



From Ad Spin to Brand Spiral

By Max Sutherland

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The more a brand is talked about, the more it gets embedded in the culture. And the more it gets embedded in pop-music, movies, TV etc, the more it gets talked about. A sure sign of a brand on this spiral is when its advertising begins to get parodied. A very funny Leunig cartoon asserted recently "*I'm scik of fcuk*". Despite the sentiment, it indicates fcuk is on the spiral. Brands that 'arrive' find that parody comes with the territory (see 'Coca-Cola' example this page).



In this column I explore this spiral where brands start copying themselves from brain to brain with reduced reliance on advertising alone to drive the process.

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When we become conscious that a word or a brand is turning up more often, it sets off self-perpetuating effects not unlike our biological genes that try to reproduce themselves. Richard Dawkins (author of "The Selfish Gene") calls these things 'memes'. "As with genes", he says, "we can expect the world to become filled with 'memes' that are good at the art of getting themselves copied from brain to brain."¹

Content-analysis studies in various media support this contention. The more recently and the more often a word appears in a newspaper, the greater the probability it will re-appear in today's issue.² Such self-perpetuation has also been found in studies of peoples' conversations as well as their emails.³

There is a certain logic to it. Memory is like a cache. The more something is encountered the more available it becomes in memory in the future. Also, the more publicity something gets in media, the more important it becomes in peoples' thinking. So, as a brand gets more 'presence' and becomes more available in the market place it becomes more available in the mind as well. 'Presence' symbolizes acceptance. Acceptance symbolizes success. Success breeds success.

With traditional marketing, this escalating, reflexive phenomenon takes off, only after a point. The spiral generally doesn't start at the ground level. It starts at higher levels. So, advertising, promotion and distribution have to *push* the brand, unassisted, up an initial flight - to a level of 'presence' where the brand has a chance to catch the spiral. (*Viral* marketing, the creation of 'buzz' for a brand, can be seen as trying to make the whorl kick in much earlier.)

Another sign of a brand on the spiral is that it begins to appear in the lyrics of pop songs. This is something that brand strategist, Lucian James monitors on his website

<http://www.luciam.com/brand.html>. There have been 81 songs overall in the Billboard top 20 so far this year. Of these 81 songs, 30 songs (37%) mention at least one brand.

Check it out and draw your own conclusions, but clearly one thing that accelerates the spiral is aspiration. In 2004, six out of the top 13 brands mentioned in pop-songs are for luxury brands (Cadillac, Hennessy, Gucci, Rolls Royce, Jaguar and Porsche). Then there are a number of everyday but prominent brands like Holiday Inn, Cool Whip, Polaroid and ESPN.

It seems that aspiration overlays on brand presence to impact the speed of the spiral and this is evident in yet another trend in the USA - babies being named after brands. No, I am not kidding. Today in the USA, kids are being named Avis, Disney, Ikea, Evian and Hyatt. But more frequently they are being given luxury names like Lexus, Dior, Armani, Chanel, Courvoisier and Hennessy. (Check it out at <http://www.nbcsandiego.com/family/2646305/detail.html>.)

People have always been prone to name their kids after things to which they aspire. The early American pilgrims named their kids 'Temperance', 'Chastity' and 'Praise' (three 'memes' that landed with them on the Mayflower).

Nebraska University psychologist Cleveland Evans, who first discovered this naming trend in the USA says that naming a child after a brand such as Armani or Chanel, associated with money or exclusivity, reflects the material hopes of families. He says it is no different from the 19th century when parents named their children Ruby or Opal... it reflects their aspirations.⁴ (Gee, I can't wait to see reaction to the first registration of a kid named 'Fcuk'. What are these parents thinking?)

Although I am hard pushed to find a similar trend in Australia, I do have a niece called Dynasty and her parents are coy about whether the inspiration came from the television series. Anecdotal evidence aside, I can find no solid evidence to naming kids after brands but our Australian data is not easily web accessible and we do often *follow* the US's lead. So who knows...the trend may be just around the corner and soon we will see hundreds of little XXXXs, Billabongs and Granges.

Depending on the launch strategy, brands vary in the spiral velocity. As we saw, making them aspirational seems to increase it. Making it easy for the brand to copy itself from past to present should also increase it. So, when my spouse says 'Don't leave home without ... (the laundry)' the brand that copies itself from my past memory to my present consciousness is the American Express card. Similarly when I look at the illustration earlier with the white flowing script on a red background, I can't help but think of Coca-Cola. And when I see a totally unbranded picture of a silhouetted bottle (as illustrated this page), I can't help but *feel* the

Billboard Top 20 - 2004		
Rank	Brand	Mentions
1	Cadillac	41
2	Hennessy	34
3	Gucci	19
3	Rolls Royce	19
5	Holiday Inn	17
7	Cool Whip	15
6	Jaguar	16
8	Polaroid	13
9	Porsche	12
9	Rover	12
9	ESPN	12
9	MTV	12
9	Bank of America	12

Source: American Brandstand
www.luciam.com/brand.html



brand Absolut is copying itself up from my past to my present consciousness

In essence then, this spiral where brands start copying themselves relatively independently of advertising, supplements the agenda-setting theory of advertising. Advertising doesn't tell us what to think.....but it does tell us what to think *about*. It influences which brands we infer are (becoming) popular and sets our mental agenda. If the second stage kicks in, brands begin to copy themselves from brain to brain and from past to present with reduced reliance on advertising alone to drive the process. In other words, the main driver of the process shades from ad spin to brand spiral.

References

¹ Dawkins R. Unweaving the Rainbow. Allen Lane Penguin Press, London. 1998.

² John R. Anderson, Learning and Memory 2nd Ed. Wiley N.Y. 2000, p233

³ John R. Anderson, Learning and Memory 2nd Ed. Wiley N.Y. 2000, p195

⁴ BBC News. 13 November, 2003