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Brand Kids

By Martin Lindstrom

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Branding is all about creating icons. And icons are all about public familiarity.

When an image becomes legible, part of the community's and the individual's visual literacy, it can communicate complex values in a radically abbreviated fashion, condensing the essence of a brand's message into an articulate, instantly comprehended image. Those white-toothed-smiling, perfectly-tanned, under-twenty-type boys and girls, for example, are recognisably part of (among others') Coca-Cola's iconography. They communicate energetic sociability, peer acceptance and inclusive activity: group-driven values that appeal to the desire for acceptance that motivate a major part of the market and that locate the brand within consumerism's "cool" hierarchy. Then there's that most masculine of icons, the Marlboro man, an image that pithily stands for freedom and virile self-determination. The roll call of such classic marketing icons, established decades ago, is a long one.

But a new generation of icons has appeared on the commercial scene. And their chief characteristic is that they appeal to increasingly younger audiences.

This new thrust started with New Kids on the Block (NKOTB). You might slightly recall them. The world's first "boy band" appeared suddenly, succeeded rapidly, then disappeared with equal speed. Its audience was not a general one of male and female consumers over eighteen. Its audience was clearly female and composed predominantly of much younger people: twelve years plus. Another boy band, Take That, followed quickly on the heels of NKOTB's success, but with two differences. Take That attracted an even younger audience and it enjoyed a longer life. You've got the picture. They're all coming to mind now, I bet. Boyzone, Westlife, 98dg, Westwood, Backstreet Boys and many more followed. And they all attracted younger and younger audiences. Really young girls were swept up in the brand-driven fan rush, parents succumbing to the trend and taking kids as young as five to their first concerts.

Years ago, marketing experts opined that Barbie would never appeal to an audience younger than ten. After all, such innocents were surely too immature and socially naive to perceive and become hooked

on the Barbie image, composed as it is of a plethora of social values (including acceptability, desirability, fashion-consciousness and popularity) that are powerfully abbreviated within and communicated by the icon. But Barbie broke through the notional age barrier and cut its audience's lower age limit to under seven.

So, back to branding. In an age in which the consumer has, through decades of advertising industry activity, developed a challengingly high level of commercial, visual and iconographic literacy, and in which, as a consequence, the most prosaic product's message has to be devised with excruciating sophistication in order to be heeded, it's no surprise that our youngsters have been quietly dragged along in the brainwashing wake. A two-year-old will not be insensible to the message of the ubiquitous and eloquent golden arches, even when they spy that icon from a fast-moving vehicle. The world-famous symbol, along with the reportedly second-most-famous-face-in-the-world (after Santa

Claus) speak volumes to the youngest of our number, and the message is McDonald's. Now more than ever, the children of the household dictate what products go into the shopping cart every week and what treats might befall them between shopping trips.

Yep. We're dealing with an up-and-coming generation of icon readers blessed, or cursed, with a level of commercial literacy like we've never seen before. These kindergarteners will demand even more sophisticated commercial communications than we've been familiar with to date. Without their help we'll find difficulty in developing commercial communications to meet their expectations, harness their attention and retain their loyalty.

And here's the thing. It's vital to remember the underlying value of a powerful icon: it can engender outstanding loyalty. This loyalty, if taken good care of, can thrive for decades and become the link between a product and its dramatically changing audience. Even though a band like Boyzone no longer exists, eBay, Yahoo! and other online auction sites still trade Boyzone merchandising. Strange? You only have to consider us grownups' relationships with ABBA, the Beatles or Elvis Presley to realise the obvious fact that the loyalty those figures earned from us during our tender years lives on in our senses of nostalgia, self-identity, force of habit ... all the corners of our memory and mentality that define our self-identities.

Let's not forget the lessons our own personal experiences have taught us. And here's my best advice on how to learn from them: keep a close eye on the kids. Play with them, observe them, notice their tolerances, values and motivations. Get in tune with them. You might just discover the secret behind, not only true icon development, but behind the development of loyalty-creating icons.

Creating An Unconscious Brand

By Rachelle Disbennett-Lee, MCC, MS

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Branding is a big topic in today's business world. Everywhere we look we can see examples of branding. Just think of companies like McDonald's, Coca Cola, and Toyota. These companies work hard to create and maintain their brand images. Branding is actually somewhat of a recent phenomena in business. It was started back with Proctor and Gamble when they decided to name one of their soaps Ivory. Naming the soap proved to be an excellent idea to the detriment of their other soap products. People stopped buying the generic soaps and began buying Ivory. Because of the success of Ivory, P&G realized the importance of branding and began a branding revolution. Moreover, branding is not just for companies; individuals have their own brands too.

You may not think of yourself as a brand, but you are. Most of us do not work at creating a specific brand like the big name products that we have all come to know and love. But, it doesn't matter. We are creating a brand everyday, consciously or unconsciously. Unfortunately, most of us are creating our brands unconsciously.

Everything we do, say, wear, every expression and even things we don't say and do create a brand. We cannot not communicate our brand because it is part of who we are. We might have a brand as a trustworthy person, or a good friend, or perhaps something not as positive such as someone who is always late. Our brand is communicated everyday by every action we take.

Stop creating an unconscious brand. Your brand is important because it says who you are and what you stand for. It communicates a great deal of information about you and can help or hurt you. Instead of being oblivious to the brand you are creating, begin taking charge of your brand. Your brand lets others know what you stand for, what they can expect from you and what kind of person you are. Make sure it communicates accurately.

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