

Brand mythology

We all respond to the power of storytelling – to myths and fables. This power, brought to life through the immediacy of packaging, can be harnessed to tell the story of brands and help people understand what the brand stands for, and stimulate them to become co-authors of the ongoing brand story

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Can a compelling story transform a random, worthless trinket into a valuable object? A project called Significant Objects was conceived by a New York journalist to explore this question. His team bought 100 worthless objects from garage sales, flea markets and thrift shops. An old wooden mallet, a Utah snow globe and a plastic banana were among the junk items. An individual creative writer was then paired with each object. He or she wrote a fictional story featuring the item. The desultory objects were then put up for sale on eBay. Instead of providing factual item descriptions, the fictional story was used in each case. Care was taken to avoid the impression that the story was a true one. The idea was to provide some narrative context, but not to deceive or hoax potential buyers.

The results were astonishing (see: <http://significantobjects.com/>). The 33c mallet sold for \$71. The Utah snow globe, which originally cost 99 cents, fetched \$59. And

that 25c plastic banana? It went for \$76. In all, \$128.74 worth of thrift-store junk was sold for \$3,612.51. What this part-literary, part-anthropological experiment illustrates is that by attributing significance to formerly insignificant objects, those objects become demonstrably

more valuable. It illustrates, moreover, that the effect of narrative on an object's subjective value can be measured objectively. There is value in meaning – financial as well as emotional. "The least of things with a meaning is worth more in life than the greatest of things without it," as Carl G. Jung once commented.

In a similar vein, it is not just products themselves that we value but also the story that goes with them. Yet haven't product brands been telling their stories through advertising for decades? It is true that, at certain times, some agencies have been masters of storytelling – as execution. What is new is storytelling as strategy. In other words, the role of storytelling has been elevated to one of defining the brand itself.

Like the parables and myths of old, the task of the story is to impart meaning – brand meaning.

A handful of brands anticipated this transition to storytelling as strategy. Among them is Jack Daniel's. The story of Jack Daniel and the company he founded became the brand's story. The narrative elements of time and place feature prominently, just as they do with other brands such as Evian or Patek Philippe. In the United States of the 1950s, Lynchburg, Tennessee, was something of a holdout. As the country settled



into postwar comfort and middle-class conformity, men's labour transitioned from agricultural to white-collar work. Meanwhile, a small rural distillery in a tiny Southern town clung stubbornly to its pre-industrial values and old-time artisanal processes. While major whiskey brands were modernising their production and marketing, Jack Daniel's championed a reactionary, independent, old-world frontier ethos, proudly and painstakingly distilling whiskey in time-honoured fashion. "56 men signed the Declaration of Independence. One man put it in a bottle," declares the current website. A visionary St. Louis ad agency brought this story to the country's attention; the story became the strategy, and Jack Daniel's went on to become one of the best-known brands in the world.

Advertising creates mythical characters, or mythologises the lives of real ones. Whether the myth is rooted in fact or partially in fiction is a moot point. Numerous brands blend storied fact and fictional verisimilitude in an imaginative fusion of make-believe and authenticity. The Marlboro cowboy is an example of a symbolic character created through advertising. It matters little that there are few real cowboys. Marlboro mythology draws on cowboy mythology in a highly selective, proprietary manner. The Marlboro cowboy is a mythical figure that dwells in a mythological world.

One of the most successful mythical characters of recent years has been The Most Interesting Man in The World (MIMW), no less – a suave, grey-bearded, sixty-something-year-old character created by ad agency Euro RSCG to promote Dos Equis beer in the US. The award-winning campaign made its debut in 2006, and produced impressive sales growth for the Mexican beer brand at a time when the import beer category was declining. By 2011, sales of Dos Equis had more than doubled to over 15 million cases.

In faux-grainy images, cobbled together like home movies, the TV spots depicted the MIMW leading mysterious expeditions and adventures: rescuing a fox from a hunt,

splashing down in a space capsule, freeing a grizzly bear from a trap while wearing a suit, and lying in a hospital bed stitching up a wound on his own shoulder while surgeons and nurses stand around, chuckling at his jokes. The voiceovers add humour and hyperbole: "He once went to a psychic – to warn her" or "He can speak French in Russian".

and pack design still fulfil an important functional role – one which should not be underestimated. Yet they also represent a powerful and persuasive tool for building deeper connections with people. The key to good pack design is to denote the brand's functional reason for being while simultaneously connoting the deeper brand

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The images are provided without context, chronology or explanation. The settings are never revealed, furthering the intrigue. As in a fable, the brand conveys a message through its narrative, encouraging its users to seek out interesting experiences and live life to the full, even biting off more than they can chew at times. "Stay thirsty, my friends," exhorts the MIMW at the end of each commercial. At time of writing, the venerable MIMW is being retired – via a one-way trip to Mars.

Yet advertising is not the only means of communicating a brand story. As more and more brand owners are realising, packaging is often a brand's most important medium. It's a storytelling medium. In fact, packaging is the perfect canvas for brand storytelling. Interestingly, a standout 2009 television campaign for the above-mentioned Jack Daniel's brand was advertising about the packaging – or rather, about the brand mythology behind, and within, the packaging. Called 'Label Story', the campaign paid tribute to the iconic pack design of the time. The films brought the label's ornate, calligraphic, etching-inspired imagery to life, as they took the viewer on a lyrical, cinematic journey to explore, through skilful animation, legendary Jack Daniel's folklore.

