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THE LONG
AND SHORT OF
Brand
Personality

At a recent speaking event, I heard a craft
brewer whom I greatly respect say,

**“THE BIG BREWERS ARE
SELLING A LIFESTYLE.
CRAFT BREWERS ARE
SELLING BEER.”**

BY MIKE KALLENBERGER

In the audience, I bristled just a little, even though the comment was a variation on a theme that's been repeated many times over the years. Sure, I understood the point, and I didn't disagree with it per se. But I think there is also a fundamental misunderstanding underlying this premise—a misperception about the nature of television advertising (and the lifestyle it supposedly sells) that's shared not only by many in the craft brewing community, but by more than a few marketers for the big brewers as well, and even society at large.

The most successful brewers, small or large, aren't just selling beer. They're selling an experience—a mood or feeling. Of course there's no substitute for quality beer. But great brand marketing—whether Super Bowl advertising, intriguing label graphics, or anything on the vast scale in between—reminds people of the feeling they're looking for when they drink beer, and eventually creates an ongoing association of that feeling with the brand. And the most compelling way to communicate that feeling (along with the brewer's other values) is through a metaphor: a brand personality that provides a window into a brand narrative.

In this sense, successful craft beer marketers may have more in common with the big brewers than they realize.¹ My belief is that this is a significant reason craft beer has been growing at the expense of mainstream beer—not only are the beers themselves more compelling, but the brand personalities are more compelling.



SIGN OF THE TIMES

Some of most successful beer advertising in recent decades was created for Bud Light in the 1990s. In 1993 their “Make it a Bud Light” campaign took a whole new direction, and rose to a new level of success, launched by a memorable spot now enshrined in the Advertising Hall of Fame, called “Limo”:

At an airport a young, ordinary looking guy gets off a plane and trudges into the baggage claim area, where a bunch of limo drivers are standing and waiting, holding those hand-written signs with their unknown customers’ names on them. Our tired protagonist, who wears a loosened tie but certainly doesn’t look in any way like executive

material, brightens when he sees a particularly bored looking driver whose signs reads “Galazkiewicz.”

“Driver, do you have any Bud Light in your vehicle?”

“Yes.”

“Then I am Mr. Gally-WE-kitch.”

Smiling, skeptical, but somehow already resigned to being taken, the driver says “You mean Dr. Ga-LACK-a-witz?”

With a burst of engagingly childlike bravado, our protagonist smiles and delivers a pitch-perfect line: “Ye-es I am.”

We then cut to our phony “Dr. Galazkiewicz” in the back seat of the limo, a Bud Light in one hand, where he’s obviously having great

“Cultural branding efforts, even the most successful ones, have not been guided by formal strategic initiatives...”

Douglas B. Holt, *How Brands Become Icons*

fun with his successful con. (Watch the spot by searching for “Bud Light Limo” on YouTube.)

This campaign was rooted in a personality archetype we can call “The Scammer.” The protagonist almost always broke the rules in one way or another to get a Bud Light. It was often very funny, but it was the Scammer personality itself that endeared the brand to so many drinkers. Our research at the time found that The Scammer had a lot of appeal to younger guys who didn’t feel particularly empowered in their own lives, and as a result enjoyed feeling as though they were tweaking authority in some small way when they were out drinking beer with their friends.²

The Scammer personality archetype persisted in Bud Light advertising until around 2007, when the campaign started to lose effectiveness. Social and cultural changes had led to the emergence of a new generation of beer drinkers—the Millennials—who simply found it less relevant to their own motivations.

A NARRATIVE APPROACH

Contrast this with the launch of an iconic craft brand like Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. In 1980, Sierra Nevada couldn’t have dreamt of advertising on television even if they’d wanted to. Word-of-mouth about a great new beer was the primary means of exposing the brand to new drinkers. But Sierra Nevada also had a clear, consistent brand personality, conveyed through its evocative graphics (and later through its website and other marketing as well). The Pale Ale label portrayed, as it still does, the lofty peaks of the Sierra Nevada range itself, rising above a stream flanked by evergreens and leafy trees, stepping stones scattered between its banks. The ornate curlicues of the label banner suggest tradition, and the hop cones flanking the “window” into the scene offer beer characteristic cues.

Mountains can be portrayed in different ways to evoke different narratives and different personality archetypes. Sierra Nevada Pale Ale’s graphics could have been designed to steer the personality toward the rugged

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risk-taking of the mountain climber or the fanatical independence of the mountain-man loner. Instead, the more serene image they chose arguably portrays a more thoughtful, even reflective personality—an Explorer archetype, one that appeals to someone who prefers that his or her beer-drinking times help to gain a little perspective on life and the world around.

The basic principles of brand building employed by Bud Light and Sierra Nevada, so this argument goes, were not all that different. The difference lay in how far and wide the brand personality was communicated—one was exposed to tens of millions of television viewers, while the other made a more intimate impression in the form of the bottle held in your hand.

