
Lessons from Cultural Icons

How to Create an Iconic Brand

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Introduction



Brands are Cultural Instruments

For better or for worse, we live in a branded world. We are at a time in history when brands go beyond being business platforms to becoming symbols of our times. Brands like McDonald's, Sony and Budweiser often reflect the changing values of our society. Brands are more than just advertising, they are part of our culture. Andy Warhol & Campbell's® Soup. Norman Rockwell and Coca-Cola®.

Today's Consumers are Brand Weary

Inundated with marketing messages, today's consumers are brand weary. Everywhere they go, they are confronted with brand imagery. They are astute marketers by necessity, understanding that brands are clearly marketing efforts. Add the Internet to the marketing mix and you find 'brand-creep' in every email box from New York to Nova Scotia. While there are more eyeballs, it's harder to break through and get people to connect to a brand.

Our True Icons: Movies, Books and Music

What do we really care about? What consistently breaks through the noise and truly affects us? That's easy. Ask these same brand-weary consumers about their favorite movie. They'll talk with passion about it, how much it means to them, how it makes them feel and how they've told all their friends about it.

The symbols of popular culture have the power to captivate our imagination: the music we listen to, the movies we watch, the books we read. Madonna, The Godfather and Catcher in the Rye are examples of these cultural icons. They've not only affected people personally, but also have mass societal impact, affecting millions of people around the world. They're part of a universal vocabulary. They've become brands in their own right.

Brands Can Learn from Cultural Icons

Icons do what brands strive to do: to be imprinted in our consciousness. However, icons are irreplaceable, incomparable and timeless, whereas many brands are commonplace, inconsistent and indistinguishable. Brands can learn a lot from cultural icons.

So, let's take off our business hats and look at the popular culture landscape and learn how these icons were created. What makes a cultural icon? How did the Rolling Stones become more than a rock band? What helped create the Star Wars phenomenon? Was it just a question of timing? Or was it something more? We've looked for sociological, psychological and political patterns. We did this with one intention: to understand what brands can do to become icons. We'll tell you what makes a cultural icon and how you can translate that phenomenon to your business. Think of it as as a guide on how to create an Iconic Brand.

Case Studies of Cultural Icons

In order to understand the impact of a cultural icon, we chose two very different types of icons to study: one from music (the Grunge movement) and the other from the movies (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.)



The Grunge Movement

The Grunge period in music was most intense in the late eighties and early nineties. The music and lyrics were characterized by gritty pessimism. To understand the beginnings of Grunge, we need to rewind to the eighties. It was an unusual time for American youth. The mood was somewhat conservative and materialistic. The counterculture was weak, if it existed at all. As a reflection, the majority of Pop music at the time was synthetic and manufactured.

Seattle was a fairly isolated place culturally. Few major bands included Seattle in their tours. It forced the city to fill the creative void with local bands, who often arranged their own concerts. Slowly, the music scene became a movement. With the establishment of local fan magazines and independent record companies, a unique 'Seattle Sound' emerged.

International success came in September 1991, when Nirvana released 'Nevermind' and the album hit the top of the American album charts. With the help of MTV, 'Smells like Teen Spirit' reached millions of teenagers around America. Nirvana soon embarked on a worldwide tour and Grunge became a global phenomenon. Other bands that followed Nirvana's success included Pearl Jam, Stone Temple Pilots, SoundGarden, Tad, Mudhoney and others.

Nirvana created a persona that millions of teenagers identified with. 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' with its "Here we are now, entertain us" refrain became described as "the slacker's anthem."¹ The Grunge movement was finally giving voice to a valid counterculture: feelings of abandonment and disillusionment.

Grunge soon began to appeal to a wider audience and perceptions of Grunge varied widely, depending on whom you talked to. It was apparent that Grunge was moving from being alternative to becoming mainstream: hundreds of other grunge bands emerged, fashion magazines were heralding the new 'Grunge Chic,' restaurants were selling 'Grunge Cuisine.' Kurt Cobain (the lead singer of Nirvana,) in particular, found himself as a spokesman for a generation.

While naysayers thought Grunge would fade away, the influence of Grunge can still be heard in popular music today. When Kurt Cobain died in 1994, the outpouring of grief was compared to the untimely deaths of icons like Elvis Presley and John Lennon. He and his music are icons for Generation X.