Packaging has evolved from protecting the product to selling the brand. Packaging

narrative. Designers have at their disposal a whole range of resources: by means of colour, typeface, visual metaphor, symbol, texture and materials (glass, tin, wood, paper, rubber), a mood and a feeling can be created, and a story told – or at least alluded to. And with pack copy, copywriters can complement or enhance the effect.

These physical features – visual signs, words, design elements – if they are unique to the brand and help differentiate it, form the brand iconography. They become 'iconic' components of the brand – think Toblerone, Tic Tac mints, Altoids, and POM Wonderful's uniquely shaped juice bottle. It is a key characteristic of iconic brands that they possess powerful sensory cues that make them instantly recognisable. Not that these iconographic design and packaging elements alone are enough to make a brand iconic – but without them, a brand will never become iconic.

Packaging, then, is both a medium and a touchpoint; and it is through their packaging that brands such as Bonne Maman tell their brand story. Bonne Maman means 'Granny' or 'Grandma' in French. The brand's preserves and jellies are made from natural, wholesome ingredients that might be found in Grandma's kitchen. According to the company website, the products are made

following the same traditional recipe that has been used since the brand's beginning. The classic wide-mouth glass jars, with their red-and-white gingham-patterned lid and simple white labels with handwritten script, feature prominently in the brand's advertising.

You're also quite likely to find Bonne Maman when enjoying room-service breakfast in hotels around the world: a highly experiential way to become (re)acquainted with the brand. Like all strong brands, Bonne Maman is an encapsulated myth, a metaphor with an archetypal story to tell. It is a brand story of homemade tradition and nostalgia. Moreover, consumers often partake in the story, literally. Bonne Maman's packaging is

towards the fiction end of the truth–untruth spectrum. Similarly, Absolut is stretching credibility when it declares “since 1879” on its bottles. The date refers to the high-temperature distillation method imported from France by Swedish merchant L. Ollson Smith, adopted by Absolut as a kind of founding father when it decided to lay claim to a fictional past. Absolut took inspiration from 19th century apothecary bottles for its unusual package. The brand was launched in 1979.

Launched just five years earlier, Baileys is the world's top-selling liqueur brand. Each bottle proudly displays the flowing handwritten signature of R.A. Bailey, underlined with a flourish, as if to remove

phase of ancient Greek civilisation, however, muthos was a true story recounting the origins of the world and human beings. When we refer to the ‘Biker Myth’, for example, we are describing a real, sociocultural and historical phenomenon – albeit one wrapped in and embellished by the trappings of mythology. In any case, to the mythic mind, the historical veracity of our collective store of lore and legends, tales and traditions is less important than their significance.

While packaging is an ideal storytelling medium, the pack alone can rarely tell the whole story. This raises two important considerations. First, how does the packaging relate to the story in its entirety; and, second, how is it connected to the other brand mediums and channels instrumental in the brand narrative? Ideally, packaging should represent the epitome of the story. For packaging possesses one unique characteristic of paramount importance: it provides tangible contact with the story. Moreover, it does so at point of purchase and at (often repeated) point of consumption. In practical terms, this means that brand owners need to involve their packaging partners (designers, manufacturers) at an early stage of product and marketing strategy development.

The formal word ‘confabulate’, meaning to talk together, to converse, has a revealing etymology. It derives from the Latin *con* (‘with’) and *fabulari* (‘to talk’ – from *fabula*, ‘story’). Storytelling is above all a social activity, and people are natural-born storytellers and self-narrators. That's why they are drawn to brand mythology. An engaging brand narrative, imaginatively brought to life through the immediacy of packaging, will help people understand what the brand stands for, and stimulate them to become co-authors of the ongoing brand story.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views or intentions of any company or advertiser mentioned here.

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A mysterious light blue gemstone adorns every bottle of Bombay Sapphire gin. The name of the product and the subsequent choice of colour for the glass bottle were inspired by the 182-carat gemstone called the Bombay Sapphire, or Star of Bombay. The stone was discovered in Sri Lanka and given to Mary Pickford, the silent movie star, by her then-husband Douglas Fairbanks. Also depicted on the bottle is Queen Victoria, Empress of India. These features lend a sense of intrigue and legend to the brand. Yet the brand has no links with the famous jewel, nor with Victoria, beyond the borrowed allusions. Its only connection with India is that gin was popular with British colonials there during the time of the Raj.

In fact, Bombay Sapphire is an example of what might be called a myth of authenticity. In this case the meaning of ‘myth’ resides more

any doubts as to the signer's existence. There was no R.A. Bailey behind Baileys.

Yet none of this has detracted from these brands, nor had the slightest effect on their success in the market. Again, besides their taste and use of design and advertising, there is the imaginative blending of fact, authenticity and fantasy that feeds our thirst for mythology. For deep down, we are myth-making creatures. “I therefore claim to show,” wrote structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, “not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact.” Myth connects with the deeper parts of our shared consciousness within our humanity. Alas, in our hyper-rational society, we have largely lost touch with the mythical underpinning of our culture.

The term ‘myth’ is an interesting one. Today, a myth is considered something to be ‘debunked’; a widespread and popular belief that is nonetheless false. In the archaic