

CHAPTER 9

MANAGING BRAND CULTURE: MAKING CULTURE A STRATEGIC DRIVER

Optimizing brands' operational management requires the development of brands' cultural potential and the mobilization of their cultural force using organization and certain instruments.

Managing a cultural strategy poses operational challenges:

- Identifying and compiling the elements that make up brand culture;
- Selecting the right tools to assess and accompany brands' cultural potential;
- Determining the orchestration and management of brand culture.

Creative research to avoid brand bureaucracy

The lack of innovation in many companies is due to the excessive use of management called *brand bureaucracy*. The brand bureaucracy trap was first finger-pointed by authors Douglas Holt and Douglas Cameron, based on the foundational analyses by Max Weber on cultural bureaucracy. It consists of the following:

- Using tools to simplify, quantify and diagram reality to make it more easily understood (statistics, abstract concepts, standardized procedures);
- Adopting a top-down management style, leaving no room for emotion or personal initiatives.

The rise of *brand bureaucracy* can be explained by the increase of science in marketing, even the construction of marketing as a pseudo-science. The authors call this parody of science *sciency marketing*, taking inspiration from American comedian Stephen Colbert, who coined the term *truthy*, satirizing G. W. Bush's decision to send troops to Irak (based on his "gut instinct without regard to evidence, intellectual examination or fact..."). Due to the legacy of the Taylorism of the 1920s, followed by the mind-conditioning methods during WWII, science in marketing exploded in the Sixties. Sciency abuses in marketing can lead to a limited brand approach by « *bureaucrats* », whose only aim is the standardization of minds and products, easy to compare and analyze, void of any uniqueness or attachment appeal.

EXPERT VIEWPOINT

The errors of *brand bureaucracy*, according to Douglas Holt and Douglas Cameron

Though the bureaucratic system may be successful in managing a company like a well-oiled machine (FedEx, Toyota, Wal-Mart, etc.), when applied to marketing, the effects can be devastating, producing a tunnel vision on the marketplace, business and products. *Brand bureaucracy* does encourage the analysis of market trends superficially, as if consumers lived in the eternal present. However, it does not attempt to identify the underlying reasons behind change, nor cultural impacts or potential opportunities.

« *Brand bureaucrats* » farm out cultural and sociological research to consulting firms or market research institutes who decoct and simplify results. This leaves them to concentrate on their two main missions:

- Defining a concept, based on *mindshare marketing*, where a product's success lies in its ability to colonize consumers' cognitive functions (perception, memory...).
- Finding the perfect formula, through testing the product or concept using pseudo-scientific methods.

Table 9.1 : Bureaucratic vs. Entrepreneurial Marketing

	Bureaucratic Marketing	Entrepreneurial Marketing
Mode of organization	Top-down structure Skills specialization Subcontracting cultural research & studies (consultancy / studies)	Network structure Multi-skills Internal cultural research (<i>cultural studio</i>)
Design stage & creativity management (research, concept, test, design)	Linear and systematic approach (production/assembly line) 1) Superficial market analysis (main trends only at a given time T) 2) Concentration on the definition and testing of abstract concepts 3) Creative design agencies' intervention towards end of project	Modular and integral approach (joint-team efforts, each project being different) 1) In-depth market analysis (causes behind societal developments, their cultural impact and opportunities arising) 2) Identification of cultural innovations, based on market analysis 3) Mobilization of creative-design agencies at project inception
Consumer Vision	Mobilization of consumers' cognitive functions (memory, perception) « <i>Emotioneering</i> »: appealing to consumer's emotions	Mobilization of consumers, delved in a common culture

Despite it all, brands are first and foremost cultural expressions. Therefore, though the marketing process arrives at a simplistic concept « *bureaucrats* » must re-inject cultural content into the last phase of creation, or *mix marketing*, design, packaging, communication... And since it was not considered in prior stages, this cultural injection is *a posteriori* and therefore systematic and artificial:

- Systematic because innovation in *brand bureaucracies* is organized like a production line, where research, concept, design, etc. are compartmentalized and linear. The concept gives rise to a set of rules the bureaucrat refers to for determining the relevance (or lack thereof) of any subsequent creative ideas;
- Artificial since the search for creative ideas (identical to prior cultural research) is entrusted to outside service providers. And though ad agencies may have proven talent and panache in this area, they are no substitute for true and deep strategic reflection on and by brands. Mobilizing agencies at project's inception would enable businesses to be properly supported in their cultural research and the identification of more relevant creative possibilities.

