolves, or bears embody not just the identity of the clans, but their relationship to one another. Now imagine those figures replaced by the swoosh, the helios, the mermaid, the bull's-eye or the bull, performing those identical classificatory operations. Brands assist individuals in the achievement of their own individual identity projects.

This assistance may not stop at simple brand loyalty or evangelism. Enthusiasts have literally tattooed the logos of Harley Davidson, Gibson Guitars, and Apple, among others, on their skin, effectively embodying the brand. (At least one surgeon stands accused of branding the logo of his alma mater—the University of Kentucky—on the uterus of his unwitting patients).<sup>29</sup> Brands promote and proclaim group affiliation. These groups range from grassroots, populist brand communities that thrive in cyberspace, to autonomous subcultures of consumption that commune IRL, to marketer-sponsored user groups that interact at commercially created brandfests.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the brand comprises every action the firm undertakes, effectively encapsulating the company and presenting it to the world as a hologram. This is an especially important concern in business-to-business markets, where, to a large extent, the firm's reputation is the brand.<sup>31</sup>

The third ritual domain enacted through the brand, while related to the others, acts essentially as the replication of a template for the formation of relationships. This secular ritual has to do with kinship and the formation of alliances. It is less about the political imposition of order from the culture industries (advertising, cinema, and the like) than it is about the negotiation of harmony in the domestic sphere. To the extent that consumer-brand relations mirror the relationship between people in the social order, consumers imagine brands existing on a continuum from intimacy to estrangement, from kinship (or kithship) to enmity; brands may be consanguines, affines, friends, strangers, or adversaries.<sup>32</sup> Erosion of brand loyalty in the United States corresponds to the pattern of serial monogamy that is the dominant marital profile of the day.<sup>33</sup> The demographer-identified trend of *starter marriages*—25 percent of first marriages terminating within five years without children—portends further brand loyalty adjustments.<sup>34</sup>

## LIVED EXPERIENCE AS MEANING PLATFORM

No matter its type—parity, niche, mega, or quintessential; elite, dowager, or new peer; cult or iconic; fast-moving consumer goods or business-to-business—every brand depends for its longevity on the skillful management of customer experience.<sup>35</sup> Further, the status of *customer* must be granted to every stakeholder in the brand's franchise, whatever the provenance. And while touch points are efficient occasions of observation and intervention, prospective touch points are just as essential to the process of experience management. Remember that brands are suspended in webs of significance only partially of marketers' own making. The lived experience of customers, from which all those meanings relevant to the brand arise, provides the platform from which brand strategy can be launched. Let us prefigure discussion of pre-launch dynamics with a brief example.

Consider the recently heralded birth of the *bling* finger. For decades, DeBeers has successfully promoted a link between diamonds and romantic love, and, in particular, diamond rings and marital engagement. DeBeers spends \$200 million annually to provide consumers with both mythic appeal and economic guidance (diamonds are “forever,” and the price of the ring should be equivalent to two months of the groom's salary). The company has traditionally marketed diamonds as gifts bought by men to be given to women.<sup>36</sup>

Predictably, marketing mythopoeia has become confounded with a feminist critique of patriarchy (the symbolic branding of women as chattel), with a shifting pattern of marital stability (increased divorce rate and numbers of female singletons), with geopolitical intrigues in sourcing (“war,” “conflict,” or “blood” diamonds), and with the gradual erosion of gendered economic inequality (more women controlling greater disposable income). Couple these changes with the rising trend in monadic giving—women buying gifts for themselves, to be given “to me, from me,” as a proactive consequence of the perceived failure of their significant others to give them gifts that indicate that “he really ‘gets’ me” (men often being eleventh-hour order-fillers at best, and bearers of lingerie and appliances at worst).<sup>37</sup> Add a downward tick in ring-share of jewelry, and early sightings of fashionistas wearing diamonds on the ring finger of the right (that is, mythopoetically *incorrect*) hand, and DeBeers is faced with a branding opportunity.<sup>38</sup> Can the brand colonize new territory by claiming the right ring finger? Recent ads stressing female empowerment, individual autonomy, and self-worth encourage women to buy these bling rings (a folk locution lifted from fashion-forward rap culture for a



product designed to look different from an engagement ring) for themselves. “Your left hand says ‘We,’ Your right hand says ‘Me’” begins one appeal; “For me, myself and I” begins another.<sup>39</sup>

