

ICONIC BRANDS - BRANDS WHICH SURVIVE

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ABSTRACT

We live in a world full of brands-big and small, weak and strong, new and age-old. These brands touch our life in ways more than one. Some brands are distant to us whereas some become an integral part of our lives. They no longer belong to a product or a service category, or to a nation or a company, they belong to those in whose thoughts and lives they reside- the consumers. These iconic brands are not simply the output of desires of marketing professionals; they are result and consequence of what companies do consistently over the years.

With the increasing wrath of competition, marketers are increasingly getting dependent on customers for mind share and pocket share. But in these recessionary times, the customers have become very fickle-minded, changing brands, stores and channels. In tough markets like today, even big brands are feeling it hard to sustain. Revenue is falling; growth is stalled for all, but these iconic brands are able to sustain.

Its not an easy task to build a brand that can be termed as iconic, rather brands do not easily achieve iconic status. In the past, even iconic brands which tower over their rivals, and dominate the industry markets, have ended up in futile efforts to sustain the impact of galloping technology, marketing clutter and global competition.

What are these brands, are they a reality or just a delusion of the psycho marketer, can they be built, how some brands have managed to stay on top, are some of the issues this paper is going to highlight upon.

Keywords: Iconic Brands, Cult Brands, Brand Icons, Brand Building, Iconic Brands in India.

INTRODUCTION

It was in 1967 when for the first time a thumb sized girl, dressed in a polka dotted frock hummed ‘Utterly Butterly Delicious!’ and just like that, a star was born overnight -- a ‘pun’ loving star, who with her bold tongue-in-cheek topicals, made way directly into the hearts of millions and became an instant hit, especially with housewives. That ‘utterly- butterly delicious’ is still in the minds of millions may it be an adult or a small kid. For more than forty years now, the little girl has managed to keep her fan following intact. So much so that

the ads are now ready to enter the Guinness Book of World Records for being the longest running campaign ever. What is worth mentioning is that the brand has managed all this despite spending less than one percent of its revenues on advertising.

We see many such examples of different brands in our day to day life, brands that have become a part of our identity. We go to buy a soft drink and we say "bhaiya coke dena" (Give us Coke), we go to buy washing detergent and we refer to it as surf. Brands like these have come to represent something more than a product or service. They are rooted in our culture and our consciousness. They are icons...or what we call iconic brands.

Think of Apple, Nike, Mercedes, they are the brands every marketer views with awe. Valued by their core customers these brands have the power to hold the marketplace for many years. All companies aspire to build brands that ultimately get etched in the culture of the society and become cultural icons. But very few companies are able to achieve this iconic status.

One can easily observe small kids, totally engulfed by media exposure and brand experiences, demanding specific brands from their parents. It's a common sight to watch kids fighting with their parents in retail outlets for their Colgates and Lifebuoys, or their Boost and Cadburys. According to a survey report of Outlook, Lifebuoy became quite popular among kids few years ago, especially after the Lifebuoy's TV campaign, which shows a group of kids trying to help clear rain water from a cricket stadium (because of which the match has been delayed), after taking a shower with Lifebuoy soap. The campaign claimed that since the kids have the Lifebuoy protection, they are untouched by germs and diseases, and this suggestion not only influenced kids but also their mothers.

Lifebuoy is a part of regular Indian families since 1895. From being bright red soap cake to it's now sleeker *avatar* lifebuoy has come a long way to become an iconic brand across the world based on its consistent core positioning of health and hygiene.

Lifebuoy is not the only brand which has contained consumer interest and loyalty over the years. There are brands like Lux, Cadbury Dairy Milk, Bajaj, Tata namak that have become synonym with the product that they refer to; they have become an intrinsic part of our social structure.

Now the question is what does "iconic" really mean? It is important to understand and explore the world of cultural icons, and explore the unique nature of iconic brands, how are they born, how they evolve and why they become such an integral part of our lives.

Iconic Brands

In marketing, we refer to iconic brands as brands that are recognizable everywhere in the world, and are not easily shaken by ordinary political or economic convulsions. These are the brands that become popular beyond the obvious level with consumers.

Because of what they mean to the society and what they are, iconic brands need to present themselves and behave in an entirely different way from other brands, and their future depends on knowing and continuously nurturing their cultural, emotional significance.

What play a very crucial role in it are the design, communication and innovation, and the key is tapping into the full potential of each and using them in a perfectly integrated way.

