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Brand Elevation

Lessons in Ueber-Branding

Wolfgang Schaefer and JP Kuehlwein • Kogan Page © 2020 • 288 pages

Marketing / Branding

Take-Aways

- Seven principles – which the Brand Myth anchors – comprise the Ueber-Branding Model.
- Master the balance between access and exclusivity; reject standard sales tactics to whisper a promise.
- Mythmaking through storytelling is the core of the Ueber-Branding model.
- The “Elevate Your Brand” process has three stages, each containing two steps.
- “Write Your Myth” to convey a vision greater than the brand and more meaningful than a product or service.
- “Realize Your Dream” by ensuring that every activity, product and communication align with the brand Myth and Mission.
- The “Live Your Dream” step of the Brand Elevation process focuses on your single most valuable resource – your brand culture.
- Ueber-Brands innovate in service of the Mission, rather than cater to a targeted consumer.
- Engage targets and a wider audience by igniting passion and bringing them into the fold.

Recommendation

How does a brand inspire such devotion that customers wear the logo, congregate in person and online to discuss products and services, or passionately gather at events? Wolfgang Schaefer and JP Kuehlwein researched this phenomenon in their previous work, *Rethinking Prestige Branding*. Here they offer the Brand Elevation model, a six-step process to elevate your brand into an Ueber-Brand, research and identify your brand mission, balance exclusivity and inclusivity, attract rather than sell, and master Myth creation and storytelling, as have such brands as Burt's Bees, Patagonia, Starbucks and Peloton.

Summary

Seven principles – which the Brand Myth anchors – comprise the Ueber-Branding Model.

The Ueber-Brand foundational principles are: “Mission Incomparable; Longing vs Belonging; Un-selling; From Myth to Meaning; Behold!; Living the Dream; and Growth Without End.”

Beloved Ueber-Brands are inspirational leaders and motivators with a meaning and identity that surpasses their product or service's function. Ueber-Brands attain status by fulfilling the human yearning for meaning, to feel special and included, and to find truth and fulfillment.

“Having a higher calling, a reason-to-be that goes further than making money, lies at the core of every Ueber-Brand.”

A Mission Incomparable is a distinct, unique purpose beyond making money. The brand reflects customer tastes, supports their aspirations and fosters good feelings. Ueber-Brands develop fan communities with operating philosophies that resonate with customers. Patagonia, for example, has a central Mission of creating products that do no environmental harm. The company aligns every activity with this goal.

Master the balance between access and exclusivity; reject standard sales tactics to whisper a promise.

Ueber-Brands adapt the scarcity principle for modern times, capitalizing on the Longing vs Belonging dynamic. Projecting exclusivity while promoting inclusivity requires delicate balance. “Ueber-Targets” become devotees and exemplars for the brand, aspirational models for a wider audience, and boost brand image.

The Ueber-Targets for Peloton, for example, are home exercising fanatics for the brand, using a bike or treadmill in their homes and wearing the Peloton logo.

Ueber-Brands “un-sell” by avoiding traditional tactics in favor of luring consumers with an implied promise of a rare and desirable experience. Beauty brands such as LVMH and Chanel use art, seduction and mystery to attract consumers. The high-end fashion brand, The Row, for example, created print ads that simply show the brand name in a sea of white, with the address in tiny print at the bottom. Only those in-the-know understand what that's all about.

“Ueber-Brands have recognized, however, that avoiding the obvious draws attention and makes the mundane transactions feel more meaningful – or even mysterious.”

Instead of boasting of celebrity endorsements, Ueber-Brands show the rich and famous enjoying their products, exemplified by commercials featuring George Clooney savoring a hard-to-find Nespresso.

Mythmaking through storytelling is the core of the Ueber-Branding model.