The sources of meanings to be managed in this particular case (a business-to-business example, as DeBeers sells to the trade, and thence to consumer, via J. Walter Thompson advertising) are instructive, as they illustrate the kind of orchestration involved in the invention of tradition. Sociodemographic, geopolitical, and cultural-historical forces are all implicated in the negotiation of identity projects. To the extent that marketers are aware of the multistrandedness of the experiential warp through which they must wend their managerial weft, the fabric that is the brand can be woven more effectively.

## TRIANGULATING BRAND MEANING

The principal sources of brand meaning arise in three primary domains. While these domains intergrade and overlap in their animation of one another, they are discrete enough for pedagogical purposes to provide strategic guidance. By tacking between these sources, the marketer can effectively triangulate the meanings that must be managed if the brand is to become, and remain, relevant and resonant in customers’ experience. These sources are brand image, brand essence, and brandscape.

*Brand image* is the external form and observable characteristics of the marketer’s offering. This is the artifact as offered. It is the embodiment of the marketer’s offering. Image is the operational meaning of the brand. It is the meaning the marketer has been able to infuse into the brand, and it is the most susceptible to strategic manipulation.<sup>40</sup>

In current practice, marketers are able to create (through repeated introspection, intuition, and insight) a brand mantra, which, through repeated incantation, reminds the brand’s champion of the grail of which the firm is in quest.<sup>41</sup> This fabulous formula focuses attention on the outcome toward which all effort, strategic and tactical, should be directed. Nike professes “Authentic Athletic Performance.” The University of Notre Dame promises “Life, Sweetness, and Hope” (*Vita Dulcedo Spes*). Burning Man urges “Radical Self-Expression.” Starbucks prizes “Rewarding Everyday Moments.” All of the meaning that stewards are able to harness in the realization of the mantra, as enacted through every traditional design element of brand identity (from name through fit and finish to point of experience), serves as input to the creation and maintenance of brand image.

*Brand essence*, on the other hand, is the meaning that arises in the customer’s creative engagement with the marketer’s offering. It is the internal

form of the offering that must be elicited on the ground. It is the meaning that is co-created and co-produced by customers. Consumers’ interpretations of the brand (along with all other aspects of their active reception of marketers’ efforts) may not have been intended or anticipated by the marketer, but they must be thoroughly understood, if not embraced. Brand essence is exegetical meaning.<sup>42</sup>

Like Tiv tribesmen struggling to convey the true meaning of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to the resistant, classically trained anthropologist, consumers try ever to alert marketers to the polysemic character of products and services.<sup>43</sup> A transformation occurs in the remaking of a brand from an image to an essence, from *your* brand (the marketer’s) to *my* brand (the consumer’s).

While essence is perhaps most effectively elicited ethnographically, often consumers will telegraph their ownership directly in the nativizing or taming of the brand. Coca-Cola becomes *Coke*. Federal Express becomes *FedEx*. McDonald’s becomes *Mickey D’s*.<sup>44</sup> Target becomes *Tarzhay*. Consumers *google* and *tivo*. They keep abandoned brands alive (Newton). They write new episodes for media brands and circulate them in online communities (*Star Trek*, *Xena*).<sup>45</sup> They appropriate intellectual property as a sign of esteem (or disdain) for the brand, as much as for monetary gain. Finally, customers may prompt marketers to explore the paradoxical essence of the brand that permits apparently opposing desires to be sated concurrently, such as the VW Beetle’s yoking of irony and earnestness, or Muzak’s evocation of eternity and transience.<sup>46</sup>

