

POPULAR

THEORY WHAT MAKES A BRAND SO POPULAR, ITS FANS GO TO EXTRAORDINARY LENGTHS TO DISPLAY THEIR AFFECTIONS? JULIA NEKICH INVESTIGATES.

In a busy market cluttered with millions of brands, some 'connect' with consumers more than others. Some brands inspire consumers to purchase products time and time again – and tell others about them. Indeed, brand loyalty really isn't easy to achieve and is often the ultimate goal of marketers.

Then there is brand devotion. A proportion of consumers display such devotion to a particular brand, they collect its products, set up clubs or websites with other devotees, or even indelibly tattoo the logo on themselves.

"Brand devotion goes beyond average loyalty – it is when a consumer develops a complete assimilation with the brand," says Associate Professor Bryan Lukas, head of the University of Melbourne's department of management. "An example is people queuing all night for the release of a Harry Potter book." Now a global brand with spin-off products such as movies, toys, stationery and games, Harry Potter has become a whole lifestyle.

Lukas says there are mechanisms to stimulate brand devotion. "You need to understand your target market very well. Then you create a brand 'story' that resonates with that market at a fundamental level. This story is the essence of what the brand stands for, and is reflected in its advertising or PR."

The underdog of the drink market

Since Nudie was established in 2003 in the competitive fruit juice market, it has achieved 15-20 per cent annual growth and developed a following of self-proclaimed 'Nudie addicts' – consumers who deck their bedrooms with the Nudie logo, or collect its empty bottles. Last year, one Sydney schoolgirl requested that she be driven to her formal in a Nudie van. Nudie graciously obliged.

James Ajaka, Nudie's chief sales and marketing manager, says consumer engagement (along with a superior product) has helped achieve this kind of devotion. "We've encouraged consumers at every point, from asking for new juice recipes to ideas on what to do with our bottles," he says. Nudie employs a full-time person to answer every email, and fortnightly newsletters are sent to its 28,000 website members. "We don't have a big budget – it's mainly PR, like giveaways on Black Thunders [radio network Austereo's four-wheel drive promotional fleet], and we sponsor community sporting teams by giving them product," he says.

Nudie recently ran a competition called Australia's Biggest Nudie Addict, where consumers had to demonstrate their addiction. A first of its kind for Nudie, it attracted more than 70,000 responses. "It was emails by our members that started the campaign. "People were sending in images of themselves and saying they were the biggest Nudie addicts ever," says Ajaka.

According to marketing experts, such levels of devotion are difficult to create. "It's very difficult for a marketer to say they're going to develop brand devotion," says Marylouise Caldwell, senior marketing lecturer at the University of Sydney. "For those who have brand devotion, I don't think any of them could have predicted it. It needs in-depth research in finding what people want to be able to extend themselves."

Caldwell says devotion is likely to occur when a brand 'fills in' aspects of consumers' desired ideal self. "With Nudie, devotion likely associates with championing the underdog of the beverage market – cultivated with a fun, baby-like cartoon figure – and a strong belief in natural foods. Hence the willingness to pay a premium for small containers of high-quality natural juice. Nudie's grassroots strategy has worked because it creates positive word of mouth." ►

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WE'RE CONTINUOUSLY EXPANDING OUR PRODUCT CATEGORIES, AND THE COMMUNITY EDUCATES US THROUGH EBAY CHATBOARDS AND THEIR OWN SUGGESTIONS.

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Sharon Scheepers
Marketing director
ebay





“
BLOOM HAS GOT
A STORY BEHIND IT,
AND A LOT OF LOVE
AND PASSION THAT
CONSUMERS FEEL.”

Natalie Bloom,
Founder & owner,
Bloom Cosmetics

An overseas brand goes local

Back in its early days, eBay Australia also used a grassroots approach. “We associated eBay with everything Australian,” says marketing director Sharon Scheepers. “We did trade shows and promotions that tapped into Australian pop culture. The day that Pat Rafter cut off his ponytail, we listed the ponytail on eBay with the proceeds going to Pat’s favourite charity. After the Sydney Olympic Games, we auctioned off hundreds of pieces of athletes’ memorabilia, including Ian Thorpe’s speedsuit.”

Stories of eBay addicts abound, and today, eBay Australia has three million registered members locally. Scheepers says eBay taps into its market by responding continually to its needs. “We’re continuously expanding our product categories, and the community educates us through eBay chatboards and their own suggestions,” she says.

Blooming in the cosmetics market

Like other popular marketable brands, Australian cosmetics brand Bloom is represented by a whimsical icon and has developed a devoted following. “Miss Bloom has a bit of soul,” says founder and owner Natalie Bloom. “At a recent promotion, a young woman approached us and showed us a tattoo of Miss Bloom on her shoulder!”

Natalie says the brand has stuck with consumers “because it’s not just a slick line of cosmetics. It’s got a story behind it, and a lot of love and passion that consumers feel. People also love a brand when hard work has gone into it.”

Since it was established, in 1993, Bloom has relied on positive word of mouth. “We’ve always had support from beauty editors globally,” Natalie says. Consumer engagement is also top of the promotions list. “We have strong e-marketing campaigns and run competitions. For instance, we wanted some feedback regarding a new product, so we sent the product for trialling to the first 50 people who emailed for it.”

“Devotion hits on the ‘emotions’ of people in the target market. The phenomenon doesn’t tap into a specific demographic – it’s across genders and ages,” says Associate Professor Lukas.

When devotion does happen, it’s like being in love, says Caldwell. “It feels natural, a total fit, unavoidable, overwhelming. Alternatives are not considered; commitment is total. Consumers feel these brands are a critical part of their lives for a long time – sometimes forever!” ●

Creating brand devotion

While there is no formula for developing brand devotion, some of these steps have proved successful for a number of brands:

- Define your target market.
- Your product must be perceived as superior.
- Create a story that ‘touches’ your market.
- Make your marketing very targeted – try promoting the brand through smaller channels.
- PR can be more effective than advertising.
- Cultivate the devotion through consumer incentives that generate greater use.

Necessary conditions for brand devotion

According to Marylouise Caldwell, from the University of Sydney, achieving high levels of devotion is not an option for every brand. Some conditions are necessary:

- 01 A large quantity of consumers must perceive the product as superior along the lines they value (taste, wholesomeness, prestige).
- 02 These consumers should have the characteristics of fortitude and stability (and not be unstoppable variety seekers).
- 03 They should typically operate in a social environment in which they can discuss and/or display the brand without fear of disapproval.