But what makes it a challenge for those who wish to replicate this narrative-led approach is that, far from being based on a clear strategic plan, history shows that many strong brand personalities were created largely by intuition, if not by outright accident.

INTUITIVE COMMUNICATION

In his book *How Brands Become Icons*, Douglas B. Holt discusses what he calls cultural branding strategies, a concept with some similarities to brand personality and brand narrative. His work concludes that “Cultural branding efforts, even the most successful ones, have not been guided by formal strategic initiatives... Cultural branding strategies have lurked primarily in the gut feel of ad-agency creatives and other commercial artists hired by brand managers...”

This is consistent with my own experience when I was in the Insights department at Miller Brewing Company. Successful campaigns, more often than not, often found their success through unintended means, which we were only able to reverse-engineer after the fact by doing in-depth interviews designed to learn about the motivations of the brand’s drinkers.

No better illustration could be found than “Make it a Bud Light.” Several years after the launch of that campaign, the two creatives

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who'd been behind much of its success had moved on to a new agency, and I had an opportunity to work with them. I shared what we'd learned about the kinds of people who were drawn to the campaign and the role of the Scammer personality.

It was news to them and, I got the sense, not very interesting. They told me the only objective they'd ever been given was to make really funny ads. I asked them if they'd ever rejected an idea for an ad because it didn't feel right for Bud Light. Their instant response: "Sure." I asked what criteria they had used. With the politely patient effort required when talking to someone who's clearly having trouble following the conversation, they replied, "We said 'This doesn't feel like a Bud Light ad.'"

That is unconscious, intuitive understanding of a brand personality. But just because it's unconscious doesn't mean it isn't smart. It's the very intuitive nature of that communication, I would argue, that helps makes a brand personality powerful, and—perhaps more important—consistent across all of a brand's communication.

STRATEGIC BRANDING

But does this really mean there is no "process" a brewer can follow in order to define a strategic brand personality?

The classic Miller Lite "All-Stars" cam-

paign ("Tastes Great!" "Less Filling!") portrayed sports heroes who were comfortable enough with themselves to reveal their "Regular Guy" sides, evoking a spirit of male bonding and camaraderie. Later, Corona rose to import category leadership by presenting a "Beach Vacation" narrative, with commercials devoid of sound except for pounding surf and the cries of wheeling gulls, making viewers feel almost as relaxed as the beer drinking occasions they craved. Still later, "The Most Interesting Man in the World" associated Dos Equis with the persona of a great storyteller (who also happened to be an infinitely resourceful superhero), appealing to beer drinkers who wanted to feel... well, a little more interesting.

The new wave of craft brewers that emerged in the 1990s often had big, bold personalities communicated through label graphics, website imagery and tonality, and other means: New Belgium's Fat Tire is a playful "Innocent," and of course passionate about the environment; Arrogant Bastard offers the brash independence of a "Rebel," if not a villainous persona; and Dogfish Head, while multi-faceted, always seems to revert to "Creative Exploration" as its key narrative theme. (These are my own judgmental assessments, as is the assessment of Sierra Nevada;

they're not based on any drinker research, and they haven't been endorsed by the respective brewers.) Like the mainstream and import brands cited previously, each of these resonates with a different kind of beer experience, a different kind of beer feeling.

All of these brand personalities undoubtedly had their roots in the insight and intuition of those who created them, and certainly aren't "accidents" per se. Yet brand building, to resort to a cliché, is both art and science, both strategy and luck. But by following a few simple rules—be true to your brand values, be aware of the subtext underlying your communication, be clear and disciplined about what motivates your target drinkers and what kind of beer drinking experience you wish to be associated with—you can put your beer in a far better position to become a brand, in the deepest, most meaningful, most resonant sense of the word.

None of this should be construed to mean that quality beer isn't the foundation of a successful brewery. But in a marketplace offering ever-expanding choices among many great beers, the biggest winners will be those that communicate their reason-for-being through the metaphor of a brand personality or brand narrative that's differentiated, relentlessly consistent, and evocative of a relevant beer drinking mood for their target drinkers. This is the strategic "glue" that makes a brand's communication a whole, and more than just a collection of parts.

Mike Kallenberger is president of Tropos Brand Consulting, which he founded in 2010. Prior to that he spent over three decades at Miller Brewing Company and MillerCoors, where he studied brand strategies, beer drinkers, and consumer trends. ■

FOOTNOTES

1. To be fair, one reason this isn't more apparent is that the big brewers themselves seem to have lost sight of this, often opting for high-entertainment, high-breakthrough ads that fail to deliver a relevant personality. A typical Super Bowl commercial could easily be Exhibit A in this argument.
2. Of course, these statements are intended to describe general tendencies; all Bud Light drinkers aren't the same, nor is every Bud Light drinking occasion the result of an authority-tweaking mood. But it can be striking how often similar themes emerge from interviews with a given brand's drinkers, and how different these are from the themes associated with another brand's drinkers.

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