Image and essence are suspended in webs whose filaments anchor and nourish them, and whose constant plucking encourages these modes of meaning to cross-pollinate and hybridize. Collectively, these webs constitute the *brandscape*. The brandscape is all about positional meaning, as it casts brands in relationships with one another, and with the culture industries at large, to create entire networks of associations that consumers use to limn their lives.<sup>47</sup> In cultural terms, the brandscape is the material and symbolic environment that consumers build with marketplace products, images, and messages, that they invest with local meaning, and whose totemic significance largely shapes the adaptation consumers make to the contemporary world.<sup>48</sup> As marketing and other cultural forms—art, education, religion, politics, technology, journalism, and so on—grow increasingly imbricated and globalized, the meaning-bank from which all stakeholders draw grows larger and more variegated by the moment.<sup>49</sup>

Let us ground the brandscape for a moment in Chicago, the home of numerous evocative flagship brand stores, which compete not only with each other and with retail outlets of more modest stature, but also with tourist attractions of all manner of description. On a stroll through Nike Town, you

would ascend from the natural world, through the cultural world to the supernatural world, as you moved through successive venues that evoked the experience of being outside, on the street, in the marketplace, in an art gallery, in a museum, and, ultimately, in a sacred place of worship. Your sense of Nike-ness would be suffused with the aura of each of these different domains, whose meanings interpenetrate and synergize one another.<sup>50</sup>

On a visit to ESPN Zone, you might spend time in the screening room before a huge television monitor flanked by banks of slightly smaller monitors, bracketed and surmounted by crawlers, providing you with images of and information about an enormous array of sports contests worldwide. You might feel like you were in a Las Vegas sports book (and possibly engage in a bit of illegal gambling), or a theatre, or possibly even at home in your den. Should you occupy the front row Throne Zone, in a plush leather recliner tricked out with surround-sound stereo and armrest control panel to adjust the audio feed, and gaze at the images while female servers ply you with food and drink, you might lose yourself regally in alternating phallic and uterine fantasies, or feel like Captain Kirk on the bridge of the Starship Enterprise or Archie Bunker in the La-Z-Boy, or wish you could buy a seat license as you would in an NFL stadium. ESPN Zone-ness would be about quenching carnal desire through multiple senses and media in quintessentially American male fashion. Once again, the brand would be amplified and constellated across a range of meaning domains.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, on a pilgrimage to American Girl Place, you might watch young girls play with dolls meticulously supplied with authentic cultural biographies and period-appropriate outfits. These dolls themselves might have smaller dolls of their own, dressed in identical fashion. The girls who own the dolls might be dressed identically to the dolls themselves. Mothers accompanying the girls might be dressed in identical fashion. Grandmothers along for the trip might be dressed like the mothers who are dressed like the girls who are dressed like the dolls' dolls. These female kin units wander the store, shopping, playing, reading, dining, conducting grooming rituals, talking and telling stories, teaching and learning, and documenting their outings with photos and video. You would be observing memory in the service of practice. The site is alive with the intergenerational transfer of female energy, the constant reproduction of domesticity and the laying down—most frequently by grandmothers—of a template for making family that will become a living legacy. Doll merchandising serves as the object of contemplation, evoking concepts of gender and family that range from retro-ethnicity to futuristic genetic engineering, from Eden to Stepford. American Girl-ness would be about convergence and individuation

in gender projects as they bear on culture-making, once again ramified through multiple genres of narrative.<sup>52</sup>

In each of these examples, the marketer and the customer draw from numerous cultural wellsprings of meaning to inform their understandings of the brand, while the brand itself is fungible or syncretic in terms of the meaning floating freely in the experiential portfolio of the culture. Aligning the meanings across stakeholders and domains to ensure consistent interpretation, or coordinating the differences in meanings across segments when consistency is deemed irrelevant or counterproductive require painstaking attention to the brandscape in which the managed meaning will eventually have to play.<sup>53</sup> A meaning audit can enhance this management immeasurably.

