CHAPTER 2

How Is Cultural Branding Different?

ICONIC BRANDS HAVE BEEN GUIDED by a set of tacit strategic principles that I call the *cultural branding model*. These principles differ entirely from those advanced by conventional branding schemes. In fact, cultural branding upends many verities by which managers have sworn for decades. To learn how cultural branding works requires setting aside conventional thinking and developing a new mind-set. To seed this mind-set, I begin with three short case studies in which I contrast cultural branding with the three branding models that dominate business practice today.

Since the 1970s, managers have overwhelmingly relied on a cognitive model of branding—what I call *mind-share branding*. In the 1990s, some experts expanded the mind-share model, which they believed ignored the emotional and relational aspects of branding. These writers pushed for what I call *emotional branding*. With the recent rise of the Internet, another challenger has become popular as well: *viral branding*.

Together, these three branding models account for virtually every consumer branding initiative today undertaken by brand owners, ad agencies, and brand consultancies. When managers seek to build the identity value of their brands, they draw on some combination of these three approaches. Table 2-1 compares the key characteristics of these three models with the cultural branding model.

My research indicates that, while these conventional models may work for other types of branding, they do not build iconic brands. In this chapter, I develop short genealogies of brands often used as exemplars of conventional strategies—Corona (mind share), Coke (emotional), and Snapple (viral)—to demonstrate that implicit cultural branding strategies have built each of these iconic brands.

TABLE 2-1

Comparison of Axioms Across Four Branding Models

	Cultural Branding	Mind-Share Branding	Emotional Branding	Viral Branding
Key Words	Cultural icons, iconic brands	DNA, brand essence, genetic code, USP benefits, onion model	Brand personality, experiential branding, brand religion, experience economy	Stealth marketing, coolhunt, meme, grass roots, infections, seeding, contagion, buzz
Brand Definition	Performer of, and container for, an identity myth	A set of abstract associations	A relationship partner	A communication unit
Branding Definition	Performing myths	Owning associations	Interacting with and building relationships with customers	Spreading viruses via lead customers
Required for a Successful Brand	Performing a myth that addresses an acute contradiction in society	Consistent expression of associations	Deep interpersonal connection	Broad circulation of the virus
Most Appropriate Applications	Identity categories	Functional categories, low-involvement categories, complicated products	Services, retailers, specialty goods	New fashion, new technology
Company's Role	Author	Steward: consistent expression of DNA in all activities over time	Good friend	Hidden puppetmaster: motivate the right consumers to advocate for the brand
Source of Customer Value	Buttressing identity	Simplifying decisions	Relationship with the brand	Being cool, fashionable
Consumers' Role	• Personalizing the brand's myth to fit individual biography • Ritual action to experience the myth when using product	• Ensuring that benefits become salient through repetition • Perceiving benefits when buying and using product	• Interaction with brand • Building a personal relationship	• "Discovering" brand as their own, DIY • Word of mouth

From Mind-Share Branding to Cultural Branding

We can trace the roots of mind share to the unique selling proposition—the principle, advocated by hard-sell advertisers in the 1950s, that each product must tirelessly communicate a single distinctive benefit to its consumers. The idea really took flight in the early 1970s, when Al Ries and Jack Trout published their famous exposition on positioning in the trade magazine *Ad Age.* They later expanded the idea in their best-selling book *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind.*[1] Their argument was simple: For a brand to succeed in a society whose volume of mass communication far exceeds what consumers can manage, the brand must own a simple, focused position in the prospect's mind, usually a benefit associated with the product category.

Since the 1970s, this provocative image—of brands contesting for scarce mental real estate in consumers' minds—has been the most influential idea in branding.[2] Academics and consultants have taught an entire generation of marketers that all brands work according to these principles.

Everyone who's taken a marketing course has seen the ubiquitous onion model of the brand. The hard, durable, objective reality of the market offering—the product or service—resides in the nucleus. Attached to the core are various subjective associations that consumers attribute to the product: product benefits, user attributes, emotions, personality attributes, and the like. The power of the brand lies in these abstract associations that one finds when one "ladders" up from basic functional properties of the product to these softer values, thoughts, and feelings that consumers link to the brand. The mind-share view is today perpetuated by leading academics (such as in books by Kotler, Aaker, Zaltman, and Keller) as well by leading consultants such as Sergio Zyman.[3]

Mind share is familiar to anyone who has read famous stories about how Procter & Gamble used dentists' recommendations to convince Americans that Crest has distinctive cavity-fighting ingredients, or how Unilever built Dove soap into a premium mainstay by telling consumers time and again that Dove is gentle on sensitive skin because each bar contains one-quarter cleansing cream. Many successful and durable brands have been built by the compulsive reiteration of the distinctive benefit (cavity fighting, gentleness) supported with rational arguments (dentists' recommendation, one-quarter cleansing cream) and emotional appeals.

