

Passion, dedication and care: branding inspiration

As the Far East seems to move closer and closer to the west, and its two billion people open their wallets to brands, it might be valuable to seek some inspiration from oriental culture. At least, from one part of the Far East, which is as culturally diverse as Europe's thirty-plus countries are, and as varied as the cultures of North America's states.

For western brands that are about to hit any part of Asia, you need a culturally aware Asian brand strategy to avoid a negative response to the culture shock you and your brand might experience. Even if you have no plans to enter Asian markets, there's lots to learn from comparing culturally derived attitudes which all have lessons for brands and business.

For example, let's look at sake, Japan's traditional rice wine. When you're in Japan, you'll observe a gesture that's typical in the hospitality of the country. It's a gesture that has relevance to branding and business in general. The eggcup-sized sake cup will be placed in front of you, sitting in a receptacle of some kind – an elegant cherrywood box, an

everyday saucer. When your host or companion pours your sake the cup will be filled to overflowing, the receptacle it sits in receiving the overflow and itself being filled to the brim. This overflowing expresses the generosity of the host, restaurant or bar. It's a gesture to show gratitude for your presence. And it exhibits a desire to give you more than you expect. You'll agree that this vignette opens vistas of meaning – brands must over-deliver and exceed customer expectations. Yet, so often, brands simply meet expectations. I'll never forget my first sake. Such gestures of abundance, hospitality and respect will be associated by your customers with your brand, creating an invaluable emotional tie between them.

Another lesson I've learnt from Japan occurred when I was visiting a picturesque little village near Kyoto, in the beautiful Kansai region. I had ordered some handcrafted knives and was told that the finishing process would take approximately half-an-hour. So, I left the store and explored the village, bathed in the rosy glow cast by the springtime cherry blossoms. I returned to the knife maker

exactly half-an-hour later. To my surprise, and contrary to my previous experience of Japanese punctuality and exactitude, the knives were not ready. Two men were still hard at work on them and remained so for fifteen minutes longer than expected. I decide to wait and observe these craftsmen in action. In the western world, I wouldn't have been too surprised to see the men expressing irritation at the extra work time. Here, though, the men's demeanors expressed passion, exquisite care, and tireless professionalism invested in every manoeuvre that produced the amazing tools. These knives were unique pieces, the antithesis of a tool I'd collect at random from WallMart. Later I realized that my wait was not unexpected. This observation time was built into the transaction as part of the handover process from vendor to buyer. The intentional fifteen minute interval was an exercise in demonstrative dedication, to show me



the care that went into my knives. Again, this is a memory I will have for life. It has made those knives into a whole story of dedication to a product.

In the world of branding, such passion tends to disappear along with the founder's resignation. I'm sure there is a ton of passion behind the scenes when ordering a book on Amazon.com or any other online retailer. But online buying has translated the customer-retailer relationship into one of collusive silence and distance. And that distance, between me and the brands I buy is widening. When I receive emails from Amazon, they're from the "customer service team". If an individual's name appears in front of this retailer's sealed membrane, it disappears quickly again, severing the promise of a sense of

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real connection. I'm not saying that we should let customers wait for service. I'm saying that demonstrative dedication, shown by the knife craftsmen, is missing in our brand building. Branding is all about creating an emotional engagement between the consumer and the brand. We need to see the passion that lies behind every brand, the real people that make it happen. This human dimension not only bonds customers with brands, it raises customers' empathy levels, making them more patient and understanding when things do go wrong.

Recently I was in India as part of my global BRAND sense Symposiums (www.brandsense.com). I'm introduced to hundreds of brands every day, and in India this was no different. But one particular brand stands out. Lijjat is a company that has as its vision statement: A unique organization of the women, by the women for the women. For decades the company has outsourced their entire production of bread to thousands of homes across India. Lijjat was one of the first true community-based

brands and women produce bread for the company every day, following strict guidelines set by the brand. So, when you choose Lijjat bread from the supermarket shelf, you're not purchasing machine-made bread. You're buying bread made by an individual, with care and love and dedication. And that knowledge makes a true branding difference. Even better, the reason why Lijjat is the best-known bread brand in India is that it's not only produced by India's women, it's owned by them, not by a corporation.

Just like the real world, the internet is all about communities. Yet brands tend to neglect this very important aspect. In fact many companies still express irritation at communication from consumers, rather than as brand-building opportunities. Leveraging the concept of communities, and of the loyalty that can arise from the comradeship and common interests shared by them, can create your brand difference, one of emotional engagement which defies replication.

Asian culture, vast and varied, holds thousands of

unique, small and useful stories, which any brand can leverage when growing. What each and every story has in common is passion – passion for people, for materials, for the product. What each and every great brand is based on is exactly the same. So, remember the three small stories I've told you today when you're next looking for your brand's point of difference.

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Martin Lindstrom is recognized as one of the world's primary branding gurus by The Chartered Institute of Marketing. He's next book BRAND sense – can be pre-ordered at Amazon. Lindstrom is the author of several best-selling branding books including BRANDchild with Patricia B. Seybold (Customer.com), Clicks, Bricks & Brands with Don Peppers & Martha Rogers (1to1



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