## CONDUCTING A MEANING MANAGEMENT AUDIT

While a comprehensive grasp of all the sources of meaning available to the marketer will prove elusive (and probably illusive as well), it is possible to specify some most likely prospects for nuanced understanding. I identify seven categories and corresponding practices that can assist in a conscientious audit of brand meaning. These practices can then be mapped against conventional canons of brand analysis (e.g., brand equity, function, ideal design) to probe the ways in which standard accounts and metrics might be narratively enriched. As the meaning manager inevitably strategizes *in medias res*, and because the print medium prevents the simultaneous presentation of these coequal categories (on a Mobius strip, as I would prefer), I treat them cumulatively, not serially, in the following pages.

### Archetypal Mythography

This is an ultimate source of brand meaning, and requires the strategist to *cosmologize*. That is, the meaning manager must learn to coax an *implied spider*—those foundational experiences all humans share and which storytellers have, from time immemorial, used as the very stuff of myth-making—to spin filaments that wire the brand into our way of apprehending reality.<sup>54</sup> We must be reminded constantly of the ways in which brands are woven through the fabric of our experiential universe.<sup>55</sup> Meaning managers imbue the brand with archetypal qualities (e.g., find the hero in Nike, the outlaw in Harley, the lover in Hallmark), metaphysical presence (e.g., the demonstration of Coke as the Real Thing, Allstate as the Good Hands, Visa as Everywhere You Want to



Be), and primal narrativity (Apple as irresistible forbidden knowledge, American Express as companion spirit, ConAgra as cornucopic abundance).<sup>56</sup> They synthesize the deep memes that become myth and help customers discern eternal from merely empirical truth.

### Cultural Biography

*Cultural biography* is the local source of meaning in a global marketplace, a diachronic account of the brand as it evolves in concert with the forces of social life. It is a life history narrative.<sup>57</sup> It requires the strategist to *historicize*. That is, the meaning manager must have a panoramic view of the brand as it evolves over time, and a deep understanding of the changing sociocultural dynamics that shape the brand's role in the lives of consumers. Here, a generational or genealogical metaphor may guide insight; a metaphor based on *zeitgeist* or *épistème* may also be appropriate.<sup>58</sup> The guiding principle is simply that temporal ethos affects profoundly the way a brand is interpreted.

Trademarks, reference figures, and spokespersons are instructive in this regard. Betty Crocker, the human face of General Mills, has changed markedly (although she is still within the bounds of effective integrated marketing communication) over generations. Through an early twenty-first-century lens, her incarnations have included an apparently stern, matronly grandmother, a lighter-hearted motherly June Cleaver look-alike, a competent and slightly coquettish businesswoman, and, in her current visage, a computer-morphed composite Anglo/Afro/Hispanic/Asian American. This metamorphosis reflects the change in culinary styles from time-consuming nutritious cooking from scratch to the ascendance of comfort foods, to the modular cooking meal-solutions era, to the rise of ethnic and fusion foodways. Social forces such as decreasing and increasing rates of female participation in the paid labor force, involvement of males in household cooking responsibilities, time famine, ethnic resilience, and the need for projective identification in an era of multicultural diversity are also reflected in these changes. Aunt Jemima, the syrup icon, has undergone a similar metamorphosis as the climate of class, race, and gender relations has changed over time. So also have the Brawny Man and countless others.

### Everyday Ethnography

*Everyday ethnography* is the phenomenological source of brand meaning, a synchronic account of the brand as it figures in the quotidian life of the customer. It requires the strategist to *contextualize*. That is, a grounded under-

standing of behaviors as they actually occur—not, as is most often the case, as managers believe they occur, or as consumers recall they occur—as the brand comes into play in customer experience. Here meaning arises in the course of day-to-day living, and it is here that the lived experience of the brand is revealed.<sup>59</sup>

