



TOPIC: MARKETING AND SALES

# WHAT MAKES A BRAND PERSONALITY MOTIVATING?

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It's become a truism in recent years: it's no longer enough to brew great beer. To be successful in an era of headwinds for the beer category, a brewery must successfully develop its brand. But if the process of brewing is sometimes described as "yeast wrangling," the process of brand-building might just as readily be called "image wrangling." After all, a brand's meaning really resides not in the brewer's strategic intent, but in the hearts and minds of drinkers. You can put out marketing conveying images and messages each of which, in your eyes, captures an aspect of your brand meaning, like tiles in a mosaic. But you may discover that many drinkers perceive some of those messages differently than you do – enough so that the mosaic they assemble in their minds can be different than what you had intended.

It's not our intention in this article to review the fundamentals of brands and brand building. But one of the thornier challenges is worth further discussion: creating brand differentiation that's relevant and motivating.

Strong brands tend to have five elements in common: they're Authentic, Different, Relevant, Motivating, and Consistent. The idea of Authenticity in craft beer has been discussed, analyzed, dissected, questioned, and clarified for well over a decade, and while some may still have questions about it, most readers probably feel they have better things to do with their time than read one more article about Authenticity.

It may be more productive to talk about the second of those five dimensions, Brand Difference. It's not an exaggeration to say that if your brand isn't perceived as different in some meaningful way, then you don't have a brand. If your competitor, Jane Doe Pale Ale, is successful in your market, no drinker needs a second-best Jane Doe Pale Ale, which is all your brand will be if it's not somehow different. (Well, being a second-best Jane Doe Pale Ale at a lower price may be one option for attaining that perception of difference, but does any brewery really want to go there?)

In a country such as the U.S. with over 9,000 breweries, finding a relevant and motivating point of difference might seem impossible. But the truth is, even if there were only two brands in the world, finding a relevant and motivating point of tangible difference would be challenging – because anything that makes one brand tangibly different can be copied by the other brand.[i] That's why intangible differences – different attitudes, values, emotional promises, personalities – are the key. Because once ownership of an intangible is established, it can be very difficult for anyone to dislodge it.

Here it might be helpful to remind readers of something they probably already know: a brand is much more than a logo or label, in the same way that a person is more than a face. It really can be helpful to think of a brand as a person. If you meet someone new at a party, and you're telling a friend about the encounter the next day, the friend may ask what your new acquaintance was like. While you may or may not describe how they look, in most cases you'll probably describe their personality. Were they funny? Down-to-earth? Inclined to say provocative things? Full of interesting stories about travel or other topics? There's a famous quote (frequently mis-attributed to poet and writer Maya Angelou,) that applies to brands as well as people: "People will forget what you say. People will forget what you do. But people will never forget how you made them feel."

This is why efforts to develop and/or articulate a point of difference may be well-served by thinking in terms of a differentiated brand personality – to start by articulating the primary competitors' personalities and asking how one's own brand is, or could be, different. Think of the canned water brand Liquid Death, which despite a complete absence of product difference has built success on "...a heavy-metal swagger... It's marketed as a beverage that is amusing and exemplary."<sup>[ii]</sup> Or Montucky Cold Snacks, one of whose founders "...admits it's not the liquid in the cans that has put his business on a rocket trajectory of growth." Instead, Montucky's sales have exploded..." based largely...on the brand's [fun, carefree] personality."<sup>[iii]</sup>

But of course, "different for the sake of being different" is unlikely to be a sound strategy. The brand's drinkers must see that difference as Relevant and Motivating – the third and fourth attributes listed above.

Well, what makes a brand personality relevant and motivating? In many cases, people are drawn to brands that help them tap into a side of themselves that's under-developed or hidden in daily life.<sup>[iv]</sup> In a real sense they live vicariously through the brand personality.

How can this work in practice? Douglas B. Holt, a former marketing professor, discusses his role in the development of the brand's strategy for Fat Tire beer in his book *Cultural Strategy*<sup>[v]</sup>, co-authored with Douglas Cameron.

Some may see this as "old news," as the approach detailed is from the early 2000s (not the more recent re-invention of Fat Tire). But readers may not be aware of the behind-the-scenes strategy designed to build a relevant difference by tapping into a side of Fat Tire drinkers that was indeed underdeveloped in daily life.

While the 2007 campaign that resulted from the strategy was built on multiple pillars, an internet-only video called "The Tinkerer"<sup>[vi]</sup> is probably the best single window into the innocent, playful personality at the core of the strategy. Under a soundtrack of mood-setting music, the video follows the quest of a rural tinkerer to rebuild a bicycle from a damaged frame he finds at a junk shop. After portraying glimpses into his weeks-long efforts, the video ends with him beaming as he literally rides his finished creation into the sunset, giving way to the words "Follow Your Folly. Ours is Beer."

But here's how Holt and Cameron summarize the strategy behind the video, and why it was so powerfully motivating: Demographically, our target drinkers were highly educated male professionals and managers... This cohort had no time or mental capacity to devote themselves to what they most wanted to do: the construction of self through creative acts... Carving out time from [technology] jobs to dedicate oneself to creative acts seemed to be a pipedream.

While Fat Tire's sales in recent years have suffered as the headwinds faced by flagship beers have gained force, the eight years after the launch of Follow Your Folly saw great success for the brand. From 2008 through 2016, Fat Tire sales grew at approximately 4% per year.<sup>[i]</sup> This is impressive, given that this growth was coming atop an already sizable base; in 2008 Fat Tire alone sold about 350,000 barrels, already a sizable 4% share of the craft beer market.

If Fat Tire had relied on a product difference alone, well, among America's many talented brewers there are no doubt more than a few who could have brewed a very similar beer. But Fat Tire's point of intangible difference insulated it from any significant degree of replication, and that's a narrative worth repeating.

Now, we're not suggesting that craft brewers start investing their scarce resources in producing elaborate videos. But there are many ways to bring a brand personality to life – not least of which is the logo and label, but also image-aligned promotions, event sponsorships, social media posts, et al. And the story of "Follow Your Folly" exemplifies the power of building a point of difference through a differentiated personality – one that's also relevant and motivating because it helps drinkers tap into a side of themselves that's not as well-developed as they'd like it to be.

By Mike Kallenberger

[i] There's an old premise of marketing strategy that the Number One brand in a category or market should literally copy everything the Number Two brand does, because then Number Two will never be able to achieve a point of difference.

[ii] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2023/06/17/liquid-death-water-brand/>

[iii] <https://www.goodbeerhunting.com/sightlines/2020/1/21/how-montucky-became-the-most-successful-beer-brand-youve-never-heard-of>

[iv] First Key INSIGHTS pieces have previously explored some aspects of this idea. See "Hard Seltzer Drinkers: The Blurring of Myth and Reality," and "The Great Equalizer."

[v] Douglas Holt and Douglas Cameron, *Cultural Strategy: Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands*, Oxford University Press, 2012

[vi] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjPZknpIFJM> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-JxG3SIh3U>

[vii] These are from the author's calculations based on data from multiple reports

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