Sociologist Max Weber called *brand bureaucracy* a « *steel cage* » many companies lock themselves into, making them incapable of any true cultural innovation requiring a refined understanding of society and culture. It is critical to develop methods taking into account a brand's symbolic, cultural, relational and experience-related value, as well as reputation. It is necessary to decipher the stories, history, images and associations immediately connecting a brand with popular culture. A brand's tangible and intangible components must be analyzed to determine the best media and supports for culture. And unexploited cultural universes are potential growth drivers or innovation opportunities.

American ethnologist Paul Willis explains how research tools are naturally creative in response to people's creativity. The expression « *life as art* » reflects his vision on people's deeply imaginative behavior in life and in consumption.

EXPERT VIEWPOINT

Creative consumption and cultural ethnology, according to Paul Willis

For Paul Willis, author of *Moving Culture*, culture is omnipresent, and it constantly defines us. People do not only strive to survive economically and materially. They want to give meaning and a symbolic dimension to their existence. « *Creative consumption* » brings into play personal, cultural, social and gender identity, and

must be analyzed as a cultural performance.

In his book *The Ethnographic Imagination*, Paul Willis presents an eponymous method giving legitimacy and scientific ground to cultural ethnology, offering a multi-disciplinary approach where all the senses are stimulated.

He considers that the opposition between the rational and imaginary does not exist for ethnologists. He would analyze society in all that is tangible as well as its symbolic dimensions. Societal phenomena is not only the result of rational and calculated acts, but the fruit of collective imaginations and ambient symbolism. In this way, a salary is more than a sum of money, it has essential symbolic value: the promise of owning one's own home, signs of belonging to a group, etc. Losing one's job can be equated with losing one's identity.

Accepting the relativity of social sciences

According to Willis, to produce something truly new requires amazement. There is no point in striving to be faithful to a single school of thinking, but one must be willing to accept learnings from field experience, even if they are in opposition to our former beliefs. Theory is the result of research and not the starting point. This is an essential aspect, not to let one be dictated what is to be seen by the method, but to be open to receiving new learnings from the field. Ethnology « *includes a portion of surprise, as it respects the ability for action and creativity* ».

Also the author notes that questions in the field constantly change. Consequently answers must change as well. Ethnographic theory is not static but dynamic, and the definitions relied on constantly change as well.

The brand culture audit: rethinking brand studies

Beyond consumer surveys, focus groups or in-depth brand analyses, brands conduct « cultural research », « cultural explorations » of their concepts, products or projects to evaluate their cultural relevance in a given market. This dual concept consists of the following:

- Assisting brands in detecting potential content resources enabling them to best express their brand culture;
- Identifying points of cultural resonance between brands and people in the marketplace (to provide the right elements of brand performance for the best fit with brand culture).

This « cultural research » is a cross analysis between the following:

- Brand identity elements (logo, name, signature, visual code, story, history, etc.), brand history and its body of communication;
- The brand's cultural environment, enabling brands to develop a rich and dense universe, capitalizing on its cultural heritage.

It is based on the following:

- Internal analysis of brand history as seen by those who experience the brand and evaluation of teams' potential buy-in;
- Cultural analysis of all communication media, central concept of brand's foundation, as well as the history of brand's cultural expressions in its competitive context;
- In-depth document research based on the brand's heritage and reference cultural universe (reading reference works, history, art history, product history, etc.)

The challenge of cultural exploration is always to move beyond brand discourse and its signs. Signs are to culture what surface is to depth – only the visible portion of the iceberg. This explains why semiological analysis (brand-issued signs and their coherence/pertinence) is not enough to observe the density of a culture and its authenticity beyond discourse. As stated earlier, in an economy dominated by a quest for meaning, cultural signs are not enough. It is not enough for a sports brand to display signs of an athletic culture, the brand must prove the reality of this culture in the brand's existence. Brands must prove their cultural reality in a myriad of ways. Any and all false or fraudulent claims by brands faking culture would be an unforgivable mistake, equal to product flaws or manufacturing defects.

