

Building Brand Tradition

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Tradition is an important component of many cultures. While the benefits of tradition are not immediately evident in a world where pooh-poohing tradition has become fashionable, tradition offers brand custodians a powerful tool for brand building.

The pleasure that many derive from family get-togethers on Christmas Eve and Thanksgiving dinners, and the powerful emotions experienced at Independence Day celebrations are strong indicators that tradition can have a strong and enduring impact on people. As long as it is meaningful, enjoyable and heart-warming, most people tend to appreciate tradition. Tradition offers marketers cues for creating enduring brand properties.

A brand tradition is a tradition created by a brand that adds a strong experiential element to the brand and that adds to the overall equity of the brand. Conducting an annual sale the proceeds of which go to charity could be a tradition. McDonald's guarantee of service within a particular period of time or the order not being charged for is a tradition that has become a strong brand property even if copied by others. The brand would not be the same without this tradition.

A brand may have a set of existing practices that make for strong traditions or it can look at consciously creating practices that can become traditions for the brand. In order to elevate a practice to a tradition it is important for the practice to be implemented consistently over a period of time.

Traditions have connotations that are useful to brands as well and give strong reasons for brands to create their own traditions:

1. *Consistency*: Traditions are a symbol of consistency in an ever-changing world. They often symbolise stability. Consistency is the essence of branding – brands are preferred over their generic counterparts because of the consistency of value and quality that is expected from brands.
2. *Commitment to values*: The values that a brand represents form the basis of the brand's relationship with its consumers. Consumers expect brands to be committed to these values and to be committed to the relationship as well. Creating and sustaining brand traditions is a strong indicator of a brand's commitment to its values. The solidity of resolve that sticking to tradition demonstrates has a powerful and reassuring impact on consumers.
3. *Providing a good brand experience*: If a brand tradition is successful then it provides a memorable brand experience and adds to the overall brand experience. A Vintage car rally by a car manufacturer or an annual exhibition of futuristic writing instruments by a large writing instruments company can possibly serve as brand traditions if they suit the brand and the prevailing culture of the land. These kinds of brand traditions would possibly be enjoyed and looked forward to by consumers.
4. *Reaffirmation of identity*: Brand traditions by their very practice and repetition state and reaffirm a brand's identity. Like the 'Swoosh' identifies Nike and controversial issues that Benetton addresses in its ads identify Benetton similarly a brand tradition becomes a unique part of the brand's identity.

The tennis tournament Wimbledon is a good example of how tradition has become an integral part of a brand's identity. Arguably the most respected tennis tournament in the world, Wimbledon is a strong brand in its own right. Its brand equity is largely drawn from the fact that the tournament is steeped in tradition. Players tend to be better behaved and more inhibited in their expression of displeasure towards unfavourable ruling by the umpires at tennis' premier

championship. At Wimbledon, unlike many other tournaments where the heights and depths of sports fashion is visible, the apparel worn by players is always white as per the rigid dress code decreed by the tournament officials.

The customary bowing of players to the royal box, the presence of the Duke of Edinburgh and the serving of strawberries and cream are traditions that add to the charm of Wimbledon. It is the tradition that makes Wimbledon so special to players and spectators alike and despite the fickle weather and the many restrictions, being at Wimbledon is perceived to be an experience to treasure.

Brand traditions could be simple yet very effective. Here are some examples:

- a. Nilgiris – a popular confectionery chain in Bangalore, South India conducts an annual cake exhibition that is the talk of Bangalore. Cakes designed in innovative shapes and sizes that extend up to 80 feet in length are displayed at this festival. Some of these cakes reflect contemporary topics with cakes designed as battle tanks or cakes featuring interesting graphics made out of icing sugar such as scenes from the Indo-Pak war. The exhibition is very popular and is usually packed with families eager to see the exhibits.
- b. MTR - a popular South Indian restaurant catering to the middle class serves food only in silver plates. Many middle class Indians like eating in silver plates as it is considered good for the health. The feeling of being pampered adds to the experience. Despite an increase in the price of silver and the occasional pilferages, the brand continues to stick to this tradition that has become an integral part of the brand's identity.

Creating brand traditions requires an understanding of what makes some traditions relevant and enduring and others not as resilient. Here are some of the important aspects of traditions that brands must keep in mind.

- i. *Tradition has to become a part of popular culture:* To be successful any tradition has to become a part of popular culture. The test of the success of the tradition is its ability to become a symbol of popular culture. The success of Nilgiris cake festival can be attributed to the festival quickly becoming a part of the city's culture.
- ii. *Tradition should retain its significance:* There are several traditions that have lost their significance over the years. Traditions that started centuries ago due to circumstances prevailing then may no longer be relevant today. If a brand tradition loses its significance then it will die out very soon. It is important to ensure that the significance is maintained by creating subtle changes that ensure the tradition's continuing relevance. For example if a vintage car rally starts losing its significance then the brand may add significance to this tradition by using physically challenged seniors as car drivers and position the rally as a celebration of the triumph of the human spirit.
- iii. *Traditions need to be contemporary:* Traditions need not be boring and archaic. A contemporary society is accustomed to contemporary expression and brands need to reflect modernity while retaining the essence of a tradition.
- iv. *Traditions need to make one feel warm about them:* Traditions that touch one's heart are more resilient than others. The example of the Christmas Eve get-togethers and New Year parties are some testimony to this. Brands need to ensure that their traditions spark off warm feelings amongst their constituents.

Brands need to audit their existing practices to see if there are any practices that can be continued as traditions. A good way of evaluating whether a practice can become a tradition is to examine whether it adds to the brand's equity and helps create a unique and distinct identity. Alternatively brands can look at creating tradition based on their understanding of what would embody the brand's values and personality while merging into popular culture. Brands need to

look at whatever they do from the perspective of whether it is *'traditionable'* in the long run. For example if a charity based sale is going to be conducted, the brand should look at whether this sale has the potential to become a strong tradition if run year after year.

An intended brand tradition only becomes a tradition once it is practiced/implemented for some time and this is good as it enables testing/trial before the decision to *'traditionize'* is taken. The relative success/failure of this practice in achieving the desired objectives can be measured over time. If it appears that this practice will endure the test of time then brand custodians can give it all the support that a brand property deserves. The decision to create a decision must be taken carefully as withdrawing a brand tradition after it has been persisted with for some time can have negative repercussions for the brand.

Brand traditions have a lot to offer brands, consumers and the definition of popular culture. A brand that can create traditions that become a part of popular culture arguably has the potential to last as long as the culture does.