Ethnographic consumer research reverses the anthropologist's mandate to make the strange *familiar* (i.e., interpret the exotic behavior of distant others): The brand strategist must make the familiar *strange*. Everyday reality must be viewed through a novel lens, highlighting the taken-for-granted and translating *consumer* behavior into *human* behavior. Grooming and purification rituals inform interaction with faucets and fixtures, detergents and emollients. Palpating, hefting, sniffing, and tasting behaviors characteristic of the produce aisle are reproduced (often covertly) by anxious new mothers in the baby food aisle, suggesting modifications to packaging and labeling. The efficacy of branding for doors can be strengthened by drawing on consumers' earliest experience of doors, which is characterized by feelings of isolation, anxiety, and anomie, by depicting doors in advertising in an open condition, with people on the other side of the threshold.<sup>60</sup> Refrigerators, ethnographically reconceived as being only secondarily about refrigeration and storage, become the soul of the smart house. The context in which brand behavior unfolds is embedded with meanings essential to the customer's personal narrative.

### Utopian Cartography

This is an important aspirational source of brand meaning, a projective account of the brand as it attempts to colonize the future. It is arcadian in character, and represents a fantastic ideal (the consumption imaginary, such as the American Dream) to which the brand acts as a portal. It requires the strategist (with apologies both to Bob Dylan and Don King) to *prophesize*, to give consumers what they really want.<sup>61</sup> Whether it is called trend spotting, cool hunting, futurology, or scenario planning, it tasks the strategist to read shifts in values and levels in the aesthetic edge in an effort to anticipate the trajectory of the culture's worldview and ethos.<sup>62</sup>

The strategist must answer Microsoft's query, "Where do you want to go tomorrow?", today, and build the response into the brand. Can the brand speak to Bobos in a transformational future?<sup>63</sup> Can it reconcile the priorities of Boomers, Thirteeners, and Millennials, or must it assume a multiphrenic image to prosper?<sup>64</sup> Will the drivers of New Luxury founder on the shoals of mass affluence?<sup>65</sup> Shouldn't soul searching, cultural infidelity, bunkering, and

values vertigo affect the financial services industry as much as the tourism industry?<sup>66</sup> Might the twenty-first-century contest between crusaders and jihadis alter the roles of marketing and consumption in the evolution of cultural nationalism?<sup>67</sup> To what extent can all brands, regardless of industry, heed the directive to nurture nature?<sup>68</sup> Perhaps the most instructive example of arcadian meaning mapping on the contemporary marketing scene is the rise of retro branding, as exemplified by the success of such brands as the VW Beetle, the Star Wars franchise, Quisp cereal, Airstream trailers, Charlie cologne, and most recently, Sting Ray bicycles, in going back to the future.<sup>69</sup>

### Brand Iconography

*Brand iconography* is an immediate source of meaning, an instance of Kant's "thing in the thing." It is the affecting presence of the brand, as manifested in the totality of design dimensions that render the marketer's offering as it is.<sup>70</sup> It requires the strategist to *tangibilize*. That is, the experience of the brand must be made palpable for the consumer; the virtual must become actual.

A tangibilized brand has both a cognitive and visceral reality for the apprehender. Sensation helps reify the brand. Visualize Big Blue. Smell Chanel No. 5. Touch the grips of Oxo tools. Taste Altoids. Hear the sound of Intel inside. The more senses the brand engages, the more tangible its existence is to the customer. Visit any flagship brand store for comprehensive sensory engagement. A brand has numerous affordances, those points of mental and emotional acquisition. Artifactuality, name, tag line, logo, packaging, web site, corporate architecture, retail atmospherics, advertising, and communication media are just a few of these affordances.<sup>71</sup>

### Semiotic Choreography

*Semiotic choreography* is an intimate source of meaning, arising from and tailored to the experience of individuals in a segment. It requires the strategist to *customerize*. In order to suit the identity projects of segment members, the brand must resonate with authenticity, with the abiding rightness of its fit with a customer's lifestyle. It is customer relationship management (CRM) at the individual level, the soul of the database that touches the tails as well as the curve. It is the stickiness that facilitates projection and introjection, the mirroring that catalyzes the transformation of a brand to *my* brand. It is the reinforcing of the identity project at every touch point.<sup>72</sup>

