



Branding – it's a Celebration!

With over 3,000 new brands introduced in the market every year, there is an amazing array of choice in America today. It's frustrating – particularly for the brands themselves. This smorgasbord of choice reinforces the great necessity of differentiation in the market to secure a competitive advantage. Even among seemingly equal choices, everyone has their favorite.

So what is the difference between Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger? Between Harley-Davidson and Kawasaki? Between any competing products?

The difference lies not only in the polo design or the sound of the motor but also in the ways it is celebrated by those responsible for developing the brand. The very essence of celebrating speaks to how something is recognized and remembered, how it is praised and respected. The celebration is set to begin once the Brand owners understand what the user wants, even areas they cannot readily express. That often requires the skills of a trained professional who knows how to dig below the surface on a "search and listen" mission to uncover motivational insights. At the same time, it is critical to uncover the words, images, and experiences that bring your Brand to life and trigger those motivators. They signal that your Brand understands lifestyle choices and dreams better than any competitors do, creating a lasting emotional connection that makes it easy for people to remember and return to.

Have you ever met with someone in a Starbucks coffee house, perhaps for an interview or a business meeting? Or maybe you have studied, researched, or even read the New York Times in one of the coffee houses? The average loyal Starbucks customer visits 18 times monthly – people don't only come for the coffee!

Because Starbucks does a superior job of selling the experience to them, they all return for more. Friendly staff and regular customers have definitely created a "people place" that fosters a sense of community. Its relaxing, quiet, sophisticated atmosphere has generated a refuge away from distractions, enchanting customers with the romance of coffee-drinking, and, for some people, it has even created a second home away from home – a third place between work and home where people feel completely at home.

No wonder Starbucks was ranked in Business Week's Top 100 Global Brands of 2004! It isn't just coffee. It's an experience.

Brands should work to establish a certain lifestyle among their consumers. Ralph Lauren sells an entire lifestyle for consumers who seek a rather sophisticated and Ivy League-ish image. Ralph Lauren sells anything and everything nowadays – not just clothes anymore. The "Ralph" lines include everything from paints and sheets to furniture. If you've ever read the magazines or gone to the website, there are fashion tips for the body and home.

There is even a list of the most important luxuries of Ralph Lauren, from a rare copy of *The Great Gatsby* to a night under the stars. According to Ralph Lauren, the best dog to own is the Yorkshire terrier! So, not only can you dress Ralph Lauren, now you can live Ralph Lauren! Ralph Lauren made itself an experience.

JetBlue Airlines is another one of those "experiences" JetBlue is not your typical airline. The airline sells one of the most unique experiences on the market – and inexpensively. After all, it's not with just any airline that you can get your own cushy leather chair and 24 DIRECTV channels for only \$99 each way! This airline recognized that brand identity starts at home and directed its respectful and playful personality to the traveler. Its television ads claim, "Without you, we'd just be flying a bunch of TV's around!"

Through selling an experience, a number of brands today have achieved a kind of "cult" status; most notably Harley-Davidson. Riding a Harley is a sure-fire way to attract attention, but an even better reason for buying H-D emerges when you consider what the brand delivers. The company sponsors the Harley Owners Group, a group of 886,000 members who organize fundraisers, social events, and the famous rides. Rugged individualism and freedom are embodied in the brand itself, and these bikers hit the road in all their Harley-branded apparel to experience what it's like to be a part of this club of "outlaws". More than half of Harley's sales are to current customers upgrading. Those who live the brand deliver the brand.

These brands create an emotional attachment between themselves and the consumers based on the experiences they sell. The real challenge for the marketer is to find both outrageous and subtle ways to consistently surprise and delight consumers – to constantly create the brand choice.

Create a dialogue between you and your current users – both frequent and loyal – and even listen to those who do not use your brand at all. Search out what's unique about the experience of buying and using your brand. Elicit the right emotion through celebrating the experience. Building the right emotion is the promise you make to consumers, allowing them to experience what your brand is all about.

Give your customers permission to enjoy the world of the brand and you give your brand fuel for future success.