

Bridging the Brain Divide: How to Move your Brand from Logical to Creative.

Most business people find comfort in logic and facts. “Give me data!” they say. “Prove it!” Although they profess a commitment to creativity, many CEOs, when looking at the brand development process, go a little pale at the prospect of handing over their precious strategic initiative to a group of wild-eyed creativistas.

And well they should pale. As one retail CEO recently asked me: “At this point we’re depending on intuition; how do I know whether the intuition of the creative team will take us in the right direction? And how can we manage it after they’ve gone back to their cubicles?”

There comes a point in any brand development process when facts and logic must give way to (horrors!) creativity; when unique selling propositions and claims of distinction need to take on *life* to connect with the brand’s constituents. For those reasons (and a few others), techniques have been developed that objectify the brand in ways that are both rich with possibility and easily understood, allowing suits and T-shirts to share understanding before the creative development begins in earnest.

The technique that seems most in vogue these days is Archetypal Branding.

Archetypal Branding?

If you’re new to the term, archetypes, as defined by the originator of the term, psychologist Carl Jung, are “forms or images of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myths and at the same time as individual products of unconscious origin.” In other words, they are powerful subconscious building blocks that all of us share. Example: the idea of the Hero, a figure that overcomes all obstacles to ride in on a white charger (or an X-wing fighter) to save the day. There are stories about hero figures in every culture, in every age. Why? Apparently because our brains are hardwired to crave it.

So – the theories of Archetypal Branding go – attaching brands to familiar archetypes, using archetypal stories to tell the brand story, gives us a well-trodden pathway to people’s neuroreceptors and thus to their hearts (and pocketbooks). What’s more, giving our brand an archetypal character (like Hero or Outlaw) gives us a set of objective characteristics to help us manage our brand now and into the future.

So when the creative team heads off to work on brand communication concepts they’re already carrying with them a powerful image shared by the brand team. And when they come back, there will be an objective set of characteristics on which to base judgments.

Does Archetypal Branding work?

There’s no question that some brands have been able to successfully tap into archetypes that help those brands resonate deeply. Nike makes athletic footwear, but they’ve built their brand on a Hero foundation – “Just do it” – that they’ve supported with famous heroes like Michael Jordan and not so famous heroes, too. In fact, everyone knows the Nike brand isn’t about athletic footwear, it’s about wringing the best from ourselves; it’s about achieving. Has it worked? Need you ask? Did Nike consciously choose a hero archetype for their brand? Does it matter?

Think how effectively Ivory has employed the archetype of the Innocent over the years, how the Ivory Soap Girl embodied the archetype, making the soap more than a means to rid dirt, but a means to achieve purity 99 and 44/100% purity, in fact. That’s powerful stuff, certainly more powerful than plain, old soap.

When you realize how easily many great brands fit into archetypal models, it’s easy to see how effective archetypal branding can be. Think how Coke embodies the Innocent (“I’d like to buy the world a Coke”) and Pepsi plays out the Jester archetype. How HP has used the creator archetype successfully (“Invent”). Or how the Outlaw archetype has helped drive Harley Davidson’s resurgence.

So Archetypal Branding is the key to success, right?

Right. And you can quit your day job and become a zillionaire just by responding to an email. We've found Archetypal Branding to be a useful tool for all the reasons outlined above. It's particularly useful in me-too categories (like soap), where it's tough to find a hardcore Unique Selling Point that will carry the day. And working from an archetypal model has been a great way to inspire creatives. But applying it requires a level of expertise not everyone possesses and a commitment to an abstract theory that some clients find hard to accept.

In the end, employing tools like Archetypal Branding does not relieve companies from making a competitive real-world promise and delivering on it. It's not a matter of throwing a dart at a wall covered with archetypes. A formal discovery process is still absolutely essential to developing a brand that builds real value for the organization. You still need to start from the inside, with real-world qualities and Unique Selling Points, before searching for archetypal connections.

Nor does Archetypal Branding take the place of great creative; rather, it inspires it. Nike's Hero archotyping works because they continue to develop products that do help enable individuals to achieve and they communicate that fact memorably. Ivory has also maintained their brand on the straight and narrow, refreshing it creatively over the years; it's difficult by now to know where their business strategy, brand strategy and archetype begin and end. One look at the Ivory Snow Girl says it all.

In the quest to connect right brain and left brain, suits and T-shirts, strategy and creative, Archetypal Branding can be one useful tool among others. And any tool that puts the client and the creatives on the same page is a good tool to have in the kit.