

Designing Corporate Cultures and the next big wave - cultural branding as a local tool for a global market:

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Defining brand, brand identity and branding - tracing: the factors that lead to 'cultural' branding

This section is a very brief rapid fire attempt to place all these similar sounding terms in perspective:

(a) Branding is "the intentional use of specific words and images to represent intangible values associated with a product, service, or company"

And is carried with the intention of building a brand identity for a product/company.

("Branding beyond Borders" by Jessica Schneider Davis, IQ magazine, May/June 2002)

(b) Brand identity is a composite of brand names, logos, positioning, brand associations, and brand personality. A good *brand name* gives a good first impression and evokes positive associations with the brand.

A *logo*, of course, is an abstract image meant to signify the story or the values or just the mere function of the product (IBM written in horizontal striped lines in soft blue, and akin to the computer printout sheets until recently, immediately signifying the company's business as being related to computers).

A *positioning* statement tells, in one sentence, what business the company is in, what benefits it provides and why it is better than its competition (asking the question with an effective answer: "what business are you in?")

Brand personality reinforces brand identity by adding emotion, culture and myth to the brand's identity (e.g., the rabbit footsteps in Hutch, or Amitabh Bacchan as the rugged but wily boatman in Pepsi telling the urban sophisticate that the country-lad need not be taken for a ride and with equal élan as the sophisticate enjoys his Pepsi).

Brand associations are the attributes that customers think of when they hear or see the brand name (E.g., the reassuring 'hum hain na' in ICICI)

(c) At the root of all the above concepts lies the word 'brand'.

According to BrandSolutions Inc., (2003), **brand** is a proprietary image made up of four components, viz., *visual, rational, emotional and cultural*. When products/company manage to build a relationship with their audiences, i.e., customers around these variables, a brand emerges. And then, depending on the number of variables involved in building the relationship (from the visual, rational, emotional to the cultural), the branding could remain unidimensional, or it could become multifarious, as with the IBM after Paul Rand's eponymous logo in the sixties and its subsequent brand positioning as the "Big Blue" that heralded IBM's emergence as the undisputed leader of business machines in the seventies and the eighties.

Of these four variables, the ones studied with some detail and passion across the decades are the variables related to the 'visual' and 'rational' - the former, viz., 'visual' belongs to the domain of industrial design (and specifically to do with communications and product design); the latter, viz., 'rational', in the domain of management studies. Although '*rational*', as the word would suggest, ought to have had the most scientifically determined set of indicators, ironically it doesn't and is often left to pseudo-psychological studies that go under market research. The tools could be subjective and highly manipulative at the hands of both surveyor and the surveyed.

'*Visual*' on the other hand, although seemingly indeterminate and nebulous as a variable, has often been subject to the grind of physical tests such as ergonomic testing, color-testing, tests arising out of tried and tested perception-studies by scholars such as Rudolph Arnheim and Susan Langer, and has, in the process, emerged with a set of indicators that are assiduously used by designers who wish to be able to explain their designs in a logical fashion.

Things remained in this two-variable mode of the rational and the visual, until two major developments - one sudden and one evolutionary - had the effect of according legitimacy to the domain of the 'emotional'. First, to mention the sudden development: this had to do with the onset of the new economy in the late eighties-early nineties and technology making it possible to *federate industry-functions* across physically dispersed locations. At the core of it was IT and enterprise resource packages such as the ERP that made it possible to house company inventories at different plants and ERP softwares tracking their movements from location to location in a vastly compressed time mode. This kind of backward integration

and time compression saved the company enormous costs but tight delivery schedules also meant that employees had to be monitored closely.

This forced the organization towards a horizontal spread of control hierarchy and an inescapable democratization of authority if one had to trust employees in far-flung locations to deliver. This, in turn, called for more than a structural set of rules. It called for *emotional* leveraging to invoke the factors of trust and initiative in the employees.

Coinciding with the federation of authority in workplace was the second factor, viz., the silent but growing dominance of the number of *women at workplace* (even if the glass ceilings may have made them stay in positions far below their capability).

By the nineties, women at workplace as a productivity factor had amply demonstrated that women had great skills at negotiating through a myriad of seemingly irreconcilable differences and tangles amongst diverse groups at a workplace. Bringing their acute and subtle management skills from the domestic sphere into the workplace, women carried the potent tool of being able to recognize (rather than dismiss), the facilitating or debilitating *role that emotions played in problem-solving*. For male managers, on the other hand, emotions were for the birds and poets, never to be brought into the professional domain.

This dual phenomena of federation of industry functions and women at workplace veritably gave rise to the concept of *Emotional Quotient (EQ)* - and since recognized as a legitimate tool of management that could make or break a company.

Following the success of forging effective management relationships between employer and employee, companies now started asking a crucial question: could EQ be leveraged to establish a relationship not only between company management and its employee-functionaries, but also between the company and its customers?