As described by H B Holt, a Harvard Business School professor, an iconic brand is the one that has social lives and cultural significance that go well beyond product benefits and features. As per him iconic brands cannot be of functional genre. They either have to be in look good or feel good categories. Iconic brands appeal to a certain set of values and attitudes and are life style driven. They are part and parcel of our life and not only about brand sales.

Nature of Iconic Brands: What are they all about?

Are iconic brands and cult brands one and the same? Well, there can be some distinction drawn between the two. Cult brands can be defined as a phenomenon where customers display an unusually strong emotional involvement with a particular brand thus lending the brand an exceptionally high degree of customer loyalty, along with an amplified sense owing the brand. While the cult brands should have the most fanatical and most loyal customer followings, the cult brands need not always be the biggest and most well known. Nevertheless, some cult brands escape the clutches of its cult members and gain immense popularity to become iconic brands. The case of Amitabh Bachchan in the Bollywood industry is an apt example for this. Thus iconic brands emerges when the fame of cults grow leaps and bounds.

Iconic brands have conventionally seen to grow from cultural roots but it's true that the most successful brand icons are those that transcend national boundaries and are able to garner global appeal and prominence. Brands like Coca-Cola, Lego, and Mercedes have been able to do this not only because they have broad appeal, but because they have tapped into universal needs and values: Coke offers happiness to the masses, Lego facilitates imaginative play for children of varying ages, and Mercedes satisfies a yearning for status.

Iconic brands are not made overnight. They all start as a product, may be sometimes as unique offerings like an iPod. They move on as product and do everything that is in sync with market needs and along with it they tramped a way that was not explored by others.

If we look at some of the common iconic brands in history like Coca-Cola, Harley Davidson, Giorgio Armani, Apple, and Mc Donald's they all reveal some very common characteristics. All these brands fulfill three important requirements of being an iconic brand:

- Create an Identity Myth
- Involve Multiple Story Tellers
- Weave Powerful Brand Stories.

The Marlboro man represents the values of the Western frontier: strong, independent and capable. McDonald's is yet another brand that has created a very appealing mythical world, a wondrous, magical place where everyone is welcome, safe, happy, loved, kind, sharing and forever young at heart. While there are now many expensive watches to choose from, Rolex still symbolizes success and status around the world.

Iconic brands are instantly recognizable, be it the 'Apple of the Apple', or the golden arches of McDonalds or back home the melodious 'Humara bajaj' jingle, all are readily identifiable. Iconic brands are that way different from most large and popular brands, in the sense that they occupy far higher top-of-mind awareness than others.

Overall if we see we can say that iconic brand customers range in age from eight to eighty, iconic brands are all amazingly open and inclusive companies. Their customer bases are usually diverse and usually cut across all ages, races, genders, creeds, and socio-economic backgrounds. Their customer base is so diverse because they aren't just selling a product or a service but an opportunity to fulfill their customers' passions, dreams, and aspirations. Another main thing worth mentioning is that iconic brands are 'sharing' and 'collaborative'. There is nothing more satisfactory and inclusive about a brand than when the company listens and acts on the advice its customers give it.

Why Iconic Brands Fail?

AT&T once meant any phone service to most of Americans, just like Xerox means photocopying to many of us. But with the changing business practices and ever changing world of brands once iconic brands in the past also tend to fade way, like AT & T's decision to retreat from the residential phone business few years back. Xerox's dominance was so total in the copier market that it was synonymous with copying, but with the advent of technology, suddenly Xerox was competing with Hewlett Packard, Canon and others. Coming close to bankruptcy a few years ago, Xerox has been struggling to remake it's image as it had once. There are many such examples of iconic brands fading away over a period of time, Brands like Fait, Ambassador, Bata that have been there for generations seem to have lost all their sheen and focus.

So what makes some brands to stay there and some to fade away in time is the question to ponder on. As per some advertising professions why Bata lost its once iconic image to the competitors was the change in its core positioning. With it's advent Hush-Puppies it shifted it's image of being value for money and affordable brand to a more contemporary and up - market brand.

Another reason why some iconic brands fail is because of their sub standard offerings in the times when consumers have a huge range to make a choice.

"Iconic Brands like Ambassador and Fait couldn't sustain primarily because their offerings were sub standard." Says, Ad film maker and CEO Genesis Films, Prahalad Kakkar. He says that these brands were bought by consumers who didn't have a choice but with the entrance of new brands that give a better product consumers tend to dump the sub standard ones.

Coke taught the corporate years ago: "*do not tinker with well-loved iconic brands*" Iconic company like coke has also undergone major branding disasters. One such disaster was Coke's famous blunder of changing its own iconic brand with the ill-starred introduction of New Coke.

