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The Myth at the Heart of the Brand

Successful brands embody myths - now these can be analysed

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This paper adapts aspects of the work of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss for use in market analysis and research. The methodology has been pioneered by the author's company, and is regularly used by them in their analytical work.

The paper explains how successful brands embody myths; and outlines a technique by which this brand myth can be identified, evaluated and exploited.

The technique can also be used by 'non-semiotic' market researchers and planners as a useful tool in analysis, strategic planning and brand development.

Re-thinking the meaning of myth

The argument of this paper is that most successful brands embody their own form of cultural myth.

Which obviously raises immediate questions, such as

*What do you mean by a cultural myth?
Is it anything more than just a figure of speech?
How and where do you find one?
Can you do anything with it when you've found it?*

The paper sets out to answer these questions: to explain what brand myth is, and to suggest ways in which that knowledge can be put to practical use.

We begin by looking at the colloquial meaning of the word *myth*: as a kind of 'tall tale'.

In English, the word has a built-in ambivalence. It is used to label a 'sacred', heroic story or subject (*eg* the myth of Camelot, the myth of the holy grail, etc). Yet at the same time, its use signals doubt as to that story's veracity and authenticity (*eg* the stories of Camelot and the holy grail were only *myths*, after all).

The word is also used, colloquially, in marketing - and with some of those same double-edged overtones. We use it to describe 'super-brands' or brand

phenomena (eg *The Body Shop* myth, the mythic *Nike* brand, the *Branson* myth, etc) Particularly brands that seem to have reached the front rank suddenly - or 'magically' - compared with long-established names like *Oxo*, *White Horse*, or *Hovis*. These latter are brands seen as having 'come up the hard way': slowly but steadily, over many years and therefore, whatever else they may be, are hardly mythical.

(There are, of course, exceptions: *Levis* have been around for many years too; yet the brand would certainly be included in any list of mythic brands).

This use of the word to suggest 'magical' growth in the marketplace also hints that the brand itself might embody some intrinsic magical properties (compare expressions like *cult status*, frequently applied to successfully targeted products and brands that have become icons for their market sector).

If there were any such intrinsic magic, then - like most magical matters - it would be hard to explore via any traditional market research methodology. The very use of such metaphysical vocabulary is an acknowledgment that certain brand attributes seem to lie somewhere beyond the realms of rational analysis.

Myth demystified

However, this paper looks in the opposite direction. It takes its definition of myth, not from magic, nor from metaphysics; but from anthropology.

There is another Levi-Strauss: *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, the French anthropologist and founder of structural anthropology. His work, both in structuralism and ethnology among tribal societies in many parts of the world, led him to an entirely new definition of myth; one with a precise meaning and a valid cultural function.

In his words

'The purpose of a myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction'

Put simply, his argument is that

(a) all cultures try to account for apparent contradictions in the world around them and

(b) in almost all languages - whether 'primitive' or 'sophisticated' - myths follow similar structural lines in dramatising these contradictions into story form, in order to resolve them.

It is on this definition that the argument of this paper is built.

Successful brands resolve contradictions

Translating this definition into modern marketing language means that a *brand's* myth is the belief by consumers that that brand offers them a way of resolving a problem or situation that hitherto represented some kind of contradiction. Or, from the perspective of the marketer, that the brand holds the power to reconcile a cultural opposition.

For a simple example of this definition of brand myth, we might look at *Persil*. Here, the brand (expressed through the persona of '*the Persil Mum*') reconciles the cultural opposition between

the '*distance*' and detachment of a factory-produced, high-tech washing agent on the one hand, and the '*closeness*' of a caring, loving member of the family on the other

From this contradiction, we could define the *Persil* myth by an expression such as

caring detachment

Our own practical experience, working in semiotic analysis, indicates that brand myth - the power to resolve contradictions in this way - is not just an attribute of one or two unusually outstanding, or apparently 'magical' brands. Virtually every consistently successful brand today embodies its own particular myth.