Stories resonate with people's emotions, access their desire to believe and provide inspiration. Stories connect with people's feelings more effectively than facts and figures. People remember stories, so a story stands out from the daily bombardment of media messages. A well-crafted brand narrative expresses ideas and sentiments people feel intuitively – and imbue them with magic and mystery. They make heroes of figures such as Steve Jobs and Elon Musk or exemplify behaviors and values, such as Burt's Bees' commitment to sustainability in nature.

“Ueber-Brands harness the power of legends and move higher – from story to Myth.”

An Ueber-Brand's products and services are an expression of its Myth and purpose that shout, “Behold!” They incorporate unique design codes that distinguish them from competitor products. They highlight the skill and commitment that goes into production, conveying a respect for the process and promising a special customer experience. Allbirds' founder, for example, tells how he painstakingly developed the unique merino wool footwear. Even without seeing the Allbirds logo, the Ueber-Target recognizes the shoe through its unique design and brand codes.

“Ueber-Brands radiate from the inside out, led by their Mission, Myth and culture.”

Luxury brand Hermès Paris limits supply to ensure scarcity. Other Ueber-Brands boost revenues without increasing volume with brand extensions that reach up or down. Tesla, for example, introduced models at the affordable \$40,000 price, and a Roadster that sells for over \$200,000.

The “Elevate Your Brand” process has three stages, each containing two steps.

The Dream phase of the Elevate Your Brand process includes the first two steps: “Set Your Mission” and “Write Your Myth.” Next comes the Do phase, including step three, “Realize Your Dream,” and step four, “Live Your Dream.” The last phase, Dare, includes steps five and six: “Find Your Ueber-Target” and “Ignite All Targets.”

“Setting your Mission” is the first and most difficult step. Begin by gathering insights and formulating concepts about the unique aspects of your brand. Examine every business characteristic, organizational structure and ongoing process that reveal the subtext of your business purpose. Dive into company archives to understand the founders' vision. Interview stakeholders including employees past and present, decision-makers, vendors and customers. Assess the market and the competition; consider current trends and consumer behaviors.

“Defining your Mission, or purpose, as many call it, goes to the core of your sense of self, your perceived reason for being as a brand.”

Distill this information into five to 10 central principles or value declarations. Choose up to 12 employees from various teams and levels of the company for a “Mission-finding” workshop to formulate ideas for the Mission direction. Write the Mission Statement, a concise, specific and bold motto that encapsulates the purpose of the brand. Supporting your brand Mission are your “Commercial Pledge”, a dedication to the functional benefits of your offering, and your “Societal Pledge,” the brand culture, commitment and personality. The brand strategy brings this Mission to life by communicating stories that provide utility while engaging consumer emotions and promising a unique experience.

“Write Your Myth” to convey a vision greater than the brand and more meaningful than a product or service.

A mythical brand narrative stretches the boundaries of reality to create an aura of mystery that connects people with something transcendent and inspiring. Alternatively, a Myth positions the brand as a standard for behavior by modeling a commitment to a value or principle. Environmentally conscious companies such as sustainable fashion brands Everlane and Brave GentleMan exemplify guiding myths. Your Brand Myth becomes the encompassing narrative for all communications and activities. It must be creative and appealing yet remain a business document that contains the foundational elements of your brand.

“Myths can let us ‘reach beyond’ the obvious, the physical, the ‘real,’ to provide explanation and reassurance. Or they can ‘guide us’ in our actions and interactions, speak of values and show us ways to live up to them.”

Write your brand Myth in the following seven steps: First is the “Calling,” the challenge the hero (founder) strives to fulfill. The second is “Inspiration,” the problem that birthed the idea for your product or service. The third is “Challenges,” the obstacles encountered on the journey to bring the brand offering into existence, followed by “Belief,” the convictions that guided the brand journey. Step five is “Apotheosis,” the turning point when your brand fulfills its promise. “Principles,” step six, is a set of standards by which you conduct business. The seventh and final step is “Future,” as your offering makes the world brighter and better.

“Realize Your Dream” by ensuring that every activity, product and communication align with the brand Myth and Mission.