Another reason of failure is the poor marketing strategy of many brands. Another case of iconic brand failure is Liril. Launched in 1975 it built a category for it self in the Indian market.

Liril was positioned on the freshness platform right from its birth. The girl and the waterfall with the unique jingle ensured that the freshness is experienced by the audience. This remained there for almost 25 years when one day the company thought they should change the communication. It changed the imagery and the jingle in the name of freshness .The new jingle or the ad never had that freshness. And with it the iconic brand became a history. The

brand that didn't change its ad in 25 years had to change the same twice in just a span of 5 years.

India and Iconic Brands

Talking about India, there are certain names that are attractive and command a lot of attention. Maruti for example is the household name in the country with tagline going "mera sapna meri maruti", it is the first vehicle for most of the Indian families. The brand Infosys, inspite of not being India's biggest IT company nor the most widely present in market coverage attracts a lot of hires. The trust and faith customers have put In fact, Tata has the brand reputation across verticals. While Royal Enfield is trying to replicate the Harley-Davidson model, Hutch struggled with its brand status (thanks to the frequent change in the ownership). Among the Indian aspirants for the iconic status include Airtel and Future group with their ad campaigns. Airtel was aiming for iconic stature with its "Barriers break when people talk" campaign (that has gone off air now). Meanwhile, Future Group's corporate campaign, *Sone Ki Chidiya* harked back to the golden age of India (again, this ad has not been on air for sometime now). The new ad campaign targets the new upwardly mobile middle class where everyone is indulging with the money earned. And the tagline goes – Let's enjoy what we earned. However, not all brands have the dash of edginess, a devoted fan base, or the niche positioning to be cult brands. But those that do tend to share similar characteristics make them successful.

One another case of iconic Indian brand is the desh ka namak- TATA Namak. With new communication strategy TATA attempts to elevate the brand to the status of a national icon *desh ka namak* (the countrys salt). With this positioning, Tata Chemicals, the manufacturers of Tata Salt, hopes to break the brand clutter caused by recent entrants in the salt market. TATA Salt is indeed the pioneer in India's branded-salt industry, It has held the No 1 position in the country since its launch in 1983 capturing around 37 per cent share of the branded-salt market and an 18 per cent share of the total salt market. Started with the positioning statement of "*Namak ho Tata ka, Tata namak*" Company tried to build its communication around the fact that Tata Salt, India's first iodized salt, was manufactured by a Tata company and within no time TATA became a household name almost synonym to salt.

But do we really have iconic brands that are really Indian... Looking around we see most of the phoren' brands that are attracting the youth here. Limca, Gold Spot, Campa Cola, Citra, (the cool Indian brands of the 70s and 80s) have long been bought by Coke. Talking about the Indian soft drinks Thums Up is the lone survivor.

Why is it that prevents Indian brands to become cult with the youth.As Shailesh Chaturvedi, the CEO of Tommy Hilfiger India puts it there are few reason why there are no iconic Indian youth brands to talk about. He listed issues like sustainability, fear of loss of existing core customers, older youth icons in India to be some issues that prevent Indian brands from becoming iconic.

CONCLUSION

As literature and research points out, building icons may not be that difficult but sustaining them in the new emerging market landscapes is definitely challenging. Icon brands are

particularly identifiable with a set of customers and when these customers are baffled with dozens of brand choices, they seem to feel isolated and locked with the 'icon brand'. The iconic brands seem rigid, resisting change and lacking innovation.

The same brand which was once close to their hearts because it could distant them from the crowd may distant the brand from the crowd.

Brands need to migrate from the traditional "pedestal" model to a new "platform" model. This in turn would mean that the brand should be able to rapidly prototype, test, and iterate new initiatives to deliver new forms of customer value. The brand should appear as a blend of several value streams, rather than an object. Brands can tap into customer's covert minds and use creativity intelligently to create value streams. Thus, the brand icons that will manage to survive will be those that can reinvent themselves to be more essential and less iconic. Like Apple is vigorously reinventing itself (and its customers) out of the traditional computer business, music business, photo business, movie business and broadcast business.

Remember Cadbury Dairy Milk Ad's... How they shifted from the theme of 'celebrations' to 'Pehli Tareekh hai' and 'kuch meetha ho jaaye' ad. Today Cadbury is not just a chocolate brand running for its share of money amidst other brands, but Cadburys has become the chocolate itself, augmenting the customer value to a range of reasons to have chocolate.

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