Some variation of mind share is today found in virtually every strategy document used for the world's most prominent brands. The terminology sometimes changes—other popular terms that reference virtually identical ideas include brand essence, DNA, brand identity, genetic code, and brand soul—but the idea has remained remarkably consistent since the 1970s.

Brand strategy, in the mind-share model, begins with identifying the brand's distinctive constellation of these abstract concepts in the consumer's mind. Managers must ensure that this brand essence is consistently evoked in every activity that carries the brand mark and remains consistent over time. Experts encourage managers to act as stewards of the brand's timeless identity.

A Short Genealogy of Corona Beer

The Mexican beer Corona was one of the most successful American iconic brands of the 1990s. Now the leading imported beer in the United States, Corona enjoys sales that have far outpaced the number two import, Heineken.[4]

Mind-share advocates prescribe that to build a strong brand, the company must first stake out a distinctive claim for an important category association, one that competitors haven't captured, and then consistently deliver on this brand essence over time. Yet Corona executed neither of these steps.

Corona's first brief climb to iconic status came in the mid-1980s and peaked around 1988. At the time, Corona was one of the cheapest beers in Mexico, the price brand of the large Mexican brewery Cerveceria Modelo. U.S. distribution was mostly limited to the Southwest, where Mexican Americans tended to live and where Mexican culture influenced the Anglo population.

In the 1980s, the idea of a hedonistic spring-break vacation had caught on spectacularly across U.S. colleges and was widely celebrated in the media. Students from across the country stormed Daytona Beach, Florida; South Padre Island, Texas; and—most popular of all—the beach resorts of Mexico. These vacations were carnivals of excess: 24/7 drinking, wet T-shirt contests, dirty dancing, and sexual escapades, real and imagined.

At about four dollars per case, the price of Corona was certainly appealing. In addition, Corona had a leg up on other Mexican beers for two reasons. First, it had a distinctive package design, with all the right connotations. A clear, returnable bottle with the logo roughly painted straight on the glass, this package was understood as an authentic Mexican beer (read: offbeat, noncommercial product of a less industrialized country) compared with the foil labels and brightly colored cans used by the more expensive Mexican beers. Second, somewhere along the way, American students started putting lime in their Coronas. This was a beer analogue to another favorite party ritual: licking some salt, drinking a shot of tequila, and sucking on a lime wedge.

As college students returned to campus with stories of libidinous fun in the sun, Corona was frequently a prop. Distribution followed the students as they entered their professional lives in major metropolitan areas, particularly in places like Texas, California, and Arizona, from where a disproportionate number of college kids traveled to Mexico for spring break. As Corona-laced myths of sun and debauchery spread, the beer soon became the drink of choice among young professionals throughout the nation. Corona was the quintessential beer for an evening of partying at bars and clubs.

Mind-share advocates would explain that Corona owned the beer category's partying associations and attendant user imagery. This explanation, however, does not work. At the same time that Corona became popular, Bud Light was beginning an extraordinary sales climb with its Spuds McKenzie, "the official party animal," campaign. Bud Light apparently owned partying, too. Nor were these two brands alone, as other beer brands tried to convey a partying attitude, albeit with less good fortune.

Beer drinkers didn't value partying as a generic concept associated with the brand. Rather, they valued beer brands when the brands told the partying story that best resonated in American culture. In the 1980s, Corona and Bud Light had the most compelling partying myths. Other brands did not. Partying was one of several category benefits available to brewers as a platform on which to build culturally specific myths. Corona's success came from its authentic role as a key prop in the Mexican spring-break myth. The beer won out because it embodied one of most resonant party-centered myths then circulating in American culture.[5]

What happened next is a good example of what often happens when customers act as the primary authors of the brand's myth. As Corona became popular, the trend-leading consumers who had initially propagated Corona's myth watched the insider coolness of their Corona drinking evaporate. The Corona story lost its cachet, and so they moved on to other beers.