This semiosis is successful when the consumer regards the brand and says "It's me"; the blue-collar integrity of Carhartt work garments, supported

with populist advertising; the upscale exoticism of J. Peterman fashion garments, supported with the ironic advertising copy that reads like a bodice ripper; the ingenious engineering of Victoria's Secret lingerie, supported with the erotic advertising imagery that enflames desire across genders; Amazon's prompting of other books you might like, based on current purchase profile; Starwood's retention of guest preferences for the customizing of repeat booking; loyalty programs. These examples each embody the effective tailoring of the brand to the individual. Sometimes semiotic redaction is the proper corrective to pursue, especially when the culture experiences seismic shifts in meaning domains. In the wake of popular animated films such as *Antz* and *A Bug's Life*, which effectively repositioned household pests as lovably personified quasi-pets, pest controllers Orkin found it necessary to reanimate insect intruders, endowing them with horrific and ferocious qualities, in order to overcome children's objections that their parents were engaged in cute-icide.

### Moral Geography

*Moral geography* is the primary communal source of meaning. It is the tribal dimension of authority. It requires the strategist to *evangelize*. That is, the meaning manager must harness the collaborative and consultative potential of brand co-creation and -production, to facilitate the emergence of proselytes among customers, and to abet the flourishing of brand communities and subcultures on the ground and in the ether.<sup>73</sup>

In narrative terms, this abetting can take two forms: the theft of fire and the gift of starter dough. The former entails a passive monitoring and recycling of meaning elements to the group, allowing it to maintain its populist autonomy and nonmarket ethos. The latter entails an active involvement with the group, an encouraging of the group to accept the firm as a partner, and engagement that borders on sponsorship. Illicit lurking in chatrooms, flying false flags on bulletin boards, and other unwelcome interaction from the firm can be viewed as, and occasionally results in, a hostile takeover by *the* brand of *our* brand, a co-optation of community by corporation that subverts the moral authority the brand desires to tap.

Mapping these meaning management directives against traditional templates of brand dynamics can provide very specific guidance for the strategist. For example, a thorough audit of the brand's composite meaning—its "\_\_\_\_\_ -ness" (e.g., Coke-ness, Chevy-ness, Sony-ness, etc.) quintessentially distilled—might begin with an analysis of the dimensions of equity, as suggested in Figure 3.1.<sup>74</sup> The Good Humor brand might prospect for narrative power along



**Figure 3.1**  
 “\_\_\_\_-ness” through Equity

<i>Audit Item \ Equity Dimension</i>	<i>Loyalty</i>	<i>Awareness</i>	<i>Perceived Quality</i>	<i>Associations</i>	<i>Proprietary Assets</i>
Cosmologize					
Historicize					
Contextualize					
Prophesize					
Tangibilize					
Customerize					
Evangelize					

the proprietary asset dimension, by focusing analysis and interpretation on its delivery trucks (a tack UPS might follow in a distinctly different direction):

Divinity  
 Horn of Plenty  
 Pandora's Box  
 Pied Piper  
 Ubiquity  
 Instant gratification  
 Iceberg  
 Oasis  
 Nostalgia  
 Retro  
 Holistic sensory engagement  
 Diversity  
 Neighborhood  
 Infantile regression  
 The good parent  
 Altered consciousness  
 Buzz  
 Children becoming market criers and pitchers

Each cell affords a distinctive way of imagining brand meaning.

A strategist might seek deep insight into the functional quality of a brand's

appeal, as suggested in Figure 3.2.<sup>75</sup> Asking the analytical question, “What is the brand supposed to do?” and expecting a pithy response, a meaning manager might probe the seduction dimension for its narrative power in underwiring the Victoria's Secret brand:

Paradox goddess  
 Angel  
 Succubus (or incubus)  
 Pygmalion  
 Happy hooker  
 Happy housewife  
 Mom  
 Models and modes  
 Foundation and façade  
 Engineering marvel  
 Prosthetic  
 Second skin  
 Mystery and fantasy  
 Chrysalis  
 Catalog as wishbook redux  
 Buzz

Commercials and webcasts spark discussion and debate. Some catalog models become celebrities, others are endowed by male readers with pet names and storylines.

