

# Using archetypes to build stronger brands

*Jon Howard-Spink, Mustoe Merriman Levy, sets out an approach to understanding and developing firmly-grounded brands*

**P**ART ART, part science, “brand” is the difference between a bottle of soda and a bottle of Coke, the intangible yet visceral impact of a person’s subjective experience with the product – the personal memories and cultural associations that orbit around it (1)

## The curse of the pharaohs

We all know why we need brands. We know the physical properties of the products we work with, the functional benefits that stem from these, and how they might be translated into communication propositions. We will also be aware that most other products in the market will have similar functionality. A spin must be developed for our offering to create its market positioning, but what happens if someone else comes and sits nearby?

Recognising that the most potent consumer needs are often emotional rather than functional, we look to intangible qualities to provide differentiation. We build a brand. Easy isn’t it? Unfortunately not. Though the development and management of brands is central and fundamental to everything we do, are the tools we use up to the job? Or do they do more harm than good?

Brands are complex, abstract and difficult to pin down. However, in endeavouring to define them we often forget this. With techniques such as brand pyramids, we take something wild and untamed and attempt to constrain and control it. Rather than trying to



understand brands in their natural habitats, we put them in a zoo.

I recognise that pyramids, onions and similar techniques can be useful internal disciplines. But do they really help define the unchanging core values of a brand? We spend weeks debating the nuances of synonyms, performing semantic gymnastics to prove that Brand X is different from Brand Y, and agonising over whether something is an Emotional Benefit or a Brand Value – a distinction we struggle to understand in the first place. At the end of the day, what does this get us? More often than not, a pile of

disconnected words that looks like nothing less than an explosion in a bombed thesaurus factory.

Unfortunately, having built our pyramid and agreed that our brand is contemporary, stylish, relevant, inclusive and other usual suspects, we fall into the trap of thinking our job is finished. Usually though, we are no closer to articulating ‘core essence’ than when we began – even if that particular box has been filled in. What should be rich, complex and, by definition, hard to articulate ends up neutered and subjected to death by a thousand adjectives. Ironically, our supposed unchanging brand template is reduced to a fluid selection of meaningless or undifferentiating words that even those close to the process interpret in different ways.

The result, to quote Shakespeare, is a brand which is ‘...a walking shadow; a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more: a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’. You may feel this is harsh, but ask yourself how many walking shadows there are out there, and if we struggle to find meaning, think how consumers feel. Nature abhors a vacuum, and where meaning is unclear consumers impose their own. Our brands become subject to the vagaries of personal experience, resulting in fragmentation and inconsistency. ‘My’ brand becomes different to ‘your’ brand, which may be terribly post-

modern, but isn't great for effective brand management. Where brands are poorly defined we lose control.

Obviously, this isn't always the case. It happens often enough though – with the negative consequences frequently going unnoticed – for an alternative approach to be considered. If current tools and models aren't good enough, what is the alternative? Is there a better way to get to grips with the intangible characteristics of a brand?

### 'A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away'

*'It will be no longer enough to produce a useful product. A story or legend must be built into it; a story that embodies values beyond utility. What is happening is that the story shapes our feelings about a product, and has become an enormous part of what we buy when we buy a product' (2)*

## 'An archetype is a universally familiar character or situation that transcends time, place, culture, gender and age. It represents an eternal truth'

There is a book I haven't read called *The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes and Heroines* (3). As the title suggests, its purpose is to help writers of romantic fiction in character development. It is built around the premise that there are certain identifiable characters you should use (16 to be precise), like the swashbuckler or the librarian.

Apart from generating amusement in planning departments, and games of 'who's who?' around the agency, there is an important truth here. This is the truth of archetypes: that there are certain basic characters and storylines that appear regularly in myth, fairytale, literature and film; archetypes that represent core aspects of the human condition, and tap deep into our motivations and sense of meaning.