QualiQuanti Market Research Institute accompanied the Citadium brand in the field during its cultural development. Citadium had intuitively developed a powerful and coherent brand universe. The brand culture audit exposed the functioning and the mapping of Citadium's cultural universe. It also identified a few minor points of dissonance and allowed for the modeling of several cultural innovation drivers for the brand. This undertaking also afforded greater internal understanding and buy-in of brand culture for the teams.

AND NOW FOR A LITTLE OF THEORY

The brand culture audit action plan

A brand culture audit does not simply apply a traditional analysis to a brand's signs as they are emitted without taking into consideration the cultural context in which it exists and develops (this would be mutilating the brand's true existence). A brand culture audit is an extensive examination which correlatively studies *ad hoc* cultural fields of reference, deducing the clusters (connections, points of overlap) produced with the brand, both past and present. These clusters represent potential avenues and threads in developing a cultural strategy that is brand-specific, coherent and authentic.

1. Auditing brand's manifestations

The first stage of a brand culture audit consists of studying a brand's diverse, multi-dimensional manifestations, including texts and images, objects, people, gestures, stories, atmospheres, techniques and technology, shapes, sounds, noises, colors, etc. This can be done by applying semiology, or studying a universe of ontologically heterogeneous signs.

2. Identifying ad hoc cultural fields of reference

In addition to studying the brand's own manifestations, to properly situate a brand within its environment, one must identify the fields whence it draws or potentially draws its cultural references. Far from random, this analysis must focus on elements that are relevant to the brand. In addition to those specific to a brand, analysis of the brand's competition can help in determining philosophical conceptions and iconographical traditions of a sector or industry.

3. Exploration of these specific, plural territories, as a part of history

In essence, a brand is a part of history. A brand is defined by its past as it simultaneously projects into the future. To understand and enrich a brand's cultural universe over the long term, one must retrace its cultural chronology, including all contributions to brand identity at every moment in its history and in every ambient context.

4. Identifying clusters for brand optimization

Once brand manifestations have been audited and the cultural fields of reference established, one must go back and forth between these poles, exposing the connections and high-potential overlaps to be extrapolated to the contemporary context.

5. Developing a cultural strategy

These clusters and territories of potential projection are the result of the historical study of the brand's unique signs put into context. These findings provide the guidelines to develop an authentic, brand-specific cultural strategy.

Cultural Research laboratories

Brands provide a powerful force for the exploration, spawning and discovery of new pathways (themes, talents, practices). Brands are cultural leaders because they provoke and push beyond, and do not simply produce stereotypical content. Brands are in osmosis with what goes on around them, and must be on the leading edge of creativity, design and research. Brands must be able to identify and pursue buoyant/promising currents.

One solution consists in using a business-line based cultural research laboratory. HSBC compiles statistics on the lives of expatriates. Audi organized a conference called Urban Future and inviting attendees to think about the role of cars in the future. Coca-Cola launched the Happiness Barometer Survey. Axa organizes the Global Forum for Longevity through its foundation. Cetelem looks at Europeans' behaviors and choices through the Consumer Buying Observatory. Sodexo created the Fondation Sodexo on quality of life. Aufeminin.com has become the expert in marketing for women through their laboratory Womenology. These exploratory and experimental initiatives illustrate how brands can act as cultural agents.

Douglas Holt, quoted above, stresses the fact that brand cultures are shared and formed collectively. To become iconic, brands must be ahead of avant-garde trends. He suggests a six-step method to develop effective brand culture.

EXPERT VIEWPOINR

Douglas Holt's six-step framework for building a cultural strategy

1. Map the category's cultural orthodoxy

One must first study the cultural context or cultural orthodoxy that innovation must break through. Generally this is the competitor's dominant cultural expression (ideologies, myths and cultural codes).

2. Identify social disruption

Societal changes can occur at any time which disturb consumers' identification with conventional cultural categories. Whether provoked by technology, economy, the media or anything else, these changes will push consumers to thirst for a new ideology.

3. Unearth the ideological opportunity

The extent of the disruption on consumers must be evaluated, as well as the direction of desires for new cultural expressions. Towards which a new or emerging ideology will they now gravitate?

4. Cull appropriate source material

A cultural innovation is never *ex nihilo*: cultural expressions generally come from sub-cultures, social movements or even brand content. Source material will be used to seize an ideological opportunity.