Because Corona's U.S. distributor was not airing ads that advanced Corona's myth, the brand effectively lost its myth when these insider customers moved on to other beers. Corona became a short-lived fad. By 1990, sales had collapsed, returning to pre-1987 levels. For five years the brand struggled to return to growth, but without success. Other beers had replaced Corona as more desirable party drinks for young people. Corona became the Mexican beer that used to be cool.

Corona's next move directly violated mind-share principles. The brand team ditched the brand's supposed partying brand essence and concocted the "Change Your Lattitude" campaign. The ads depicted an idyllic beach scene—what Americans understood as a Mexican beach—viewed through the eyes of a couple lounging beachside. The ads had little in the way of action and no music. Time stood still. Instead, the audience was gradually introduced to a simple setting: a beach, a couple relaxing, and Coronas.

The campaign's breakthrough spot, "Pager," opened with a long shot of the blue ocean, a gentle surf washing onto white sand, and the familiar sounds of the sea—seagulls, wind, and waves. Then a rock skipped across the water. As the camera pulled back, we saw a woman lounging on the beach next to a table. On the table rested a Corona, a man's watch, a half-dozen small saucer-shaped rocks, and a pager. The arm of the woman's male companion reached into the frame, grabbed a rock, and skipped it across the surf. The man began to repeat the motion when the pager went off; the vibrating beep made the pager bounce around the table. His arm hesitated, changed direction, grabbed the pager, and skipped it across the surf, just as he had skipped the rocks. Unperturbed, the woman swept her hair back and stared mindlessly out at the ocean. The tag line told us "Miles Away from the Ordinary." As the campaign developed, the tag line was switched to "Change Your Lattitude."

Corona immediately took off, soon hitting sales numbers far beyond the 1980s peak. Unlike what happened with its first fifteen minutes of fame, Corona sustained extraordinary sales growth for a decade, becoming far and away the leading imported beer in the United States.

How do we explain Corona's success? Mind-share advocates would argue that Corona succeeded because the brand now owned the relaxation benefit. Again, however, Corona's association with relaxation does not explain the brand's success. Relaxation had been a central benefit in the beer category for many decades, long before Corona had significant distribution in the United States. Budweiser had emphasized a relaxation theme as far back as the 1950s, and other beer brands followed Bud's lead. Since other beers shared Corona's generic connection with relaxation, what, then, made Corona's particular expression more resonant than those offered by other brands?

When Corona's American consumers slapped down seven dollars for a six-pack of the former bargain-basement beer, they were buying a chance to experience, through the ritual gulp of the yellow liquid, a glimmer of the American ideal of a tranquil beach vacation. The new advertising campaign had grabbed hold of Corona's valuable but dormant cultural real estate—the Mexican beach—to develop a different and more meaningful myth. With its roots as a working-class Mexican beer and its spring-break reputation, Corona was still indelibly etched in the collective American imagination as a key prop in a winter beach vacation. This asset, however, lay dormant, underutilized.

Mexican beaches had another meaning that Corona's managers adapted. Sitting on a beach relaxing with a beer or margarita had become one of the most salient American dreams for getting away from it all. This ideal, equating relaxation with escaping to a beach in a less developed country, a place far removed from the highly competitive company life, a place where time slowed down, was tremendously appealing to overworked Americans. To tap into this cultural opportunity, Corona authored an evocative myth that used the Mexican beach stories to imbue its beer with the idea of escaping from everyday routines.

Corona's new campaign registered so powerfully because the United States had just undergone a profound shift in its labor market. Process engineering techniques and outsourcing were applied to once secure white-collar jobs. For the first time in the twentieth century, middle-class salaried jobs were now routinely subject to layoffs and firings. Work became intensely competitive, and work-related stresses dominated everyday life. In this environment, relaxation took on a new, historically specific meaning. No longer did relaxation mean simply kicking back at the end of the day to chill out with a cold beer—a common relaxation story told by Budweiser, Schlitz, and Pabst from the 1950s through the 1970s. With job demands following workers into their homes, this simple tale no longer made sense. Relaxation required more radical escapes. Professional men and women now dreamed of going someplace far removed from the rat race.