An early example of a brand built on an emotional relationship with its user was the Coca Cola, which, in spite of losing out to Pepsi Cola in blind tests, continues to compel the audience to buy Coca Cola if only to be driven by the audiences' fond memories of their childhood, or for the more adventurous ones, their experience of buying something with its origins in the coca plant, considered an addictive substance and consumed by the early Mayans. A slightly better tasting cola, it would seem, could be less important than one's cherished memories and experiences. And that has got to do purely with emotions.

Coca Cola showed the way to emotional branding-based products, and was followed by products such Volkswagen's Beetle car and other such.

It needs to be said that 'emotions' as a variable for branding could be hard and elusive, requiring great creative skills and understanding of the psyche of the buyers as individuals rather than as a market segment. Additionally, as a relatively new tool on the block, it is yet to develop effective tests.

To continue into the last leg of the trajectory of these variables in the way they helped build links between products and customers, it has to be said that just when life seemed complicated enough and when no one thought that something as home bred as 'culture' could have any legitimacy in the marketplace except to sell cultural artifacts and cultural festivals, came the great shift in the markets - marked by a physical and economic movement from the evolved ones in the Western world to the emerging ones in the developing countries of China, India, Brasil, Indonesia and Malaysia in the late nineties and into the millennium.

Never quite anticipating such a phenomenal shift in power away from the West and hence never having to worry about what our part of the world ever felt, suddenly, the transnational companies were beset with the woeful need to have to root their products in specific *cultural* contexts if the burger had to sell to satisfaction in a local market that definitely had tastier tikkas.

Since the products of these transnationals had been designed in completely western studio environments, these (products) had not established any cultural relationship with their present audiences. Compounded no less by the fact that traditional societies in the emerging markets were insulated by their local environments with tastes and preferences honed into specific palettes across aeons of time, and inconceivable that the audience was going to oblige the companies by shifting these tastes to adapt to the alien products from the West.

But there was also a positive side to this constrained-filled situation. If, on the other hand, 'culture' could be leveraged as a positive link between product and audience, there was the great possibility of using an existing technology and processes to make products that could never have been conceived of as products in the first place in their original western environments. E.g. of such a product with a cultural

flavour would be the washing machine being used as a 'lassimaker' in Punjab.

It meant that given the same technology and process, there could be as many product variants as there were cultural contexts.

It needs to be mentioned here that there exists a close symbiotic relationship between the domains of the emotional and the cultural, and that one could flow out of the barrels of the other. And in some sense, a good example of cultural branding would also signify a closing of the loop between the four crucial links (visual, rational, emotional and cultural) required to build a relationship between product and customer to result in a brand. (E.g., for the lassimaker to emerge as a successful brand that looked less and less like a washing machine, it would require among others, substantial visual inputs in terms of semantic and ergonomic features. Otherwise it would be treated as a substitution, and not a meaningful product in its own right.



Cultural branding - the big branding paradigm ahead:

The closing of the loop across the four branding links/variables would then bring us squarely into the domain of cultural branding.

Cultural branding happens when the product's design is based on a philosophy that reflects a shared sense of difference from others, a shared sense of social rituals, a clear sense of moral responsibility tied into this philosophy and all this building up, in the process, a sense of a community among the users. When this is achieved, the brand transcends the product itself to become a *social icon*. In other words, successful social icons are those that exemplify the cultural connection between the brand and the cultural world (as opposed to the economic or the political).

The obvious examples internationally are, of course, the Apple Computer (originating in the early eighties), Snapple - the iconoclastic soft drink originating in Big apple New York City from the early nineties and Starbucks, the coffee chain (also from the early nineties) with its commitment to social issues such as cooperative farming and such. Within India, an early example of a social icon would be the Amul which carried strong visual, emotional and cultural links complete with its brand of Indian English to advertise its products and its origins in the cooperative movement and its role in

'Operation Flood' and the subsequent White revolution.

Intrinsic to cultural branding are five crucial elements: social context, experience, community, products and services, which at various points in time, strive to do the following, viz., create brand experiences, build community, sell to cultural occasions, not to individual consumers, learn the language of the consumer and understand shifting tastes in the consumer world.

But, beneath the above commonalities, cultural branding may be seen from two different perspectives, and a distinction that is important and quite conveniently for our understanding, representing the two opposing worlds of the emerging and the evolved markets respectively:

(i) The first perspective may be identified with products that have come out of being contextualized within a certain culture/society, and as already indicated, as being the direct outcome of the shift in consumer balance in favour of the emerging markets, thereby forcing upon companies from the West, the need to shape products according to the identities of the given cultures.

(ii) The second variant of cultural branding is inherent to the Western modern societies' need to build alongside its economic capital, a certain cultural capital yielded by the "softer" aspects of life such as nature, art, family, faith, community, and school (Pierre Bourdieu quoted by David Norton, *Design Management Journal*, winter, 2003).

As it happens, a great deal of this 'cultural capital' was eroded through the rabid consumerism of the eighties, leaving within these societies, especially in the USA, a deep yearning to regain a modicum of the eroded 'cultural capital' by shifting emphasis from objects to experiences. This shift in the American economy from producing objects to producing experiences was articulated quite substantively in 1999, almost for the first time, by Joseph Pine II and James Gilmore in their book '*The Experience Economy*'

Where this variant of cultural branding meets up with the cultural branding from the emerging market societies is in the need for the modern market societies to have to invest in factors such as community building, cooperation and acts of service, in order to produce truly meaningful experiences.

