

Brand Building Backwards:
Using Your Brand's Unique Heritage To Ensure Its Future Success

By:

Joseph Benson
Rob Levinson
Drew Allison



They can copy your products, replicate your services, or even steal your design ... but one thing a competitor can never claim is your unique brand heritage.

Whether your brand had humble beginnings or burst on the scene, it has experienced a trajectory that over time attracted more and more customers. Customers who remember your story feel part of your story, and like to repeat your story to future customers.

Ultimately your unique brand heritage distinguishes your brand from competitors and provides a sustainable competitive advantage.

Consumers at both ends of the buying spectrum are attracted to and buy brands that have a compelling heritage. For some it's Mercedes-Benz, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Rolex. For others, it's Chevrolet, Sears, and Timex.

What makes these brands great, and what they all share, is longevity and by association the time to build a meaningful and relevant past. Customers need this time to buy the brand, make it a part of their lives, and endow it from one generation to the next. Ultimately a brand's heritage subconsciously compels consumers to choose them.

Heritage speaks of status, character, social class, and a history. It reflects a traditional way of life that is of value to present and future generations. It creates an inheritance of shared experiences and common history.

Brands express and share their heritage in the form of a narrative: a crisp, meaningful, relevant, and memorable story that acts as the cornerstone of their over arching brand voice.

For instance, Disney's brand story is about the ideal American community with clean streets, high moral values, happy families and a future where you never grow old, get sick, or even die. Visit a Disney theme park and you'll experience the safety, security, and enjoyment of a small American town.

Marlboro's brand story embraces nostalgia to exploit the myth of the stoic, solitary American cowboy living in wide-open spaces, and a time of simple choices, of good and evil, and of heroism.

Chanel's brand story elegantly depicts the sensual, strong, and independent woman seeking romance, love, and physical ecstasy.

Universities, Brands, and Heritage

Heritage stories are not limited to popular consumer brands.

Universities, for example, differentiate themselves from each other based on their heritage — traditions of education, country of origin, and culture.

Oxford University's brand story is that of the oldest English-speaking University in the world laying claim to nine centuries of continuous existence, the preservation of the English language, and the education of generations of England's royalty.

La Sorbonne was founded in 1257 expressly for just twenty theology students. Its brand story is one of true independence from government interference or religious administration. With students from all Christian countries, it personified intellectual debate.

Harvard University, recognized world-wide by a single crimson-colored “H,” has perhaps the best university brand heritage story ever told. Founded in 1636, it boasts over 300,000 alumni (in 90 countries), 43 faculty members as Nobel Laureates, a 16 million volume library, and the world’s largest endowment of nearly \$40 billion dollars. True or not, everything about it says first, largest, and best.

Movies, Brands, and Heritage

Movies become brands when they tell the stories of our collective consciousness and of our shared heritage. Anointed as “classics,” some films stand the test of time.

For example, the Lawrence of Arabia brand story is that of the man who rises above his station in life. His story details the founders of many of the world’s great religions, of individuals who overcome overwhelming odds, and of people who believe passionately in their convictions.

The Godfather brand story is that of a ruler whose goal is to create a prosperous, successful family in a new land. This is made clear when the Godfather, speaking with his youngest son in their expansive garden says, “I always believed you would be Governor Corleone or Senator Corleone.”

The Forrest Gump brand story is that of the regular guy, that of a humanitarian. His message is that everyone matters just as they are, regardless of his or her abilities or circumstances. This is illustrated when Forrest says to the great love of his life, “I may not be a smart man, but I know what love is.”

People, Brands, and Heritage

Individuals become brands in their own times by associating with the great stories of our common heritage.

Nelson Mandela’s brand story is that of the wise old man. He uses his intellect to defeat overwhelming physical oppression and the status quo to deliver freedom, democracy, hope, and a future to his people.

Mother Teresa’s brand story is that of the universal mother — the source of goodness in all of us. She provided warmth, caring, and purity. She catered to the poor, the underprivileged, and the disenfranchised.

Barack Obama’s brand story is the ultimate American dream. You can be biracial, have an absent father, rely on food stamps for a time, move several times, experiment with drugs ... and still have the fortitude to find your way to Harvard and ultimately the Oval Office. You can also own a single word – HOPE – that will change the course of a country.

Heritage as the Master Builder

The common stories of our heritage live in our minds and hearts. When a product, university, classic film or individual successfully attaches themselves to one of these stories, they gain entrance into our minds and hearts.

And when they are in our minds and hearts, they take on the stature of a brand. And brands create differentiation and distinction. They drive choice. And you cannot be chosen unless you are a choice.

About the Authors

Messrs. Levinson, Benson, and Allison are principals of Brand Blueprint, a Brand Consultancy located in Boston, MA. Their key areas of expertise include, respectively, brand positioning, brand strategy and visual expression.

CEOs, CMOs and other marketing leaders turn to Brand Blueprint when they seek to reposition, fortify or simply update their brand.

Collectively, Brand Blueprint principals have over sixty years of experience advising category-leading brands such as Allstate, Bose, DeBeers, Disney, General Electric, Gillette, JP Morgan/Chase, Pitney Bowes, Rolls Royce, Seagram and Staples.

For more information, please visit www.brandblueprint.com.



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