1. Howitt, Bernie. 2000. *Popular Culture (Grunge)*. Society and Culture Association.

Case Studies of Cultural Icons (continued)

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest

'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,' starring Jack Nicholson and directed by Milos Forman, was released in 1975. It was loosely based on a 1962 novel by Ken Kesey. The book was both a critical and commercial smash. With its psychedelic references and imagery, it came to represent the anti-establishment spirit of the 'beat generation' in the sixties.

The movie, however, was released thirteen years after the book's introduction. By this time, the hippie generation was in decline and the allure of psychedelia had diminished. However, the movie was a huge success, grossing over \$300 million. It was nominated for nine Academy Awards® and won five. What made the movie so popular even after the hippies had moved on?

The success of the movie becomes clear when seen in context. The early seventies were a reflective and disillusioned time in America. Watergate, the Chicago Seven and the My Lai trials, along with the close of the Vietnam war, contributed to the general malaise. By the mid-seventies, however, the country was beginning to look forward. It was seen as a time of rebirth, renewal and resurrection. 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' spoke to Americans who were looking for optimism and hope, who wanted to move on and find closure with the past. The movie symbolized the power of beating the odds and embodied the triumph of the human spirit.

"... I think it's much better that it was made now than in the '60s. After a certain time, all the distracting elements fall away, all the transitory psychedelic stuff. And we can follow what it is really about." – Milos Forman²

The effects of the movie were far-reaching. It firmly established Jack Nicholson as a premier American icon. It introduced a range of actors to the big screen (Danny DeVito, Christopher Lloyd, and Brad Dourif for example.) The hazy edges of insanity became a theme for numerous movies. It forced a critical review and overhaul of our psychological treatment. Three decades after it was first released, the movie is still relevant and powerful. Even today, it forces a piercing look at our culture, our values and ourselves. It ranks #11 in the Internet Movie Database list of 'Top 250 films of all time,' #20 in the AFI (American Film Institute) list of '100 greatest American films,' and has grossed over \$70 million in video rentals.

² Haskell, Molly. 1975. *The Village Voice* (December 1).

Case Studies of Cultural Icons (continued)

Cultural Icon Evolution

These case studies typify the 'cultural icon' pattern: the rumblings of a movement in society, a sudden explosion of the icon, the mass influence that it creates, and the timelessness that it acquires. The table below explains the stages that most cultural icons go through.

| | Stage 1 | Stage 2 | Stage 3 | Stage 4 |
|-------------|--|--|--|---|
| Stage | "Rumblings" | "Explosion" | "Collective influence" | "Timelessness" |
| Mood | Building of pressure | Catharsis | Mass acceptance | Glorification |
| Description | Undercurrents in society A confluence of social, political, psychological factors | The icon breaks out Captures the mood of the time | Spawns imitations Ripples in other fields: fashion, language etc. | The next rumbling on the horizon Imitations fade, icon remains and represents a period in time |

The Difference Between Icons and Brands

Icons Create Emotional Connections

Ultimately, what makes a cultural icon so special is its ability to create emotional connections with people. Our research³ suggests that people have emotional links to their icons: they speak excitedly and freely about them. Our bonds with most brands, however, are more benefit and features-driven, rational and guarded.

Association with Brands (Rational, Features-Driven, Guarded)

“What I look for in a brand...reliability, value for money, aesthetic appeal...”

“High quality, reasonably priced, lasts forever and gets better with wear...”

“The customer service at the store, the quality of the packaging and the display of the products.”

Association with Icons (Emotional, Feeling-Driven, Free)

Jane Austen: “Lively, witty, funny, sunny... filled with life lessons”

Sting: “Gets me in touch with my emotional side... takes me places...”

Johnny Cash: “The Man in Black...the John Wayne of American music...the turn of phrase that is distinctly his. An authentic and honest voice that tells compelling and original tales.”

Iconic Brands Connect Emotionally Too

Iconic brands, however, manage to break through consumer barriers to create emotional bonds. Consumers speak of their favorite brands in the same language as they do their cultural icons. Brands like Nike, Ben & Jerry’s and Harley-Davidson® have moved from the ‘rational world’ (that most brands occupy) to the ‘emotional world’ (that icons own.) Look at it as the ‘Icon Switch.’ where Iconic Brands turn on the emotional switch that separates them from most brands.