5. Apply cultural tactics

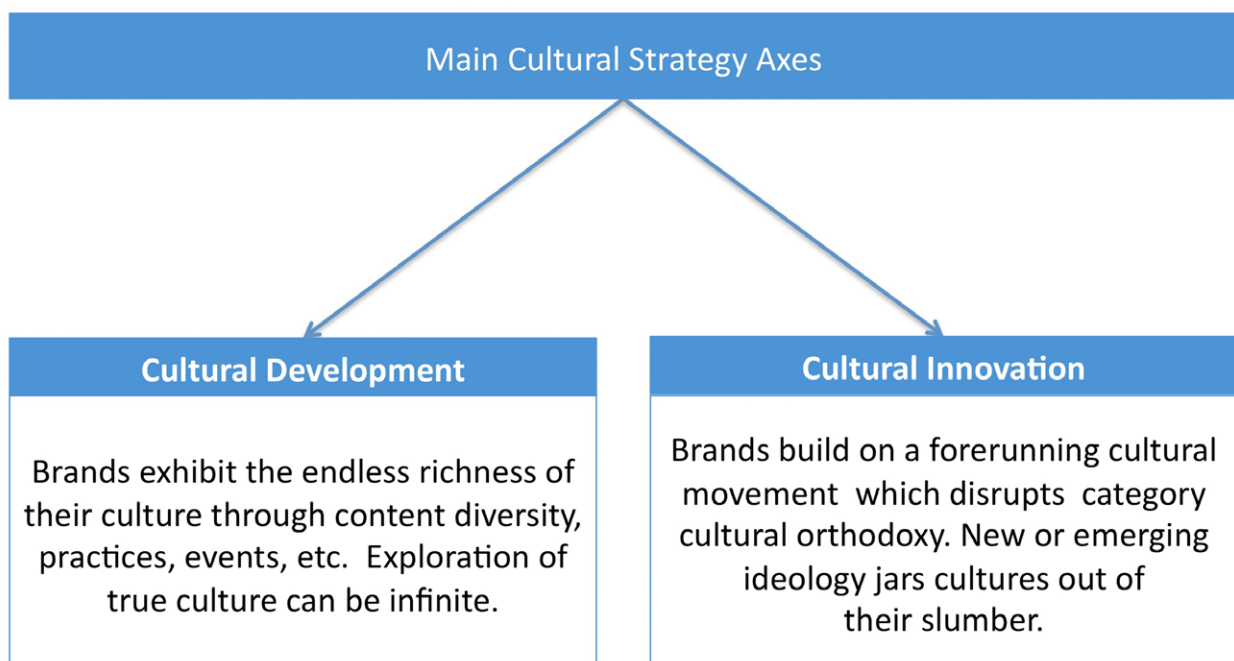
Many techniques can provide tactical improvements to cultural strategies. For instance, ideological debates can be spurred, brands mythologized, or dormant mythologies revived.

6. Craft cultural strategy

Cultural strategy requires the identification of a specific opportunity at a particularly opportune time, in a particular social context, and seizing the opportunity by a particular cultural expression.

A winning innovation and development strategy enables brands to be at the fore of avant-garde cultural developments. It must be pointed out that cultural orthodoxy is not necessarily a bad thing in the cultural field: a strong culture will not fade just because it is shared. On the contrary, cultures can be maintained and renewed by growing ever deeper. Along with strategies of cultural disruption, deepening or extending a culture is also a viable strategy.

Figure 9.2: Choosing a cultural strategy



Brand culture orchestration and management

Managing a cultural strategy requires organization. Various experts recommend the appointment of *chief culture officers* or *chief meaning officers* to culturally manage businesses.

EXPERT VIEWPOINT

A new profession to include culture in businesses, according to Grant McCracken

Culture is an ocean of opportunities for brands. The stakes are so high, that anthropologist Grant McCracken contends in his new book that a new position must be devised, i.e.: a *chief culture officer*. The CCO's role would be to keep a watchful eye on the outside world to help a business anticipate, adapt and communicate right.

According to McCracken, Levi's lost \$1 billion by ignoring the hip-hop movement (marginal cum mass culture) and neglecting to redesign their jeans. Facebook drew criticism by claiming to have 7 billion photos... Examples are endless where many businesses misread «culture» only to regret it afterwards. The term «culture» is to be considered in its broadest sense as the ensemble of ideas, emotions and activities which make up consumers' lives.