The more contradiction the better

The power of the brand myth seems to stand in direct proportion to the dynamism of the contradiction it resolves: *ie* the stronger the oppositions, the stronger the myth - *and, consequently, the stronger the brand positioning.*

It thus follows that the *weaker* the opposition (which often erodes over time, as a result of socio-cultural change or the growth of new technologies) then the weaker the myth - *and, consequently, the weaker the brand in the marketplace.*

We find this to be borne out in practice. Companies with 'ailing', 'declining' or 'dying' brands are often companies (from a semiotic perspective) whose brand myths have fallen behind, or out of tune with, the dynamics of the contemporary culture within which they and their consumers live.

We have developed the Lévi-Strauss formula into a technique for identifying and evaluating brand myth; and for indicating the reasons, if and when it is losing power within its culture. We then use the same techniques to help put things

right - either by revitalising an obsolescent myth, or formulating a completely new one.

The problem of myth identification can be more difficult than might appear from the over-simplified example of *Persil*. Well-established brands are complex animals and may sometimes incorporate more than one myth - or at least more than one way of expressing that myth.

Certainly there is a whole hierarchy of oppositions, with which to refine - and ultimately define - the expression of a brand's 'root-myth'. And it is the task of the analyst to work his/her way up that hierarchic pyramid, in order to find the opposition that expresses the myth most distinctively and evocatively.

The myth quadrant

Figure 1 shows the basic diagrammatic structure for working on the analysis of myth. Two simple axes at right angles to each other: one vertical, one horizontal. The axes mark the boundaries of four corresponding corners, or quadrants:

The vertical axis runs between one pair of opposites (*opposition 1*)
the horizontal axis between another (*opposition 2*)

Two facing corner quadrants represent *cultural norms*
the other two represent *cultural contradictions*.

The myth stands or falls by the strength and dynamism of these various oppositions, and the subtleties of their interplay between the four 'poles' and the four quadrants of the diagram.

If the two pairs of opposites are well selected, then two of the quadrants diagonally facing each other will clearly represent accepted beliefs and attitudes (*cultural norms*).

Conversely, the other two corners will represent *cultural contradictions*.
One or both of these will be the *myth quadrant*.

If no cultural norms emerge, then - consequently - no contradictions will appear. This means that the chosen pairs of opposites were not relevant enough, or appropriate enough, or powerful enough, or interactive enough to generate them.

Fairy tale myths

Figure 2 shows a simple example of the diagram in action: in a myth of the fairytale.

Good is the opposite of *bad* (opposition 1)
Beautiful is the opposite of *ugly* (opposition 2)

Most western popular culture, equates
good with *beautiful* and
bad with *ugly*

Therefore the
good /beautiful and the
bad /ugly
are the quadrants of *cultural norms*

This is why, in our fairytales, the heroes and heroines are almost
invariably
good *and* beautiful
(like *Snow White, Cinderella, The Sleeping Beauty, etc*)

and our villains are
bad *and* ugly
(like *giants, ogres and goblins*).

However (for all kinds of psycho-social and historical reasons) there have been
times and situations when the popular imagination needed to invent the concept
of *beautiful badness* or *ugly goodness*.

So the *bad /beautiful* and the
good /ugly
became these quadrants of *cultural contradictions*

And their attributes became the two *myths* within the fairytale diagram.

Popular culture fulfilled these mythic slots by inventing characters to represent
them, for example

the wicked stepmother (*bad but beautiful*)
the seven dwarfs (*good but ugly*).

Powerful enough creations, both in image and positioning, to resolve their
intrinsic contradictions. So powerful, in fact, that such mythic, *ambivalent*
characters are usually the most memorable characters of the stories in which they
occur

It is this power and memorability of *myth-as-reconciled-contradiction* that gives
it its commercial importance and value. Translated into the world of marketing,

the contradictory corners of the diagram (*ie* the potential *myth quadrants*) represent the communicational *windows of opportunity*.

Provided their contradictions can be *creatively resolved*, then at least one of those two quadrants is going to provide a strong brand and/or advertising positioning myth, or a viable myth on which to base a new product proposition.

Window of opportunity - or market cliché?

Assembling the myth diagram itself is not difficult. But the first trap is to avoid 're-inventing the wheel': devising a too-simplistic myth, or one whose contradiction has already been resolved; and thus merely expresses a communicational cliché.

As an example of a once-powerful but now taken-for-granted myth, consider the ready-prepared meal

The two opposing pairs are:

Real food is opposed to *junk food* (opposition 1)
Home-made is opposed to *commercially made* (opposition 2) .