And common to any successful examples of cultural branding would be the need to apply the notion of '*social constructs*' which are ways to understand differing perceptions of constructs across cultures, and essentially "represent attributes that are not necessarily just

adjectives (such as durable, efficient) but *images and emotional attributes associated with the brand*" (Such as luxury, independence, fun, passion, ruggedness). Jennifer Aaker, Associate Professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business believes that specific social constructs would have to be indigenous to particular cultures and would necessarily affect the branding efforts at local levels, and that companies would "need to understand the traits of a culture in the indigenous language of that culture along with the stimuli embedded in these cultures." E.g., the way Spanish culture identifies with "passion" and the opposite being true of Japan and the USA where passion as an attribute is not indigenous to these cultures. Or, the way USA as a culture would identify with "ruggedness" defined as Western and tough, but would not go down well with East Asian cultures that discourage ruggedness as an accepted ideology.

It is companies that are able to identify constructs relevant across cultures that would find more success in communicating their brands globally (carmakers trying to understand the way the attribute of 'luxury' works ought to realize that while in the USA it signifies opulence, abundance and wealth, in Japan it would mean simplicity and elegance - which simply boils down to a matter of understanding the perception of the construct of luxury across different cultures).

(III) In conclusion - architectural bench markings as a definitive test of successful cultural branding:

Since this award is at the initiative of the architecture community and seeks to felicitate good architecture and design, as a tribute to this initiative I would like to subject my own references about good branding to certain architectural bench markings, as a sheer test of whether the above concepts of good branding are able to stand scrutiny.

In August this year (2004), Time magazine published a Special called 'Great Buildings of the World - The World's Most Influential, Inspiring and Astonishing Structures'. In its foreward, Kelly Knauer, the Special's editor refers to a 1917 poem where Wallace Stevens invites readers to consider "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." And uses this lead to devise her own 'Seven Ways of looking at a Building' based on criteria devised by her team. These seven ways would be, architecture

- (1) As witness to history
- (2) As objects of beauty
- (3) As exemplar of style
- (4) As artifact of technology

- (5) As emblem of a culture
- (6) As the work of an architect
- (7) As repository of social values

Encapsulated in the above criteria, and fortunately for us, are also the essential contours of successful cultural branding. But there are two of the above criteria that we have failed to see the worth of:

First, following the factor of the 'work of an architect' as function of a great building, we need to give in to the idea of looking at a product as a signature of the designer, who as an artist and as an individual, is eminently in a position to create meaningful visual, emotional and cultural links with the consumer by simply inspiring us to identify with his designs as signifiers. Why else would Air India's Maharaja be so loved by even those who haven't had an opportunity to fly? Or the Amul girl, whose digs at politicians are lapped up by all, including those who've given up eating Amul ghee, butter or chocolates because of their growing girth. Secondly, we completely endorse architecture's effort to salute its artifacts as witnesses to history. The truly great

brandings will emerge from products that have stood the test of time and have managed to build a legacy, for there can be no legacy without history. Unlike the traditional brand manager who typically commits himself to a less than two year product framework and then moves on to his next assignment. Success with cultural branding, on the other hand, would have to depend on a 'cultural marketer' who is able to commit to and live with a user group for a decade or more without the itch of anything more transient. The traditional weavers' village of Soalkuchi in Assam or Phulia in Bengal could easily show the way with to cultural with their respective staying powers.

And finally, as a tribute to the logo of the DCC Award, the asymmetrical pyramid, I would like to conclude with references to the awesome pyramid from the Mayan culture - the Pyramid of the Sorcerer at Uxmal in Mexico - using this example as a metaphor for the way history itself has shaped our perceptions of authority, and which indirectly, serves as an exemplar of the kind of branding one may expect in a given context.

Centuries ago, they say, the Maya walked up the steps of the pyramid to be killed by priests as an offering to the gods.

Centuries later, we have the spiral ramp of the revamped Berlin-based Reichstag's glass dome from where the common man, in a classic reversal of power and authority, can look down on the chamber below and witness the goings

on of the representatives of the people, with the full knowledge that it is he who controls the destiny of these representatives and not vice versa as in olden times.

Cultural branding seems also to be a classic example of the power of people pushing the cult of a brand. Unlike 'mind-share' branding where the manager's present-tense view of brands can blind him to lucrative cultural opportunities, or his paying attention to the majority of the brand's customer's can destroy the brand's values, cultural branding reflects the power of people, because according to Douglas Holt, professor of marketing at Oxford University, iconic brands are built by focusing on culture, not products. So, needless to say, if a brand manager neglected the vital signs from his people, the brand would have to face imminent collapse. Perhaps, in the years ahead, the DCC Award could become an exemplar of people's power inherent in truly good branding.