If your products, messaging or behavior stray from the brand promise, you’ll cause irreparable damage to the Ueber-Brand image and reputation. Assess the “Myth-fit” of your product and service portfolio to ensure every aspect of each offering aligns, from sourcing and production to messaging and delivering. If you conclude an item doesn’t align, discontinue production or demote it in your product hierarchy. When developing new products, let your Mission be your guide and inspiration, never commercial considerations alone.

“For Ueber-Brands, the product or service isn’t simply proof of promise, it’s the manifestation of their ideal or dream.”

Celebrate and validate your offerings’ distinctiveness by moving beyond “Reason(s) to Believe (RTB)” to STB, “Stories to Believe,” which romanticize the product and resonate emotionally. Create rituals around the use of your products, such as people’s commitment to make SoulCycle part of their weekly routine. Elevate your products by becoming the authority in your field and educate patrons to their use. Beauty brand Kiehl’s “White Coats” for example, provide hands-on demonstrations and give customized product samples to customers.

The “Live Your Dream” step of the Brand Elevation process focuses on your single most valuable resource – your brand culture.

An Ueber-Brand’s culture is not an image it projects; it’s an essence that permeates every aspect of the organization. To be authentic, employees must understand, embrace and embody the culture. For example, the Ritz-Carlton Mission is, “Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen.” Employees address each other as such and live by this credo. To build an Ueber-Brand culture, recruit for passions and interests that align with your Mission. Enable team members to fulfill the brand Mission by creating an environment that promotes the brand personality and provides the support and resources they need to perform at a high level.

“Everything you do should – must – be a reflection and an expression of your culture.”

Live the Mission within the organization. REI, for example, closes its stores on the Friday following Thanksgiving so employees can spend time with their families. Incentivize and reward team members that live the Mission Statement in action.

Ueber-Brands innovate in service of the Mission, rather than cater to a targeted consumer.

Define and understand the Ueber-Target or “design target.” These are the early adopters and brand fans who identify with your products as an extension of the Mission. The “strategic target” is the “core target,” your most likely prospects, and the “wider target,” which includes everyone else. The Ueber-Target for the cycling brand Rapha, for example, are devoted cyclists. The core target are MAMILS – “middle-aged men in lycra.” The wider target is anyone who cycles.

“Your Ueber-Target is your brand’s and its strategic target’s dream target, your muses – the people you probably had in mind when you conceived your brand and who personify your ideal user above and beyond.”

Through psychological profiling, qualitative and quantitative research, you can gain a sense of your target audience’s likes and dislikes, demographic and personality characteristics, and behaviors and values. Create a conceptual character that represents your core target that team members can envision when developing and executing products and programs. The persona may include traits such as attitude, lifestyle, family situation, age, community, passions and pursuits.

Engage targets and the wider audience by igniting their passion and bringing them into the fold.

Today's brand communications are not one-way, as in the past, but experiential, interactive and complex. Brand patrons become brand experts and advocates, sharing user knowledge and bestowing status and credibility.

"Today's brand relations, including mass communications, are by and large interactive, the 30-second commercial monologue yesterday's hero."

Show who you are and what you do through symbolic acts, such as Dreamforce's annual Symposium for Change.

Ueber-Brands live their Mission through corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, such as Patagonia's Worn Wear initiative, and externally via sponsorships, such as Chobani's 10% net revenue donations to immigrant and refugee foundations. Demonstrate your authority with quiet forcefulness, as when fashion brand Jil Sander collaborated with film director Wim Wenders to create short branding films.

About the Authors

Wolfgang Schaefer is founder and CEO of Zwoelf Consulting and co-author of *Rethinking Prestige Branding: Secrets of the Ueber-Brands*. **JP Kuehlwein** is a principal and co-founder of Ueber-Brands Consulting, an adjunct professor of marketing at NYU and Columbia Business School, and co-author of *Rethinking Prestige Branding: Secrets of the Ueber-Brands*.



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