The cultural norms are (or rather *were*)

real food/home made
and *junk food/commercially made*

leaving

commercially made/real food
and *home-made junk food*

as the cultural oppositions - and both, in theory, therefore potential myth material.

This example also introduces another consideration. Of the two contradictory quadrants in a myth diagram, usually only one is a starter. The other frequently offers a kind of 'double-bind'; the *worst* of all worlds.

In this case, it is the

home-made/junk food quadrant
which identifies that worst-case scenario.

Which positions

commercially made/real food
as the myth quadrant - the window of opportunity.

Which indeed it was, some twenty-five years go, when Marks & Spencer identified and and successfully opened it, with their high-quality, ready-prepared meals.

Today, it would be an outdated myth-position to start from. *Commercially made real food* is now readily available from many food companies and most major supermarkets; so the myth - and the proposition it represents - have both lost their original power.

Here is a cultural contradiction that no longer exists, because of technological development.

Compiling oppositional pairs

This deliberately over-simplified example highlights the importance of finding really 'sharp' pairs of opposites, in order to create a truly distinctive, ideally even unique myth. The problem is how and where to find these sharp sets of oppositional pairs.

At this juncture, a small injection of semiotic know-how can prove useful. One of the axioms of semiotics is that we understand things in the world around us because of their '*not-ness*' (*ie* via their opposites).

Thus, for example we know when it's *light* because it's not *dark*
we know something is *smooth* because it's not *rough*
we recognise *modesty* because it's not *boastfulness*.

On this basis, if we were to compile a list of all the (good *and* bad) attributes of a brand, we could, at the same time, compile a parallel list of all their (bad and good) opposites.

As an example, let us use scotch whisky. For the purposes of this paper, we will consider a (fictional) mid-market, old-established, *declining* whisky brand, called *Black Sporrán*.

Let us further suppose that its owners are searching for an exciting new, *younger* positioning in the marketplace. In our terms, they are searching for *a new scotch whisky myth*.

So we can list each of the properties and perceptions of *Black Sporrán*, (good and bad) and at the same time we can also list its opposite to form a 'rival' column

| | | |
|--------|-------|-----|
| smooth | rough | (a) |
| dark | light | (a) |
| heavy | light | (a) |

| formal | informal | (b) |
|---------------------|-------------------|-----|
| drunk neat | drunk diluted | (a) |
| serious | fun | (b) |
| 'sacred' | 'profane' | (b) |
| respectful | flippant | (b) |
| older men | younger men/women | (b) |
| sincere | ironic | (b) |
| strong | mild | (a) |
| deserved | undeserved | (b) |
| reward | stimulus | (b) |
| private | social | (b) |
| 'traditional' label | 'modern' label | (a) |
| men's club | cafe bar | (b) |
| heritage | instant | (b) |
| authentic | phoney | (b) |
| pedigreed | illegitimate | (b) |
| hierarchic | egalitarian | (b) |
| upper class | lower class | (b) |
| cliché Scotland | real Scotland | (b) |
| national | international | (b) |

To help further structure and simplify this demonstration, each pair of opposites has been classified as either

- (a) '*material*' (opposition 1) or
- (b) '*situational*' (opposition 2).

It is interesting in this particular listing - and in the light of the whisky company's declared objective of going for a younger market sector - to see just how many '*opposites*' of the traditional world of scotch whisky-drinking are also discriminators of today's younger end of the drinks market.

This phenomenon seems to be true of a number of market sectors. 'Forward progress' in a market often means moving towards its *opposite* paradigm.

A random choice

Let us now take any one pair of opposites, at random, from the (a) classification, and a pair from (b). For example:

dark/light from (a) and
sincere/ironic from (b)
(see figure 4.

We would probably agree - in terms of today's UK drinks market - that the *sincere/dark* and *ironic/light* quadrants are nearer to being cultural norms than the other two corners.

This grouping is a good example of one where the choice of oppositional pairs is not an immediately obvious one; so the allocation of quadrants needs some thought. (The 'sharper' the pairings, the more the *norm* corners almost jump out from the diagram, so clear are they - making the other two corners even more contradictory and thus better potential myth material).

However, we did make a genuinely random choice as an example; so we'll stay with it for the purpose of this exercise.

