

Developing iconic brands



By [Thomas Oosthuizen](#)

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We all recognize them, we all love them and we all want them, yet iconic brands are rare.

An iconic brand is able to punch far above its weight. Most iconic brands do not spend a fortune on marketing - they attain gravity naturally as consumers tune into them. Whatever they do, creates impact beyond their magnitude, which makes them efficient drivers of profit for companies and drivers of value for consumers.

Iconic brands are brands such as Apple, Cartier, Nike, Louis Vuitton, Prada, Zara, Four Seasons, The New Yorker and Virgin.

Iconic brands cannot be iconic if they do not offer the consumer something extraordinary. They are simple, yet they often involve complex "stories" that make them exciting and intriguing. It is unlikely that detergent can ever become iconic, even if it is as famous as Tide.

Royal example

Cartier is a good example of an iconic brand. It has a heritage of craftsmanship that goes back to 1847 and is associated with European royalty.

It has a number of product designs that have become classics in their own right, such as "Panthère", "Santos"; and "Tank".

It owns a particular burgundy red colour. Wherever you travel in the world, you will notice its distinctive burgundy canopies. Even though many of its designs are available in platinum and stainless steel, it is most associated with gold and diamonds.

Place de Vendome in Paris is almost a "monument" to a brand (the other significant brand there is The Ritz).

Unlike most watch brands, it is a jewellery brand, adding to its fame. Seeing that high-end jewellery, unlike watches, mainly consists of unique pieces, it adds to the exclusivity of the brand.

The collective perception is a story of fame, fortune, glitterati and famous designs, yet it is a very serious brand, as the craftsmanship that underlies it runs deep over generations. Regular innovation in product design keeps the story alive and current. Many of these are adaptations of classic designs, but some are new.

Unlike other jewellery brands that may use famous people to promote their brands, it always focuses on its design integrity,

never on "flash." It is noteworthy that the equally iconic founder of the company that owns it today, Dr Anton Rupert of Richemont, always placed product integrity central in any brand story, from Peter Stuyvesant to Rothmans. This means the focus is always on what makes these products unique, yet it is never boring. The brand also "owns" its unique placement in print media: it is always in the front or the back of the magazine, similar to what brands like Rothmans used to do.

Its "flash" is created through the support it enjoys amongst significant people around the world, so it is authentic flash. You just need to be seen in a few significant places, to make the right statement - even better if it is unrehearsed.

Best efforts pay off

The same principle applies to most iconic brands: they have a story that runs deep, such as Apple.

I think at least partly because the concept of becoming an iconic brand lies in realising that all we can do, as marketers, is to put our best efforts "out there" - and then hope that the force of gravity will create an iconic brand for us.

Yet, we need to know what these "best efforts" must be to give our brand the best possible chance to become iconic. Some marketers seem to have an unrealistic hope that magic happens without hard work!

Then we must tell our story: yet, like any story, it needs to be authentic; otherwise, it will have no longevity.

Substance delivering value

An iconic brand needs to offer the consumer something extraordinarily powerful. To start with, an iconic brand needs to deliver a relevant and real value proposition to consumers.

I can hardly see an iconic brand only being built through clever advertising and marketing alone. Even the often-cited Old Spice viral campaign starts with a brand that was iconic in its time, being one of the very first male fragrances.

Steve Jobs used to say that design is not only what a brand looks and feels like, but also how it performs. From the way an Apple product looks like, to the way it feels, to the way you interface with it, to the way it works, to the "ecosystem (eg iTunes) that underlies it - every single aspect of it adds unique value to the consumer experience. There is true substance in it. The user experience is unlike any that of other brand. This is what substance is - it delivers true consumer value in the user experience.

Sony used to produce many such products once. The Walkman offered consumers a portable music experience when the only alternatives were larger and more cumbersome products. The decline of Sony is highly correlated with its decline in product uniqueness and leadership.

Without substance, no brand can become iconic - you cannot bore your way into fame!

Storytelling ignites a brand

An iconic brand needs to tell a good story. Consumers must be clear on what makes your brand unique and you must tell a good story.

No iconic brand is ever boring - it always makes consumers sit-up and take notice. This means marketers need to think about how they can create stories that are real and interesting: one's that will engage consumers.

If a brand has to spend inordinate amounts of money on marketing to be noticed, either it is a lousy brand or it is wasting its money on pedestrian marketing campaigns. When you get exactly out of a campaign what you put into it, it is simply not good enough.

This happens when we do not think deeply enough about our brand, what makes it different and how we can tell a story about it that will engage. Moreover, even if our brand is pedestrian - most consumers do not get excited about detergent, we still need to get "bang-for-our-buck." Even normal brands can tell good stories - strong detergent brands are still very high quality products as they do work!

Many years ago, TBWA Hunt Lascaris created a campaign to launch BMW three series power steering. It used a small white mouse running on a steering wheel: this powerful demonstration made the car (and agency) famous. This kind of thinking does not just happen: someone put hard thought into it. It became one of the best stories ever to come out of South African marketing.

Nevertheless, it also sold something that was real.

The stronger the brand integrity, the more important it is to sell its unique benefits. There is an old saying, "if you have something to say in marketing, please just say it."

Marketing an iconic brand is a serious challenge for marketers, as it means that being pedestrian is not good enough. It has to be exceptional. This is more important in the beginning, when the brand is not yet iconic in the eyes of consumers.

When you compare industries with high levels of parity, they often have to spend large amounts of money on marketing. Whilst we may argue that is a sure-fire way to break through the competitive clutter, a highly differentiated brand should not have to do that. I should do a few significant things that punch above its weight.

Nando's has been telling good stories over many years. It responds to the topic of the day and relates that to a particular product offer to the market. This means the brand becomes talked-about, laughed about and ultimately cared about. Even though many other restaurants offer Portuguese chicken, Nando's took ownership of the story around it.

Developing your brand story

- Create a product that is significant, or search for what makes your brand significant. Unless you are Cartier or Apple, this will not jump out at you, you will need to search for it. Sometimes you will not find it, which is significant in its own right - not even the best marketer and agency can sell a bad product all the time, it wears you down.
- Then use that as a base to tell a real story about your brand. One that will break the clutter of mediocrity and stand out, engage and intrigue. Good stories have all the traits of a James Bond movie. Yet not all movies are good, you need to work at it.

It all helps if the brand is good, then there is a story to tell. In my experience, many brands have stories if you care to look for them.

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