Brands

Rational world

Associations with benefits and features

Examples: Reliability, Value, Customer Service, Price, Aesthetic

The Icon Switch

Icons

Emotional world

Associations with experiences and feelings

Examples: Adventure, Independence, Originality, Comfort, Nostalgia

3. All quotes used in the following pages come from a survey that Harvest conducted in December 2001/January 2002 except where indicated.

How to Create Iconic Brands

Many would argue that cultural icons are 'flukes.' While Nirvana or Milos Forman never intended their work to become iconic, the cultural icon is born out of a convergence of sociological, political and psychological factors.

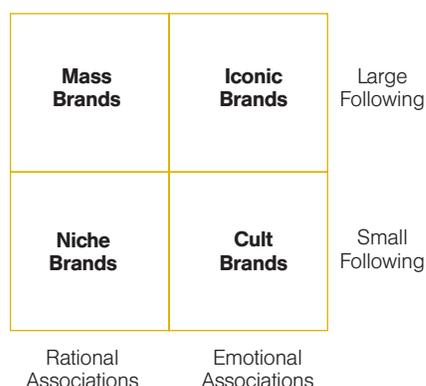
Marketing, however, cannot wait for convergence. Marketers need to make decisions about their brands and work to create emotional connections with consumers and ultimately build an iconic brand. At Harvest, we see three tools to help you do this: BrandPath™, BrandBelief™ and BrandMemory™. Let's see how that transformation is possible.

What's your BrandPath?

The first step in creating an Iconic Brand is to know where your brand presently stands. The following figure will help to map the present state of your brand.

Brands either possess rational or emotional associations. The larger brands that have emotional associations are the 'Iconic Brands' (Nike, Budweiser, Coca-Cola®). The small, emotional brands are what are commonly known as 'Cult Brands' (Krispy Kreme, your favorite local restaurant.) They have a small, but fervent following. Large brands with rational associations are 'Mass brands' (Wal-Mart, Toyota.) If your brand has a specific set of consumers who associate your brand with tangible assets or values, it's a 'Niche Brand' (The Bank of New York, Kia, Uline.)

It's critical to find out where your brand currently stands. Does the brand have a large or small following? Do consumers of your brand associate the brand with emotional or rational things?



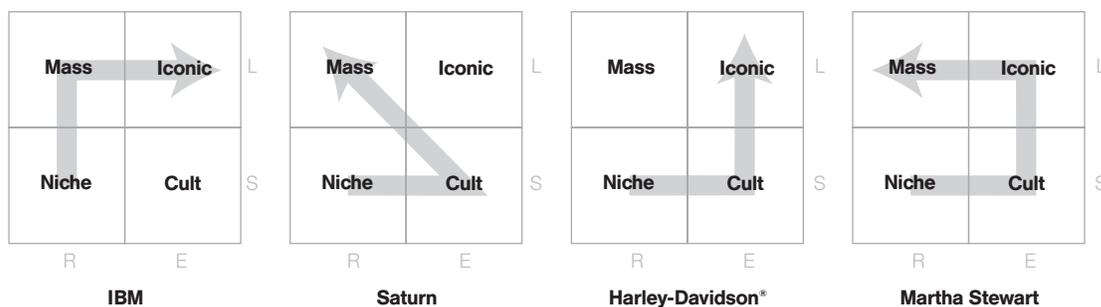
How to Create Iconic Brands (continued)

Choosing your BrandPath

It's also critical to decide which way you want your brand to move within the quadrants. We call this BrandPath. Over time, as the brand evolves, it shifts among quadrants.

IBM, for example, began as a Niche Brand (with its associations with computer hardware.) Building on their rational associations, they moved towards Mass Brand status. Over the years, the IBM brand has consistently overcome identity barriers. They evolved from the “guys in the blue suits” to e-business experts. IBM may be inching toward Iconic Brand status.

The Saturn brand has taken a different BrandPath. In the beginning, it was a Niche Brand – speaking to a specific set of consumers. However, its successful ‘down-home’ positioning of “A different kind of company. A different kind of car.” moved it to Cult Brand status. Over time, as Saturn has become a bigger brand, it has shed some of its emotional associations. Saturn is moving toward Mass Brand Status.



Choosing your BrandPath is about deciding where you want to be and how you want to get there. Most brands become Niche Brands when they have moderate appeal with a specific group of consumers. With time, brands can retain their rational associations and gain large followings to become Mass Brands, or keep their small customer franchise and develop emotional associations to become Cult Brands.

