Nurturing Cult Brands
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Abstract
Cult brands are the brands which have passionately loyal following, brand loyalty, customers organized around a cause, parodied in popular culture, strong detractors, stood the test of time, events organized to celebrate the brand and first of its kind in its industry. Cult brands are different from iconic brands in terms of culture, society, value and uniqueness.

Keywords: Cult brand, Empowered consumers, Launching of cult brands.

Introduction
Casey Neistat purchased Apple Company's iMac computers and editing software when he was building his film making career. When Neistat brothers discovered the digital music player batteries were irreplaceable and lasted just 18 months, they made a film called iPod's Dirty Secret and launched a protest website. 1.4 million people, who visited this website, came to know about this fact and lastly Apple Computer Inc. addressed the problem. Later Neistat said this protest was an act of love because he believes in brand so much.

These days relationship between brands and consumers has become more complex. Now consumer simply knows more than they used to. Internet opens a wealth of information, allowing for instant price and quality comparisons. Consumers demand more from brands than simply reliability; passionate consumers want their brand to become a form of self expression. Increasingly, consumers are customizing products and services to achieve that. This shift in clout from companies to their customers is creating opportunities, especially for younger brands that grew up with internet and become adept at building user communities.

Way back in 1940s the Italian aeronautical engineer and designer of pioneering helicopters, Corradino D'A Ascanio, was asked to design a utility transport vehicle for a country ravaged by post war truma. D'A Ascanio designed a motor scooter that was centered around the vision of a man seated comfortably on his couch, and gave the touches accordingly-the engine was placed the rear, unsightly mechanism were covered up, and plenty of leg room was created. The compact little vehicle that was thus created became the iconic Vespa. Now the iconic brand has made its foray into the Indian market not an object of transport but as a lifestyle symbol.

Cult brands like the Vespa, or Volkswagen's Beetle or Harley-Davidson are all linked by a few common threads: they have a strong loyal following; they are seen as lifestyle enablers; and they are means of transport is incidental. In other way, they are products you could do without-but which you badly want to covet. “Iconic brands always stand for something unique. They have a code that underpins a strong point of view on culture, society and values.”

Cult brands are the brands, which dare to be different and celebrate that difference and therefore posses the power of the loyalist who come together on a common ground for the common values and ideologies.

Cult brands are the brands, which are more evolved to just talk about functionality or the benefits of the category they peg themselves much higher in the human value systems, like upholding truth, honesty, simplicity, perfection and goodness. They intelligently tap into innate reserves of human conscious.

“ Star Trek” became a cult by being a crusader of human rights by juxtaposing humans and aliens, war and peace, racism and space born humanitarians all in an adventure story of planets and space.

Volkswagen” achieves with Beetle, all with utter common sense. Harley with its irreverence sense of fantasy and adventure. Apple does with its child like simplicity and perfection producing magical joy to the end user.

Indian brands which can be included as cult brands are Thumps Up, Old Monk and Royal Enfield.

A brand is assessed as cult brand on the basis of following parameters:

1. Passionately loyal following
3. Customers organized around a cause
4. Parodied in popular culture
5. Strong detractors (Nearly equally passionate critics)
6. Brand uniquely epitomizes a value, idea or ideal
7. Stood the test of time (Continued success beyond the involvement of the founder)
8. Events/Reunions organized to celebrate the brand
9. First of its kind in its industry
10. Global adoption-brand crosses/transcend cultures
Empowered Consumers

The classic example of cult brand is Harley-Davidson. The 108 year old brand comes from more than 9 lakh members of the company – sponsored Harley Owners Group. They are the ones who organize rides, training courses, social events, and charity fund raisers. They pore through motorcycle magazines and wear Harley branded gear to feel more like rugged individualists and outlaws when they hit the road on weekends. More than half of new Harley sales are to current customers who are trading up. The brand is self reinforcing.

In Shanghai, Wang Jian Shuo runs a Web blog that, among other things, delves into his likes and dislikes with IKEA, the Swedish furniture chain that offers modestly priced, ready to assemble furniture with cute names. Notes Wang: “IKEA seems to know my life better than any other furniture brand.” Among those posting responses to his musings are Malaysian fans who started his own IKEA forum and another who makes jokes about Swedish meatballs.

Such exchanges underline a key aspect of brand communities in the modern age: They evolve in ways that the head office can’t control. Newly empowered consumers can appropriate and manipulate the brand in whatever way they want.

The key for brand builders is to give empowered consumers a great product and tools to use it however they want. Jeffrey P. Bezos, chief executive of Amazon.com defined community as “neighbors helping neighbors make purchase decisions.” That means allowing negative customer reviews, even if it sabotages a possible sale. It meant halting spending on conventional advertising last year to funnel money into cutting prices and improving service in the belief that the community itself would spread the word. What Bezos does not control is the range and quality of his site’s offerings. “The thing that we did early on is that we made it very easy for people to find very obscure products,” notes Benzos. “If you are not doing something that people will remark on, than it is going to be hard to generate word of mouth.