In thirty seconds of film, Corona used its authority to represent the Mexican beach to encapsulate these desires for a sanctuary from the hectic pace of work life. Corona gave beer drinkers the perfect antidote that they could now gulp down, even while sitting at home on a Wednesday night after a frantic day at the office.

To accomplish this feat, Corona branding violated the rules of mind share by shifting its supposed brand essence from wild partying to tranquil relaxation. But consumers didn't seem miffed. Instead, the story connected, and Corona came to embody one of the most potent expressions of relaxation in American culture. The brand didn't represent relaxation in a generic way, as an abstract concept stripped bare of connotations, reduced to its dictionary definition. Rather, Corona owned a particularly evocative representation of relaxation in American culture: doing absolutely nothing on a faraway Mexican beach.

Why Can't Mind-Share Branding Build Iconic Brands?

Corona's iconic value resided in the particulars of its distinctive myths, not in the abstractions that mind-share advocates emphasize. Further, Corona succeeded only when it radically shifted its myth, from a story about partying in Mexico to one about relaxing in isolation on a quiet beach. Rather than stewarding the brand to maintain consistency at all costs, as mind-share advocates advise, Corona succeeded when managers attended to historical changes and made the appropriate adjustments to better align the brand's myth with important tensions in American society.

Mind-share branding can be an effective approach for utilitarian, low-involvement brands like Dove and Crest, because distilling the product to a handful of key benefits simplifies decision making for the consumer. On the other hand, the reduction of the brand to a handful of abstract concepts will never lead to the building of an iconic brand.[6]

Why, then, does mind share maintain such a tenacious grip on all branding activities today? Managers hold on to the mind-share model because it allows for easy rationalization of the branding task. If the brand is a timeless, abstract entity, then creating a brand strategy is a painless process. Once you've got it, you've got it. And, if the management task is to express this brand essence in everything the brand does, then managers can make quick decisions, brand bible in hand, on whether proposed branding activities are on-strategy. Metrics that measure the brand's success flow easily from these assumptions, as well. In general, mind share is attractive to managers because it allows them to coordinate and control brand strategy throughout their organizations and with their business partners.

As we shall see in the coming chapters, the problem with applying mind-share principles to identity brands is that the impulse to conceive of the brand in abstract terms, and then to focus on keeping these abstractions consistent over time, necessarily overlooks what makes identity brands valuable to their consumers. Identity value exists in the details that managers who follow mind-share principles routinely consider extraneous executional issues. By simplifying the brand so dramatically, managers treat the brand's most critical assets as strategically irrelevant.

From Emotional Branding to Cultural Branding

Consultants have recently peppered the management book market with promises of a revolutionary new branding model, what I call *emotional branding.* Emotional branding is less a new model, though, than an extension of mind share. In emotional branding, the basic mind-share assumptions—that the brand consists of a set of abstractions that should be maintained consistently in all brand activities over time—still hold. But as the name suggests, emotional branding emphasizes *how* this brand essence should be communicated: Managers should build emotional appeals into their branding efforts, which are used to spur emotionally charged relationships with core customers.

Emotions seem to sell. Consider consultant's books like Marc Gobe's *Emotional Branding*, or *A New Brand World*, by former Starbucks executive Scott Bedbury.[7] Gobe wants everything the brand does to be packed with emotion, personality, and sensory experience. Bedbury works within the mind-share paradigm, even though he discards seemingly old-fashioned terms like *positioning* and substitutes more au courant ones like *genetic code* and *brand essence.* But he argues for a more emotive and experiential slant instead of the hard, cognitive approach popular in previous decades. Managers should continue to stake out distinctive associations and consistently articulate these associations through everything the brand does. But a brand must emphasize its personality and forge an intimate connection with customers.

Pushing one step further, some experts today argue that, through the magic of internal branding, the entire organization should emote in unison the spirit of the brand. Organizations are to look deeply inward to truly understand their identity and then inculcate the brand spirit so that they can express this spirit in everything they do. Likewise, communications should work to build emotional linkages between brand and customers. Some consultants even argue that organizations must work to get both employees and customers to treat the brand as a religion. When the brand is communicated with supercharged emotion, a deep bond will form with customers.[8]

A Short Genealogy of Coke

Coca-Cola is a favorite example of emotional branding. Managers envy the extraordinary bond that Coke developed with its customers, particularly in the brand's halcyon days in the United States, from the 1950s through the 1980s. But how did Coke build and sustain these emotional ties?

