

What is your story? And who is your brand?

Jon Howard-Spink, sets out some guidelines for using archetypes effectively in building brands

IS THERE A better way to define brands than the jumble of bland, unrelated adjectives we typically employ? That was the question I posed here last October (1). My answer was to suggest that there is much to be learnt from the archetypal stories and characters of myth and legend. However, as with any good yarn, my first instalment ended on a cliffhanger. Left unsaid was how exactly you put this theory into practice, which I address in this article.

Understanding archetypes

If you look at myths and legends from different cultures and times, similar underlying narrative structures and characters emerge. These archetypes resonate powerfully with us, and are regularly exploited by the film-makers and authors of today. According to Chris Vogler, one of Hollywood's leading script doctors, '[the great films] consist of common elements found universally in myths, fairy tales and dreams ... as soon as you enter their world you become aware of recurring character types and relationships' (2).

Jung suggested these archetypes have continued cross-cultural potency because they reflect our own 'collective unconscious', drives, needs, fears and desires hardwired into all of us. Often though, we only consciously recognise and articulate these drives when we see them brought to life in the stories of others, whether Homer, the Brothers Grimm, Tolkien or Spielberg. As myth analyst Joseph Campbell suggested of his contemporary: 'Jung ... has demonstrated irrefutably that the logic, heroes and deeds of myth survive into modern times ... [in our] private, unrecognised, yet secretly potent pantheon of dreams' (3).

This recognition that the eternal stories have continued potency is not limited to mythologists and psychoanalysts. Stephen Gould, one of the great scientists of the late 20th century, also saw the truth in these tales – 'human thought and emotion have a universality that transcends time, converting the

different stages of history into theatres that provide lessons for modern players'. Even in the cutting-edge science of artificial intelligence, there is increasingly a belief that it is general (and eternal) themes and metaphors that are key to intelligence, not knowledge of specific facts and figures (4). And even that arch-rationalist modernist Richard Dawkins, in his theory of self-perpetuating ideas or memes, is talking about nothing less than stories.

Ultimately, when you strip everything else away, story is all we are. We are defined by the stories we tell ... and that are told about us. And brands are part of that story.

Using the power of archetypes to create legendary brands

'A brand is a metaphorical story that ... connects with something very deep – a fundamental human appreciation of

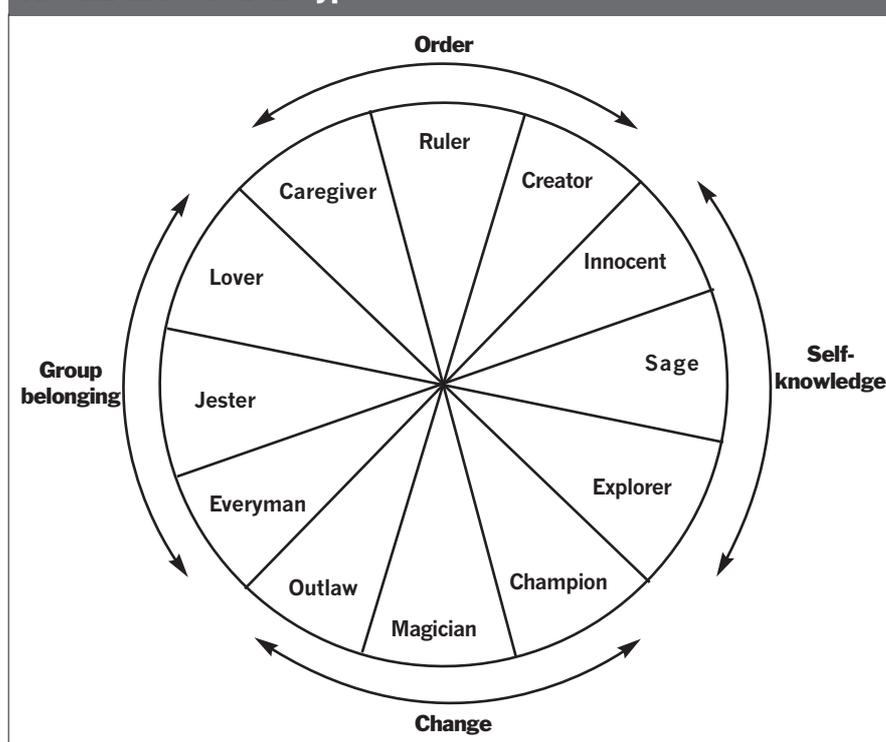
mythology ... Companies that manifest this sensibility ... invoke something very powerful'. (Scott Bedbury, ex-head of marketing at Nike and Starbucks).