Often, as already pointed out, only one contradictory corner is of any myth value. The other embodies too many negatives to be of use. However, on this occasion, there are *two* potential windows - each of which offers its own distinctive creative possibilities.

The two 'windows of opportunity' - or myth-positions - are:

light sincerity (or *sincere lightness*) and
dark irony (or *ironic darkness*).

Continuing with the example, but using other, different (a) and (b) pairings, would generate many further windows. Some will now be on the edge of cliché: positions that have already been thoroughly exploited by other products and brands. But, every so often, by a consciously careful choice of pairings, a surprising number of genuinely fresh insights will emerge.

Even this simple - random - example has generated four thought-provoking possibilities for a new scotch whisky myth:

1. Light sincerity
2. Sincere lightness
3. Dark irony
4. Ironic darkness

There are semantic differences between each of these four myth-positions; and the next stage would be for the brand team - and target consumers - to evaluate them, comparing the associations each evokes (plus of course its relevance to the materiality of the product itself).

However that part of the process goes beyond the intended scope of this paper.

'Myth technology'

The myth diagram need not be just a static one. It can also be used to track movement (past, present and intended future), reflecting changes in brand positioning and in the surrounding culture.

Figure 5a illustrates a (fictional) brand of outdoor clothing: *Peakland*. Its positioning has always been that of specialist supplier for mountaineers and rock-climbers.

Traditionally, opposition 1 in its world has always been between

serious ('professional' climbing) and
fun (active outdoor life)

and opposition 2 between

heavy duty and *light duty*.

The *norms* for its traditional marketplace were

serious/heavy duty and fun/lightweight

Conversely the *contradictions* were

serious/lightweight and fun/heavy duty.

Peakland originally established itself years ago, as a producer of serious/heavy duty clothing, working to the cultural *norms* of the time.

Later on, the company was able to design clothes using special new lightweight yet weather-resistant fabrics. Because of this, it was able to move into a (contradictory) myth quadrant:

serious/lightweight

from which position it built most of its present successful reputation.

Nowadays, however, more and more people are spending some degree of their leisure time following active outdoor pursuits. Alongside serious, dedicated climbers, there is now a new much larger market for high-performance active-leisurewear: for fell-walkers, hikers, cyclists, birdwatchers - even for people just walking their dogs in the park.

Peakland has been missing out on this new market, by restricting its appeal solely to the serious climber; even though its lightweight fabrics are highly appropriate (if not, perhaps, its present colour ranges).

By brightening up these colour ranges, and becoming a shade more 'fashion-conscious', the company could move towards yet another quadrant

from *serious/lightweight* to *fun/lightweigh*.

In this position, the company could possibly reshape its image, and present itself as younger and more modern-looking for this wider market.

However, by moving back into a cultural *norm* quadrant, and no longer resolving a contradiction, the brand may well lose credibility. A large number of companies operate from this *fun/lightweight* norm positioning, and *Peakland* could well sacrifice some of the authenticity that established its reputation in the first place.

So before making any such move, it would pay the company to carefully review its cultural positioning; perhaps to the extent of seeking entirely new, more contemporary pairs of opposition - and thus lead it to the creation of an entirely new myth.

The three versions of the myth diagram graphically chart the cultural patterns (and dangers) implicit in these past and possible future changes of direction.

In conclusion - a research/creative bridge

Traditionally, the mindset of the research world is quite different from - and sometimes antagonistic to - that of the creative world (in some advertising agencies, the two languages provide a vivid in-house example of cultural opposition!)

As an interpretative tool, yet one firmly based on data (data from research, semiotic analysis, observation, briefing from the client, cultural study, etc) myth-diagram technique can be a useful bridge, for strategic planners, across this often conflicting research/creative discourse.

Because it expresses itself graphically, and uses evocative 'human' terminology in evaluating variables, the myth diagram can hold more meaning for creative people than 'cold' statistics. (This visual demonstrability also makes it a useful tool at the client debrief stage).

Finally - because a considerable degree of sensitive, imaginative judgment and interpretation is needed to assemble and use it effectively - the myth diagram

could also perhaps help stimulate more 'creative' right-brain thinking by researchers themselves.

Reference

Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1977) *Structural Anthropology*, Peregrine

Valentine, Virginia 'Opening up the Black Box', MRS Conference, 1995