**Figure 3.2**  
 “\_\_\_\_-ness” through Function

<i>Audit Item \ Functional Dimension</i>	<i>Information</i>	<i>Differentiation</i>	<i>Seduction</i>
Cosmologize			
Historicize			
Contextualize			
Prophesize			
Tangibilize			
Customerize			
Evangelize			

Designing an ideal brand might involve the strategist in a detailed exploration of the aesthetic dimension of meaning, as suggested in Figure 3.3.<sup>76</sup> Narrative power for a brand like Evian might be derived from artistic exploration of meaning:

Fundamentality  
 Aboriginality  
 Aqua vita  
 Purity  
 Oceanic merger  
 Mountains  
 Glaciers  
 Carved ice  
 Cerulean vastness  
 Homophonic with “avian,” hence associations with winged grandeur  
 Anagrammatic stigma: naïve  
 Luxury and indulgence  
 Conspicuous consumption  
 Milk baths and bathtub gin  
 Facial spritzers and personal fan-atomizers  
 Buzz from *affecté* to *de rigueur*

**Figure 3.3**  
 “\_\_\_\_\_ness” through Ideal Design

<i>Audit Item</i> \ <i>Design Dimension</i>	<i>Functions</i>	<i>Behaviors</i>	<i>Aesthetics</i>
Cosmologize			
Historicize			
Contextualize			
Prophesize			
Tangibilize			
Customerize			
Evangelize			

Bottles come in multiple sizes imprinted, incised, and engraved to convey all these meanings, surmounted with a pink cap, to recall our ultimate source of refreshment, replenishment, and indulgence: Mom.

Whatever template is chosen, brand meaning is most thoroughly explored by mapping the meaning practices systematically against the template’s meaning dimensions. Alternatively, a simple free listing of domain-specific meanings, accompanied by a kind of spreading activation charting of the association evoked (denotatively and connotatively) by the listing, will also prove enlightening, as will a subsequent cross-domain charting of overlaps and meaning migrations.

For example, the Levi’s brand is cosmologically anchored in an explorer archetype.<sup>77</sup> It encompasses entrepreneurial Americana, from the Gold Rush through the cultural revolution of the 1960s, to the nanotech cyborg millennium of smart fabrics. It comprises individuality, authenticity, and the quintessential extended self. It anticipates and reinforces disruptions such as the casual workplace, and it must creatively respond to ones such as the emerging *masstige* market. It shapes and reflects the human form with stylish fit and finish. It marries its models to personal narrative of great projective power, tapping cultural narratives of sexiness across the spectrum of gender (straight, gay, and androgynous). It is emblematic of youth subcultures, working class subcultures, and intelligentsia subcultures, investing the concept of a uniform with the paradoxically customized cast. The brand’s core values—empathy, originality, integrity, and courage—radiate from each meaning code and ramify throughout the constellation of meanings, in ways that suggest a multitude of management options.<sup>78</sup>

In summary, the practical outcome of an audit is a comprehensive inventory of meanings, clustered by category, that managers can use to guide the design, positioning, communication, and rejuvenation of the brand at any point in time. This guidance might be particular, as in a simple adjustment of nuance in a single category, or holistic, as in a thoroughgoing overhaul across all categories; it might be devoted to a single brand or an entire portfolio. Let me illustrate the audit outcome with one last example.

Coffee has perennially straddled the commodity–brand boundary, the tune of its dialectical dance called by imaginative marketers. Coffee is among the key symbols of contemporary consumer culture.<sup>79</sup> It is principal among our household gods, and the ritual substratum of much of our interpersonal interaction. The meanings available to manage any particular brand’s ownership of *coffee-ness* can be conveniently chunked.