When we encounter these, they resonate in powerful ways that transcend culture and demographics. This is why, when penning the original *Star Wars* trilogy, George Lucas turned to Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, to help him understand the archetypal narrative structure and

characters found in these mythic stories, and why these three films enjoy such strong and enduring appeal. Whether Luke Skywalker, The Man With No Name, Red Riding Hood, Harry Potter, or real people such as JFK, Princess Diana or Marilyn Monroe, there is something primal in archetypal characters and situations that stirs our emotions, stimulates our memory and sometimes changes lives.

In developing and managing brands, are we really so different from George Lucas or a budding Barbara Cartland? Ironically, in this postmodern age when people are supposedly no longer interested in meta-narratives with common understanding, brand development is nothing short of creating a story that people want to be part of; a character with values that have deep resonance which our target audience want to emu-

late or be associated with.

This is why a Harley-Davidson marketer can say:

*'what we sell is the ability for a 43-year-old accountant to dress in black leather, ride through small towns and have people be afraid of him' (4)*

Or why Scott Bedbury, in his time head of marketing at Nike and Starbucks, believes that:

*'a brand is a metaphorical story that ... connects with something very deep — a fundamental human appreciation of mythology ... Companies that manifest this sensibility ... invoke something very powerful' (5)*

As an approach, this is nothing new. It is precisely what the Ancient Greeks and Romans did with abstractions. They personalised them and used story and ritual to bring them to life in a way that went far beyond our use of flabby personality descriptors. Similarly, using the same archetypes, we can personalise our brands today, using story and ritual to bring them to life.

The reality is that many of us will be doing this unconsciously already – that's

the whole point. But how much more powerful might our brands be, if we recognised this truth and pursued it systematically?

This might seem counter-intuitive. We spend most of our time endeavouring to make brands unique, so why root them in an archetype if someone else could do the same? Won't this minimise differentiation? Only if you believe that the pyramid of adjectives currently masquerading as firm and distinctive foundations is better, and only if you confuse an archetype with a stereotype, as they are in no way synonymous.

### You say stereotype, I say archetype

*'He's just a stereotype.  
He drinks his age in pints.  
He has girls every night.  
But he doesn't really exist'  
(‘Stereotype’, The Specials)*

A stereotype is culturally, and often temporally, specific, usually complete with a heap of negative connotations. All cultures and times have stereotypical characters, but they don't travel well. They tend to be rigid, simplistic and one-dimensional. Unfortunately, most also carry some grain of truth, which is why they are easy to slip into and hard to shake off. They are ten-a-penny in sitcoms and just as prevalent in advertising, which can be one reason why brands become undifferentiated, moribund and in need of reinvention. Stereotypes embody surly teenagers, lazy students, arrogant stockbrokers, bumbling vicars, hen-pecked husbands and bad women drivers.

In comparison, an archetype is a universally familiar character or situation that transcends time, place, culture, gender and age. It represents an eternal truth more than just a (stereotypical) manifestation; a start point more than the finishing line and a brand's bedrock more than the characters in its advertising. So, whereas a stereotype can be expressed in only one shallow, inflexible way, archetypes can be manifested – and often combined – in a multitude of distinct ways, each of which taps into primal needs and motivations whilst retaining the freedom and flexibility to change external trappings with the times.

Take a very obvious archetype, the

## 'Manifestations and nuances may be different, but we all recognise a character [the champion] who fights for truth in defence of the weak'

Champion. This character is found throughout myth, history and popular culture. Manifestations and nuances may be different, but we all recognise a character who (usually but not always) fights for truth in defence of the weak (whether people or ideals). The Champion is Joan of Arc, Martin Luther King and Aragorn, William Wallace, Robin Hood and the Magnificent Seven. It protects, empowers and champions the underdog; it challenges unjust systems, fights the bully and rescues people in distress.