The most desired quadrant for a brand is the Iconic Brand. Getting there has unique challenges and tasks whether you are already a Cult Brand or a Mass Brand. The process involves making and sustaining an emotional connection with a broad audience.

How to Create Iconic Brands (continued)



What's Your BrandBelief?

In April 2001, The National Statistics Office in Britain added 'Jedi Knight' as an option under 'Religion' for the UK 2001 Census. This was an acknowledgment of a popular campaign by fans of the Star War movies. Why do we admire our cultural icons so much? We respect our icons because they have ideals and believe in something. In order for a brand to become a cultural icon, it must have a clear, central conviction. We call this BrandBelief. BrandBelief is one way that your brand can begin to have emotional associations.

BrandBelief makes people look up to the brand. It creates aspirations out of values and ideals, not pricing and position. These core values cross barriers of age, race, sexual orientation and geography. An iconic brand like Harley-Davidson® appeals to a highway-addicted HOG (what members of the Harley Owners Group® are called,) as well as the Armani-suited CEO.

BrandBelief allows the brand the flexibility to evolve. As long as the brand stays true to its core ideals, the message it conveys (or even the business it's in) can change. A brand like Virgin has been stretched from music and entertainment to transport (airlines and trains,) drink (vodka and cola,) personal finance, cosmetics, and mobile telephones. They're all held together by Richard Branson's 'unstuffy, irreverent, us-against-them' attitude⁴.

BrandBelief also creates competitive advantage. As we've seen, for most cultural icons, competition rarely sticks. When you compete on belief, there's little competition can do, but they can always compete on service or price.

4. Tomkins, Richard. 1999. Brands: Shaping the Psychology of Choice. *Financial Times* (December 6).

How to Create Iconic Brands (continued)

How to Build BrandBelief™

Change the way you think of your brand

Many marketers tend to treat brands simply as business concepts (of increasing profits and satisfying customers.) In this vision of brands, the values associated with them become diluted: “We listen to our customers,” “Good Value,” “Great Quality,” or “We believe in Customer Service.” Unfortunately, in this world of intense competition and our unwillingness to take risks, most brands are saying the same thing. They’re commercial clichés. They stand for what the brand does, not for what the brand believes in.

The first step in setting BrandBelief is to broaden the vision of your brand. Cultural icons can be our guide. Icons stand for beliefs and values, not actions and functions. In fact, our survey consistently showed that cultural icons transcended normal definitions.

East of Eden and John Adams: *“East of Eden helped me understand good and evil (or bad) on a new level and John Adams helped me understand and believe in the power of ethics and honesty...”*

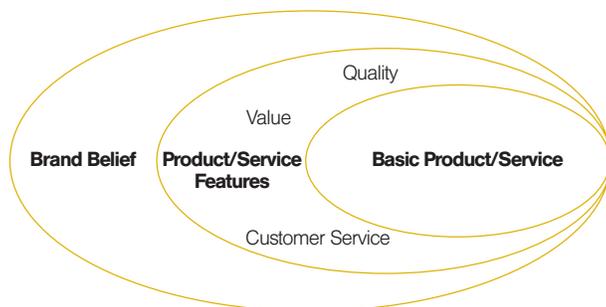
Bob Dylan: *“Intense, philosophical, unpretentious, irreverent, stands alone. Views life through clouds of gray...”*

Dead Poet’s Society: *“‘Carpe Diem’: my core theme song...spirit for life, human bonding and living beyond the ordinary.”*

Having BrandBelief entails a transition of vision where brands stop being simply ‘products.’ Instead, they get associated with their beliefs. For most people, Ben and Jerry’s is not just ice cream. Nike is not just another shoe. Harley-Davidson® is not just another motorcycle. Iconic brands not only have ‘consumers who buy their products,’ but also have ‘believers who stand by the brand.’

| Examples of Iconic Brands | And their BrandBeliefs |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Ben & Jerry’s | Community, caring, environmental, fun-loving |
| Nike | Resolve, determination, freedom of self expression |
| Harley-Davidson® | Spirit of adventure, the Cowboy in all of us on a motorcycle |

How to Create Iconic Brands (continued)



Choose and integrate the central belief for your brand

Choosing your BrandBelief is not easy. It must be universal, ideal and timeless. BrandBelief must be authentic, integral and in-sync with the brand. It's important to remember that cultural icons serve their basic functions in a superior way. The bottom-line is that *Catcher in the Rye* is a good book. Madonna's music is original. *Casablanca* is a well-made movie. However, these icons manage to add a layer of belief around their basic function. Brands must do the same.