Cosmologized, coffee is foundational and fundamental. It is *prima materia*. It is *sui generis*. It is *aqua vitae*. Historicized, coffee has ranged from a



sacramental aid to prayer, to a call for *communitas*, to a tonic stimulant fueling work, to a sedative hypnotic promoting relaxation and escape, to a personal indulgence on the order of reward and therapy. Contextualized, coffee is a site magnet and a beacon product, emplacing homeyness and domesticity, and sacralizing third places; it embodies sociality and bonding, even as it serves as a rite of passage in a consumer's individuation. Prophesized, coffee is the quintessential gift, to others and to oneself; it is a vessel of the donor's essence. Tangibilized, coffee is a politically correct psychotropic, awakening, engaging, and challenging all the senses, inviting a cult of connoisseurship to unpack and appreciate its complex character. Customerized, coffee is a Rorschach roast, the touchstone of identity whose intimate idiosyncrasies are rediscovered with each sip; it is the sensory stimulation driving the guilty pleasure of a "\$\*", or the quest for the "godshot." Evangelized, coffee is a global-local lightning rod of third-world emancipation/immiseration, of independent/franchised freehold; it is a primer of cabal, klatsch, and convocation.

Thus inventoried, coffee admits of many brands, distinctly positioned. Meaning clusters abound; sacramentality, sociality, sensuality; individuality, idiosyncrasy, indulgence; cost, class, connoisseurship; pace, place, politics; time, transformation, therapy. Any particular meaning may suit the brand's image and essence; any particular cluster may be invoked to locate and fix it in the brandscape. Recall one last time that meaning management is a dynamic process that must incorporate the creative input of consumers.

Failure to check the marketing imagination against consumer creativity can tarnish the brand. Toyota outraged an entire segment of consumers by presenting a putative homage ostensibly to their hip users, a gold miniature RAV 4 sport utility vehicle embedded in the front tooth of an anonymous African-American smile, as the knowing wink of a street-smart partner. Consumers objected strongly to the rap-ethos allusion as an exercise in stereotyping, rather than as an exercise in insider bonding. So also did American Girl in 2005 evoke the ire of Hispanic critics in Chicago, who resented the implications of a biographical detail of its latest doll, Marisol Luna. Marisol's home neighborhood of Pilsen, a Mexican-American enclave in Chicago, was characterized by her mother as a dangerous place for children to grow up; the family subsequently moved to the suburbs. A well-intentioned acknowledgment of demographic trends in the service of verisimilitude quickly and rightly becomes a flashpoint for identity politics in a plural society. Marketers must recognize that meaning is highly contextual, and that triangulation is essential to avoid alienating those consumers they long most ardently to woo.

## CONCLUSION

In twenty-first-century perspective, brands are an experiment in memetic engineering. They encode and engender the meanings that sustain our culture of consumption. To a very substantial degree, human behavior *is* marketplace behavior. Inevitably, Brands R Us, with all the social, political, and ethical complications such identification implies.

Brand stewards must become astute meaning managers, if their charges are to become the kinds of cultural building blocks that ensure not only mere profitability, but also the long-term adaptability of the species itself. Accommodating and resisting this management are the principal preoccupations of our postmodern era.

Let me return to the ritual and evolutionary orientations with which I began this chapter, to bring these themes full circle. A persuasive case has recently been made for the emergence of a new hallmark of humanity: *homo quaerens*, that is, people who seek, or search.<sup>80</sup> Wisdom, handiness, storytelling, and playfulness may ultimately be harnessed in the service of our intrinsic inclination to quest. While questing may assume many forms, the quest for meaning is preeminent among them. This particular quest is a journey that brands were bred to undertake. Brands shape and reflect our quest for meaning. They are often the lodestar and the destination in our nomadic walkabouts. Brands reinforce and challenge our foundational notions of the real. Brands fix and focus our search for meaning, as we parse our seeking across the institutions of culture.

The wellsprings of brand meaning are both finite and inexhaustible. These sources are readily identified and tapped. Harnessing them in the service of marketing strategy is the manager's challenge. By tapping the narrative and performative power inherent in these sources in a collaborative fashion with stakeholders, marketing managers can create and sustain truly meaningful brands.

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# **Kellogg on Branding**

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