A new stakeholder is necessary to understand culture: a *chief culture officer* (CCO). The CCO's function is to understand culture in all its facets and to support the CMO (*chief marketing officer*) in an area which requires full-time consideration. He must detect all emerging innovations and new creative practices and consumer buying.

Grant McCracken distinguishes the following:

- fast culture: trends and fads which constantly change and require us to change as well;
- slow culture: the culture we are so steeped in that we don't even see it any more.

McCracken considers that both must be considered by the CCO. One must understand culture that is established over the long term and resist the passion for novelty that governs today's marketing field.

These days culture spreads everywhere. Anyone can shoot films with very few constraints. There is no single electronic or rock music culture, but dozens. Cultures grow in number, separate and refine. «*The CCO's job is to find a path in the chaos*».

How can a CCO observe?

The CCO must take interest in what we undoubtedly know, what we don't know and what seems strange to us. He tackles murky areas where knowledge is lacking, interacting with people in the know and asking the right questions.

He must also observe publishers, the press, television, Facebook status and popular culture, leaving nothing to chance. Connections between observations must be made. And even the insignificant must be questioned. The CCO must be empathetic and able to feel what the observed people are feeling.

Mc Cracken believes one becomes a CCO by truly « *experiencing* » something which allows us to understand a brand's mechanisms. This is precisely the example of de Philip Knight, who was a runner and knew what athletes wanted and the meaning of « *a runner's culture* ». As a result, he launched Nike, and the rest is history.

The CCO does not use « *intuitions* » or an aura which help him « *sense* » things. He uses objective evidence that others do not see, but could see if they worked towards observing attentively. This is how he/she is able to reach the broadest audience.

This rationale must be applied to all brands without iconic designers, by placing a designer alongside the manager, and a cultural advisor in top management to *drive* the brand and define the brand's role as a cultural leader.

Burberry's creative director, Christopher Bailey embodies the global approach to culture. In Jérôme Bonnet's portrait of him in French daily *Libération* on December 8, 2011, it was clear how central culture is to his profession as illustrated below:

- As *creative director* in charge of brand, he is responsible for « *the design of all collections and products, as well as communication, corporate artistic direction, architectural design, multimedia content and brand image in its entirety* ».
- He views his work by developing a universe around products: « *Today, a brand is no longer simply a product. Context is critical, including the purchase experience as well as the experience wearing products. You can have the most beautiful coat in the world, but if it doesn't reflect any sign to you, it is meaningless* ».
- He is required to practice certain disciplines: « *Everything I love in life: music, fashion, design and architecture are the topics I'm working on at Burberry's. I have been so lucky in my career.* »

As suggested in the article culture is a « global field », which is not divided. Culture is a whole unit. By calling Christopher Bailey a « *global field guru* », the journalist clearly identifies the specificity of culture and its implications for business organizations. In the upcoming years, it is highly likely that these new managers in today's fashion businesses will make their way to other organizations which *a priori*, have no direct contact with artistic or creative universes. For clearly, all brands do have culture.

Building Brand Culture:

Unlock your Brand's Cultural Potential

Preface by Jean-Marie Dru, Chairman, TBWA Worldwide
Post-face Interview with Raphaël Lellouche, Consultant in Semiology

Repetto, Ladurée, Nike, Oasis, Vuitton, Chanel, L'Oréal... Global brands are so much more than economic institutions. Rooted in cultural environments, brands are cultural agents, continuously interacting and affecting change. The cultural dimensions of brands are clearly emerging as the pillars of sustainable value creation in today's economy, where producing meaning is *de rigueur*.

Our first book **Brand Content** (2009) sets the stage, **Building Brand Culture** shows you how !

Unlock your brand's cultural power to drive innovation and let our concrete examples and testimonials help you:

- Identify cultural sources and modes of expression;
- Leverage powerful brands' cultural strengths;
- Reinforce cultural resonance to bolster customer uptake;
- Manage brands and cultural diversity in today's global economy.

Featuring excerpts from philosopher and semiologist Raphael Lellouche's **New Brand Theory**, as he applies the concepts of self-binding, performativity and mediality to the market-place, brands and their stakeholders.

Translation by: Tamara McGinnis