At the heart of every great brand, whether it is a chocolate bar for its consumers, a bank for its customers, pop stars for their fans, or a company to its employees, is a compelling story built around an emotive character or personality. While it is important to have a good product or service, and a competitive price, it is this story that provides sustainable differentiation and reason for purchase. We are at our most loyal when buying the story of the brand ... and the opportunity to become part of that story.

So, we buy Nike sports shoes, but not just because they offer a performance benefit. We are also buying a story rooted in the history of sporting endeavour, and a chance to join the gods of sporting prowess. In other words, Nike isn't just

FIGURE 1

The 12 master archetypes



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selling shoes; it is selling life meaning that no one else can offer. Similarly, Harley-Davidson doesn't just sell motorbikes, but the story of you as a Hell's Angel on the wide, open roads of America ... even if you live somewhere completely different.

Thinking of brands as story and character is powerful stuff, as Bedbury suggests, moving us beyond the limitations of adjectival definitions. If I say my brand is iconoclastic, crusading, rebellious and charismatic, I may feel these words are rich and distinctive. But being iconoclastic and rebellious can mean different things for the marketing department and the MD, client and agency, or planner and creative team. We assume common understanding, when in reality our visions of the brand could be fundamentally at odds.

If, however, I say my brand is Robin Hood, the archetypal champion of the underdog, everything becomes clear: all ambiguity is removed. Everyone understands the character and values of the brand, the story it is telling, and how that story should be brought to life for the consumer. Interestingly, it is claimed that Richard Branson's vision in the early days of the Virgin empire was for the brand to be 'like Robin Hood'. And that archetypal vision has been made manifest ever since. Indeed, so emotionally appealing is the Virgin brand, that we often forgive its product shortcomings – 'It's OK if the trains don't run on time, because Virgin is on our side!'

This is what it means to use the power of archetypes to create legendary brands.

Putting theory into practice

'There is no limit to the number of possible archetypes: they are as varied as human experience itself' (*Gale's Encyclopaedia of Psychology*).

Branson was lucky. His vision for the Virgin brand came already packaged in archetypal terms. But most of the time, we won't have the luxury of knowing which of the limitless archetypes our

brand should be rooted in (or why). For this reason, structure must be applied. To do this, I have turned to the mythologists and social anthropologists who suggest that the limitless characters of myths and legends (and, by implication, books and films) can be defined in terms of master character archetypes. Carol Pearson (5), possibly the best-known contemporary writer in this field, has suggested that there are 12 of these (Figure 1).

Where it can be difficult to isolate one person or character that captures the values and meaning of your brand, agreeing that your brand is an Explorer or Outlaw can be far easier. In turn, this makes specific personification much more straightforward.

Building on this principle, I have developed a suite of tools to help manage the brand archotyping process. These have been used very successfully with our advertising clients at Mustoes, delivering significant step-change insights in the process. And they are also a central project-based offering of our sister brand consultancy, The Oven.

Recognising that a great brand requires a great story built around a great character, these tools are designed to help brand owners understand, formalise, communicate and manage their story and character,

What's the story?

Ask yourself these 5 questions ...

1. How well established is the story currently?
 2. How internally consistent is it?
 3. Do people understand the story ... and does everyone understand it in the same way?
 4. How believable and motivating do people find it?
 5. What character and values does it suggest?
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and to align all aspects of their business in light of this understanding. The approach takes as its start point two key questions – What is your story? and Who is your brand? In looking at how to answer these questions, I will focus on two of the tools we use: Story Audit and Brand Archotyping Workshops. I will explain how those tools work by considering three different brands I have worked with which, for confidentiality reasons, I will call Brand A, Brand B and Brand C. These all happen to be long-standing fmcg brands, but the principles of managing meaning would apply in any context, including for new brand concept development and internal culture management (the company 'brand' to its employees).

What is your story?

If a great brand requires a compelling story, it is important to understand the stories told about that brand. This is the purpose of a Story Audit.

The answers come from reviewing how a brand talks about itself, for example in company reports, on its website, its packaging or in its advertising; and from carrying out interviews with key stakeholders, particularly long-term employees, key suppliers and customers, and loyal consumers.

Carrying out a Story Audit proved a significant first step in repositioning Brand A. Historically, the brand was something of an Everyman, an unpretentious yet rather macho savoury snack. Though there was some truth in this, it was always felt that there was more to the brand.

The hidden depths were revealed by a Story Audit, especially when people were encouraged to be more creative in their recounting. Indeed, it is often the case that, for those directly involved with marketing a brand, it is only by stepping outside our usual language and models (positioning statements, brand images, market shares, and so on) that the real story emerges.