When it comes to brands, the Champion archetype can be seen in the likes of Domestos, *Which?* or Virgin. No one would say these brands are interchangeable or undifferentiated. Quite the reverse. They all have a clear, distinct positioning in their markets, and these positionings are consistent and potent. These brands all tap into the same recognisable archetype, but this actually frees them to be different and avoids the descent into undifferentiated stereotyping that comes when a brand lacks strong foundations (Figure 1).

The Champion is just one of many archetypes. These are also potentially limitless if you look to specific character manifestations – for example 'my brand

is Indiana Jones' 'my brand is Peter Pan'. It isn't enough to combine these with everything else on the brand pyramid or creative brief. Tapping into the power of archetypes isn't about mouthing the words, it is about being a living manifestation of that archetype to your consumers.

Alternatively, to create structure, some have attempted to identify key master archetypes that exist in most cultures – notably Carol Pearson, author of *Awaken The Heroes Within* and *The Hero and The Outlaw* (6). The danger is that this can tend to the stereotypical if used insensitively. However, as a start point it stops you lurching into debates about the relative merits of obscure characters from mythology and folklore (7).

### Here's one I prepared earlier

How does it work? Consider a household cleaning product. You might start by discussing whether your brand is a hero fighting against dirt and germs, an innocent promising a return to the natural simplicity of Eden, or a caregiver nurturing and protecting your family.

Having decided that the archetype you want is the caregiver, you may then flesh out particular nuances. There may be secondary archetypes that are part of the brand – while Richard Branson and Virgin embody the Hero archetype, there is also a bit of the Outlaw as well. Or there may be particular examples of caregivers, real or fictitious, that might capture how you want to be seen – are you an earth mother or Mother Teresa; Florence Nightingale or Princess Diana?

It then becomes much easier to use conventional techniques such as brand pyramids. If everyone agrees that the brand is a caregiver as manifested by an earth mother, you find that the words in the boxes suddenly become more meaningful and interconnected.

It also becomes easier to judge whether an execution is right for the brand – we may have different

interpretations of adjectives, but we all understand archetypes in the same way.

### And they all lived happily ever after...

It may be because I fritter away my earnings on comics, and sub-Tolkien fantasy novels, but I find it more exciting to think of myself as the author of eternal brand stories than as someone who writes strategy documents and brand pyramids.

Obviously, putting theory into practice is never easy. From my personal experience, and a quick web surf, it becomes clear that this isn't broadly held as a way of viewing brands or brand management. Apart from Dublin-based brand consultancy Alexander Dunlop, and Carol Pearson's rather disappointing *The Hero and The Outlaw*, little work has been done in this area. Words and adjectives remain the norm. Unfortunately, people tend to feel comfortable with convention, even if it doesn't deliver.

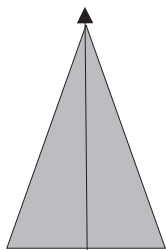
It is easy to do things the accepted way. More often than not, I do it. There is a real danger of looking like a mad hippy (another good stereotype) if you start likening your client's brand to characters in fairytales. None the less, in true hero's journey fashion, having received my call, I plan to throw caution to the wind, set off down this path, and see what happens.

1. N Hawley: 'Brand Defined'. *Business 2.0*, June 2000.
2. R Jensen: *The Dream Society*. McGraw-Hill, 1999.
3. See [www.tamicowden.com/archetypes.htm](http://www.tamicowden.com/archetypes.htm).
4. As quoted by Tom Peters at [Tompeters.com](http://Tompeters.com).
5. S Bedbury: 'What Great Brands Do'. *Fast-company*, August 1997.
6. See [www.herowithin.com](http://www.herowithin.com).
7. See the *Encyclopaedia Mythica* at [www.pantheon.org](http://www.pantheon.org).

FIGURE 1

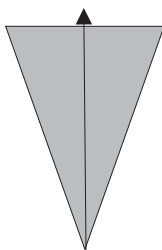
### Brands as stereotype and archetype

Brands rooted in culture-specific norms are simplistic and undifferentiated



Stereotype

Brands rooted in universal and eternal truths are rich and distinctive



Archetype



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