Clearly, a brand needs to get its core act together. That of being a superior product or service with robust features and benefits. BrandBelief gets 'wrapped around' the brand's features.

Ensure that BrandBelief is 'radiated' across communication channels

The real work begins after you've honed in on that central BrandBelief. BrandBelief is not just a slogan or a tagline. The brand must breathe, walk, speak, and radiate its values. How the brand communicates becomes very critical. Each BrandBelief has its own voice, tone, language. The table below illustrates two contrasting examples.

| Brand | BrandBelief | Personality | Voice | Identity |
|---------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Virgin | Irreverence | Young, Brash | Rebellious, Exciting | Stark, Bright, Multi-Colored |
| Tylenol | Comfort, Safe | Experts, Trustworthy | Caring | Mild Hues, Soft Focus |

Once you've decided how the BrandBelief will come alive, it's important to ensure that this is executed across communication channels. Just like our icons, there are many communication channels where a brand has to radiate the belief.

| Brand | BrandBelief | Personality | Voice | Identity |
|--------------|---|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Musicians | Lyrics | CD Design, Copy and Liner Notes | Interviews, Promotions, Award Shows | Clothes |
| Movies/Books | Characters, Dialogue, Plot | Events, Openings | Talk Show/Interviews Publicity | Promotional Marketing (from Billboards to Posters, Radio and Broadcast) |
| Brands | Advertising and Public Relations – Online and Offline | DM/Collateral | Internal and External Communications | Events/Promotions Point of Purchase |

Cultural icons effectively and consistently communicate their beliefs across channels. Whether its their clothes, music, lyrics: each of these are viable media to demonstrate their beliefs. Building BrandBelief implies looking carefully at every communication channel available. It's important for the 'radiation' of the BrandBelief to be consistent across the channels: from the animation on your website, to the music that plays on your 1-800 number, to the dress code for your employees.

How to Create Iconic Brands (continued)



What's Your BrandMemory?

Do you remember the first time you saw your favorite movie? Who were you watching it with? And did it make you cry in the end? Was it raining outside when you picked up your favorite book? Does listening to your favorite song bring back powerful imagery of a specific point in time?

Chances are that you remember the experience vividly. One of the striking things we discovered about cultural icons is how they are embedded in our memories. Somehow, we develop deep, personal associations with them.

John Lennon: *"The song 'Imagine' has always stirred something in me. It's a song about belief written in a humble way that makes peace seem believable and within reach. It's a lullaby for adults that says 'everything is going to be all right.'"*

Bringing up Baby: *"...timeless humor that harkens back to the black and white Hollywood era. Conjures up all the nostalgia I love."*

Love Story: *"I remember I was in school time when I first read this book. I had a term paper the next day and I could not stop myself from reading it."*

In these stressful times and with the information age weighing upon us, people are looking for the warmth and comfort of the past. And the trend seems to be that we're moving towards a time when nostalgia will become critical. A 1998 survey from RoperASW showed that 55% of Americans believed the "good old days" were better than today. This is a complete shift from 1974 where 54% of those surveyed believed there was no time better than the present.

Iconic Brands seem to be sensing this too. Doesn't the image of Campbell's® Soups bring back warm memories? The more we asked people about their favorite brands, the more they talked about fond times.

Sony: *"My sister...got one of the first Walkmans... it was so cool...we had never seen the likes of it till then."*

Adidas: *"I was heartbroken when I had to throw away an old pair 10 years ago... But I photographed them before I let them go!"*

Tide: *"I see Saturdays with Mom and I doing the laundry and talking. It was a time when we were usually alone together, listening to music and actually enjoying the mundane household tasks."*

The memories were so strong, it was enough to put it on our cultural icon checklist: something we call BrandMemory.