In this instance, rather than a filling fuel for truck drivers and construction workers, the stories people told conjured

up more a timeless Innocent. In the words of the subsequent creative brief, the brand is an 'antidote to the stresses and strains of the modern world; the embodiment of a nicely outdated view of life'.

Who is your brand?

Though carrying out a Story Audit can be a stand-alone project, it is typically carried out in conjunction with a Brand Archetyping Workshop because, if a great brand requires a compelling story, that story needs to be built around an emotive character. And the most emotive characters are archetypal ones.

The workshop is designed to help people get to grips with this character, and define it in a relevant and motivating way, laying firm foundations for the brand's story to be aligned and implemented through all aspects of the business. A workshop will typically have three steps.

1. Defining the brand in terms of the 12 master character archetypes.
2. Bringing this archetypal definition to life in terms of a specific personification.
3. Agreeing the values of this personification.

When working with archetypes, there are a number of important considerations. For example, you need to differentiate between the generic archetype of a market, which, though important, can often be strong in all brands, and the archetypal nuances that make each brand different. Brand B is a good example of this.

Brand B had always been positioned as an Explorer, in part due to overseas provenance, with its point of difference being functional convenience. Building

on this practical benefit, a Brand Archetyping Workshop helped identify a more emotionally distinctive positioning, that of a Creator – in a complex, often confusing market, this brand helps you get the results you want.

Prior to a workshop, participants fill out our interactive Archetype Assessor, rating their brand on 96 descriptors (try it out at www.oven-uk.com/brandarchotyping). The output of this gives an indication of the archetypes a brand may be rooted in. Interestingly, in this instance, Creator was already instinctively emerging as by far the strongest archetype, not the generic Explorer (Figure 2).

Once a brand has been defined in terms of the master archetypes, the next step is to bring it to life through personification. It is at here that we make concrete all that the brand stands for, by rooting it in a known character. Brand C, for example, is an obvious Magician, the secret ingredient that brings transformation. Often, though, there had been an all-powerful, Gandalf-like quality to how the brand was portrayed. What became clear during the workshop, however, was that this missed a key facet of the brand: a naive Innocent quality which means the brand doesn't always know what will happen when its power is unleashed. In this way, it was felt that Harry Potter, rather than Gandalf, was a more accurate and useful personification of the brand and its values.

The story continues

Beyond these central tools, further applications for brand archotyping have begun to emerge through the projects I have carried out. These include the following.

Archetype alignment workshops, where the implications of a brand's archetype on all aspects of the business, internal and external, are considered.

Brand storytelling, where, by various means you enable key brand stakeholders to understand and internalise the brand story.

Brand story implementation programmes that bring a brand's character and story to life, whether in advertising or annual reports, through promotions or at point of sale, in your office design or through your websites.

Story management, which recognises that defining a brand's story is not a one-off exercise. You need to monitor and manage the story over time, to ensure it remains both consistent and relevant.

Each represents a different chapter in

TABLE 1

Branding on the web	
	No of results
'Brand image'	105,000
'Brand equity'	75,600
'Brand positioning'	18,000
'Brand personality'	6,600
'Brand essence'	2,820
'Brand attitude'	1,380
'Brand core'	921
'Brand archetype'	22
'Brand archotyping'	1

Source: Google search, 01.05.03

the development of a brand's story, and together they create the meaningful, distinctive and emotive brand properties that more conventional models and approaches fail to deliver.

The importance of being different

Put the words 'brand image' into Google and you get 105,000 results. It is the currency everyone uses, but it is a currency that has become devalued due to its over-reliance on verbal definitions. The same is true of equity, positioning, personality or essence. But put the words 'brand archetype' into Google and you get just 22 results ('brand archotyping' appears only once) (see Table 1).

To conclude, not only does brand archotyping give you a more meaningful, distinctive and emotionally potent definition of your brand, it does so in a way that few people are yet exploiting. And, as we all know, being innovative and different in marketing is one of the best ways to guarantee business success. So, what is your story and who is your brand? ■

1. J Howard-Spink: *Using Archetypes to Build Stronger Brands*. Admap, Oct 2002.
2. C Vogler: *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters*, Pan, 1999.
3. J Campbell: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Fontana Press, 1988.
4. R Schank, R Abelson and R Wyer (ed): *Knowledge and Memory: the Real Story (Advances in Social Cognition)*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995.
5. C Pearson: *Awakening the Heroes Within: Twelve Archetypes to Help Us Find Ourselves and Transform the World*, Harper, San Francisco, 1998.

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