Some companies are using mass customization to bind their customers ever more tightly to their brands. The efforts extend beyond the individualized web pages that characterize websites like Amazon.com and eBay. It means allowing customers to set up fan sites on web or personalize items. Some companies like Honda Motor and Nike, offer tools to help customers put their imprint on a product such as choosing unique color combinations and messages for their sneakers.

Some old-line brands seem to be coasting on sheer size rather than an ability to forge a unique relationship with customers. Even brands that have enjoyed decades of success and have instant recognition with customers can lose some sparkle.

Big brands can also connect with customers. For e.g. General Electric Co.’s most popular section on company’s web site is “GE Pen,” which allows users to doodle in a variety of colors and styles before e-mailing their handiwork to a friend. It gives users a warmer feeling about the company.

Foreign Cult Brands in India

The most recent entrant to this list in India, Vespa, has been launched keeping in mind that “there is a generation that is all set to earn and indulge, that is looking for ways of self expression and is willing to indulge on brands that provide an opportunity for the same, reflecting extension of their personality,” says Ravi Chopra, Chairman and managing director, Piaggio Vehicles India, a wholly owned subsidiary of Piaggio Italy. Accordingly, the focus is more on emotions and not merely the steel that goes into making automobile, he adds. Creating brand salience for such a category is can be a tricky task. That’s because many would have heard about the brand and its lineage but may not fully know what the brand stands for unlike the case of mass brands like say Maruti or Hero MotoCorp, which have unabashedly embraced the fuel efficiency proposition. According to Lutz Kothe, head marketing and PR, Volkswagen Passenger Cars: “Creating and ensuring the right communication for such an icon (like the Beetle) is not an easy task. The right balance has to be maintained between heritage and legacy, and a modern and well equipped carline.”

In the Beetle’s case, while people were emotional about the original Beetle and its heritage, the New Beetle launched in 2009 in India had changed and align itself with modern tastes and requirements. In contrast, when it is about selling mass brands like Maruti or Hero Motor Corp, the focus is more on product features and functional benefits like mileage, durability and after sale service. For cult brands what matters more are status, lineage, legacy and pride of ownership. Maruti and Hero MotoCorp are
familiar and known. There is an existing mass equity that can be capitalized. In case of brands like Vespa, there is little familiarity and more intrigue; because it is foreign, slightly distant and more talked about than seen in real life (especially in India).

In such a category, Imagery and experiential components play a huge role. For instance, the memorable shot of Audrey Hepburn side-saddled on Gregory Peck’s Vespa riding through the streets of Rome in romantic comedy ‘Roman Holiday’ is possibly the most iconic Vespa communication ever done by the brand. And that was not even done as a part of well thought out media plan as it was many moons before the strategy of product placement was even spoken about. Harley-Davidson, the bike that sells in India in range of Rs. 5 lakh to Rs. 35 lakh range, does the job through a host of experiential initiative like HOG (Harley Owners Group) rallies and Boot Camps. Boot Camp is a brand introduction event in which prospective customers come and learn about history, heritage and life style of Harley-Davidson as well as go through the bike family introduction. In a carnival-like atmosphere, they get a first hand brand experience and an opportunity to test ride the legendry HD bikes with proper HD riding gear.

Launching of Cult Brands
Advertising in most of these cases is not the answer to brand building or even launching them. An innovation is the best way to launch these brands. The innovation helps attract attention to the fact that the brand is now in India, thus generating interest among target consumers. So when Vespa had to announce its launch in India, it chose to digital with an innovative campaign conceptualized and designed by OgilvyOne in partnership with Meridian Communications. Inform Parasanna Kulkarni, senior creative director-digital OgilvyOne: “The pre-launch campaign comprised an interactive application which engaged the audience and at the same time spoke about the Vespa lineage and its association with music, cinema and art over the years.” The campaign generated more than 70000 unique visitors. The arrival of New Beetle was announced with the first heli-banner flown across the city of Mumbai followed by cut-out hoardings of carline across all major cities in India. In addition, there were special outdoor innovations created like wavy Zebra crossing at several strategic locations in Mumbai with message ‘Curves are back’.

Still creating brand salience is not always as easy as it might appear. In Vespa’s case the challenges are even more diverse, “We need to walk a thin line since mass advertising is usually seen as contrary to establishing a premium image; and, secondly, in a category that now skewed towards women, to position the brand as a gender-neutral object of desire would be a challenge,” says Samrat Bedi, head of Meridian Communication, Mumbai. This is where experiential elements can play a major role. For instance Vespa showrooms have been given a completely different look and feel to them; they have been designed to provide a life style experience inclusive of Vespa history wall that presents the rich legacy of the brand. Also on the anvil is the introduction of Vespa merchandise and accessories, as also the well known Vespa clubs, which are present in more than 40 countries. True iconic brands are ones that inspire loyalty beyond reason.

Conclusion:
Cult brands empowered the consumers so that they can have warm feeling about the company and its products. Cult foreign brands in India are mainly Vespa, Beetle, Harley-Davidson. While launching the cult brand advertisement is not the only option. Innovation is the best way to launch these brands. Creating brand salience is not always as easy as it might appear.

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