

Marketing

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The slippery nature of cool

By Victor Barac

The fickle worlds of music and popular culture decide which brands become cool

Most marketers rejoice when their brands become cool, but bestowing coolness on a brand is largely out of their hands.

"Cool" is what anthropologists call a "native" or "folk" concept. It refers to a mysterious, though tangible, quality attributed to people, things or events that sets them apart from the ordinary. It's hardly a scientific concept, yet several cool researchers each offer distinctive ways of defining and measuring cool.

London's The Brand Council publishes an annual report on cool brands. For the 2003 edition, it commissioned a research company to survey 300 British ABC1 consumers between the ages of 18 and 30, divided equally between males and females. The report that followed identifies the 50 coolest brands and numerous consumer taste trends. Among the coolest brands in 2003 were Puma, Tate, Ruby & Millie and Courvoisier. The attributes most commonly cited as defining the essence of coolness were, in descending order: uniqueness, originality, innovation and authenticity. Tellingly, more than half the cool brands from 2002 failed to repeat in 2003.

An alternative method of gauging the coolness of brands is to look at their presence in popular culture. For its annual (and quarterly) "American Brandstand" reports, market research company Agenda of San Francisco devised a method of determining the contemporary cultural relevance of brands by quantifying brand references in Billboard Top 20 songs. Brand name references in popular music are almost exclusively found in hip-hop and R&B-the dominant popular music genres of today. In 2003, 43 of the 111 songs in the Billboard Top 20 had lyrics with brand references. Of all artists, 50 Cent mentioned the most brands in his numerous hit songs. Lil' Kim mentions the most brands in a single song.

American Brandstand identifies prestige, aspiration and luxury as the dominant themes of these songs, reflected in 2003 brand favourites such as Mercedes (with 112 mentions in songs), Lexus (with 48 mentions) and Gucci (with 47 mentions). The dominant product categories-automobiles, fashion, and alcoholic beverages-have remained constant since the inaugural research was reported.

In the first half of 2004, Cadillac (41 mentions) supplanted Mercedes as the most mentioned brand, with Hennessy (39 mentions) moving into second place and Gucci and Rolls Royce (26 mentions each) tying for third. As for the top brand name droppers, Lil' Kim and 50 Cent have been eclipsed by rising rapper Kanye West and a whole new set of hip-hop posses. More artists are mentioning more brands in more songs so far in 2004. American Brandstand also reports on a trend toward more complex lyrical uses of brand names that go beyond the "bling" factor.

Though they arrive at coolness quotients using different methods, both American Brandstand and The Brand Council illustrate that coolness is fleeting for more than 50% of the brands-half the brands on last year's lists failed to repeat on this year's list.

Maintaining cool status is an art few brands have managed to master, primarily because the ultimate arbiters of coolness are always other people. Consider Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, recently in the news for a surprising upsurge in U.S. national sales. In 2001, Blue Ribbon was pumping at about a 10th of its historical peak in 1975. Then production unexpectedly started to grow-first by 5% in 2002 and then by 15% in 2003. The company had made no changes in marketing. They spent little on advertising. What happened? It turns out that a popular bar in Portland, Ore. started stocking Blue Ribbon as a substitute for a local beer that failed to deliver a regular supply. Soon, Blue Ribbon was being ordered in ever-increasing quantities in several other Portland bars. The trend continued in Seattle and San Francisco before heading northeast. In some places, like Nashville, demand increased by over 100%. The beer was adopted by a societal cross-section, notably college students, blue-collar workers, punk rockers and backpackers. Costing less than half the price of regional microbrews, Blue Ribbon became the beer of people who hated being marketed to. It had once again become cool.

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Cool research affirms the importance of coolness as a cultural category and shows how ephemeral such status is for most brands. Cool research also suggests that attainment of coolness is largely out of one's hands. It can elude the most ardent suitors while being bestowed upon the indifferent or unsuspecting.

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Tracking the tribes

By Victor Barac

How research pioneer W. Lloyd Warner helped bring together the worlds of anthropology and marketing

While I am an anthropologist, I brave the corporate jungles of North America- instead of tracking primitive tribes in exotic locales- consulting to chiefs, big and small. For some, this is bewildering. "What's anthropology got to do with business?" they ask. "It helps design Intel computer chips, Chrysler cars and Kodak cameras," I respond, "and a whole lot more." In fact, popular innovators in the market research industry get their core ideas and methods from anthropology. So how did this unlikely relationship happen?

For the answer, we have to go back to 1927, when the Western Electric Company of Chicago initiated a long-term productivity study of its firm. It hired Australian anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner, then at Harvard, to lead the observational component of the research. Known for having done fieldwork among Australian desert tribes, Warner's approach to studying human social life was the same everywhere. Whether dressed in grass skirts or Brooks Brothers suits, all social systems had cultures that needed to be studied from the "native's" point of view. But getting that point of view required anthropologists to go out among the natives, a method known as "participant observation."

Warner and his colleagues used participant observation to study the culture of one of Western Electric's factories. They discovered that workers' culture was basically informal, and yet, operationally vital to the company. Workers' culture had no status in scientific management-the prevailing business paradigm of the time-which viewed corporations as machines and workers as little more than materialistic adjuncts. The Western Electric research, published over a decade later in 1939, ignited the field of organizational studies and introduced concepts like "social system" and "culture" into the mainstream of business studies. It cast serious doubt on simplistic, but popularly held, notions of corporations as self-contained entities, refocusing attention instead on the relationship of corporations to the communities and larger social systems in which they operate.

During the Second World War, organizational studies multiplied in the United States. Propelled by his reputation as a pioneer in the field, Warner in 1946 started a Chicago research consultancy, Social Research Inc., with anthropologist Burleigh Gardner. SRI distinguished itself by fearless methodological openness and experimentation. In addition to anthropologists they hired sociologists and psychologists, rapidly acquiring expertise in a wide range of research methods.

Among its first clients were companies eager to learn about managerial culture. Early on, too, were advertising agencies seeking knowledge of consumer behaviour beyond what surveys could yield. SRI conducted detailed ethnographic studies across a range of industries and product categories. Its principle research methods was participant observation, in-depth, open-ended interviews, photographic documentation, and group interviews, precursors of the focus group. SRI laid the groundwork for what was to become known as qualitative research.

In the 1950s and '60s, SRI designed numerous research projects for major marketers. It developed key concepts like brand image and was among the first strategic planners. It also promoted the marketing concept into non-business areas like health, education and the arts. SRI is still in the business of observing the social and symbolic dimensions of corporate culture and consumer behaviour within and outside North America. Warner's work, incidentally, has greatly influenced one of the most sought-after consumer researchers today, Paco Underhill, founder of New York-based research company Envirosell and best-selling author of *Why We Buy*. His philosophy, echoing Warner, is that consumer behaviour cannot solely be understood using ques- tionnaires and focus groups.

Far from being an arriviste on the methodological scene, anthropology is, instead, one of the intellectual and practical foundations upon which contemporary market research functions. No passing fad, anthropology can be best understood as the R & D arm of the research industry.

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