How to Create Iconic Brands (continued)



How to build BrandMemory ***Brand History is a Good Start***

Visit the Coca-Cola® website and you'll see them playing out their history. The site is replete with references of days gone by: a fond and nostalgic time warp. Perhaps sensing the importance of its heritage, Coca-Cola® is also in the process of digitizing an archive of all its advertising and marketing materials: from the first newspaper ad that appeared for the brand on May 29, 1886 to calendars created by Norman Rockwell. The project is estimated to cost the company about \$5 million. Mercedes-Benz is another brand that helps us to remember the past. Their 'Of Legends and Passion' website section is an example of a brand trying to associate itself with good memories. Their centennial celebrations in 2001 have been a celebration of their past: advertising that takes us back to the many innovations (and memories) that Mercedes is responsible for.

This trend in branding has resulted in what BusinessWeek calls 'Nostalgia Marketing:' from the Volkswagen New Beetle and Ford Motor Company to StarKist, brands are mining the warm associations of boomer youth and the age of Aquarius to sell.

The critical issue is basing BrandMemory on consumer milestones, not brand milestones. Mercedes and Coca-Cola® stand apart because they 'translate' their brand histories into milestones that consumers connect to. If your brand doesn't do that, it's running the risk of just sounding 'corporate.'

Balance Nostalgia and Futurism

We're not suggesting for a moment that you dress up your brand in bell-bottoms. Far from it. What Iconic Brands instead seem to do is a juggle between having a vision for the future and a penchant for the past. And managing to do this seamlessly and effortlessly. It's a constant skipping between nostalgia and futurism.

Coca-Cola® manages this balance. Coca-Cola®'s campaigns have always reflected contemporary themes. But, during 'nostalgic' times like the holidays, their commercials harken to days gone by, celebrating our collective heritage with Norman Rockwell style images. It's this constant hop-skip-reverse jump that makes Coca-Cola® an iconic brand.

BrandMemory must be authentic. Many brands have tried to jump on the nostalgia bandwagon and failed. Simple retro packaging or advertising just won't do it. The brand graveyard is full of products that tried to fake nostalgia and flopped. The lesson is clear: nostalgia works only when the brand has truly tapped our memory. It's the honest, true association with the brand itself: rather than just its physical manifestation.

How to Create Iconic Brands (continued)



New Brands Need to 'Create' BrandMemory

It's clear that nostalgia is easy for old, well-established brands. So, how does a new brand create BrandMemory? Think of it as planting seeds of BrandMemory in your consumers.

Think radical and clear differentiation. Sample a Virgin Atlantic experience, for example. From their almost outrageous on-board giveaways to the relaxing massages in Upper Class. These brand elements are all designed to burn a pleasant hole in your memory bank.

Unexpected delivery is another way of building BrandMemory. Consumers have become jaded enough to know what to expect from a brand experience. Giving them something new, unexpected or out-of-the-box helps create BrandMemory. AOL, for example, has constantly evolved and developed the trial CDs that they mail to potential customers. From tiger-striped CD graphics to packaging them in metal boxes, each one of their direct mail campaigns is guaranteed to make you remember AOL.

The Icon – The Ultimate Benchmark

In a world where it is difficult for brands to get through to consumers, the cultural icon just may be the ultimate benchmark. Watch them. Learn from them. Use them as a litmus test for consumer loyalty and consumer connection. It could mean the difference between brand evolution and extinction.

Lessons from Cultural Icons

BrandPath, BrandBelief and BrandMemory are three ways to help your brand emulate the power of cultural icons.

Here are some pointers to keep in mind:

- > Discover the present state of your brand in the BrandPath quadrant. Do your consumers and stakeholders have rational or emotional associations with the brand? Do you have a large or small set of consumers?
- > Using BrandPath, decide which quadrant you want to be in and how you want to get there. Every BrandPath that you imagine has different tasks and consequences.
- > Broaden the vision for your brand: it's not just what the brand does, but what it believes in.
- > Choose your central BrandBelief. Is it timeless, universal and ideal? Is it authentic and in-sync with your brand? Is it aligned with society and where consumers are today...and where they are going?
- > How does this BrandBelief manifest itself? What are its personality, tone, voice, color and image associations?
- > Are all your communication channels consistently radiating your BrandBelief? Remember, BrandBelief is more than a slogan or a tagline.
- > Look at your brand history to build BrandMemory. Translate brand milestones into consumer milestones.
- > Use BrandMemory skillfully by balancing nostalgia and futurism.
- > Create BrandMemory for new brands by radical differentiation or unexpected delivery.

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