In the United States, Coke was originally launched through mindshare techniques—as a nerve tonic, hangover cure, and stimulant for "brain workers." But, beginning with its innovative use of advertising and public relations during World War II, Coke was soon transformed into a potent iconic brand.

The Coca-Cola Company shipped Coke to the troops on the front lines and celebrated the war effort in a blizzard of print ads. The media reported that GIs were writing home from the battlefront, pining for Coke. This idea was picked up in Robert Scott's wartime best-seller *God Is My Co-Pilot,* in which he describes how shooting down his first "Jap" was motivated by thoughts of "America, Democracy, and Coca-Colas."[9] Troops would treat the scarce bottles of Coke with religious zeal, drinking in a ritual confirmation of their national pride.

As a result, by war's end, Coke came to represent American myths exemplified in the war effort: a country willing to sacrifice its sons and daughters to save the world for democracy, a country with a unique industrious spirit able to outpace the Axis powers in building war machinery, and a country with the tenacious ingenuity to out-science the enemy in the race to the atomic age. Downing a Coke, consumers could imbibe in collective feelings of national solidarity emanating from America's ethos as dramatized in World War II.

There is no question that Coke consumers formed a significant emotional bond with the drink during this period—a bond that continued through the 1980s. But the crucial strategic question is this: What spawned these ties? Even a glimpse at Coke's history in this period reveals that the source of customers' emotive relationships with the brand had to do with the identity myth that has been plunked into each bottle of Coke through publicity and advertising. The lesson we should learn from Coke's postwar success is straightforward: Imbue the brand with a compelling identity myth, and potent emotional ties will follow.

Throughout the postwar years, Coke rested on these laurels. As American nationalism surged around the country's postwar economic strength and Cold War containment policies, Coke served as the favored vessel for these ideals. Meanwhile, Americans were going to work for large companies and were moving into the new government-subsidized suburbias, and Coke was championing the new suburban-nuclear life in its most euphoric mode. In Coke ads, smiley all-American cola-quaffing girls exuded equal dashes of modesty and sex appeal, filling the drink's "pause that refreshes" with unquestioned patriotic good cheer about the new American way of life. Americans could experience a moment of national solidarity simply by sharing a spare moment sipping a Coke.

By the late 1960s, however, Coke's apple-pie celebrations of the American commonweal were wearing thin. Civil rights protests, a youth culture disenchanted with companies and middle-class life, and a very unpopular war in Vietnam were all tearing the country apart. Coke's suburban-nuclear myth had become naive, antiquated. Attempts to reconnect with consumers by means of a smorgasbord of tried-and-true Americana imagery failed.[10]

Here we see a common property of iconic brands. Since these brands derive their value from how well their myth responds to tensions in the national culture, when there are tumultuous cultural shifts, the brand's myth loses steam. I call these shifts *cultural disruptions*. When disruptions hit, iconic brands must reinvent their myth, or they fade in relevance.

Finally, the company and its ad agency hit on a resonant revision of the Coke myth.[11] "Hilltop," shot on an Italian hillside, began with two fresh-faced and short-haired girls singing, "I'd like to buy the world a home, and furnish it with love. . . ." As the camera panned, we saw that they were joined by other youth, men and women, whose facial features and dress showed that they were from different countries. As the camera included them, their voices joined the chorus, until finally we heard many dozens singing the next verse: "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony." What had begun as a folk song had turned into an anthem for peace, one that placed Coke as the fulcrum: "I'd like to buy the world a Coke, and keep it company." Each held a Coke bottle as if it were a flag and stared slightly upward, singing with a sense of conviction and optimism that more than hinted at a church choir. As the camera pulled back to a shot taken from a helicopter above the hill, we saw that hundreds of youth had come together on this hilltop to sing with great idealism. "It's the real thing. What the world wants today is the real thing. Coca-Cola."

Again, the company had spun a myth that many Americans found useful as a symbolic resource to patch up their identities as citizens. Moreover, the myth's identity value renewed emotional connections between Coke and its core customers.

Coke had dramatically reinterpreted the product's refreshment benefit—the "pause that refreshes"—to perform a new myth of American solidarity. Coke drew on mass-media images of the hippie counterculture and the peace movement to address the conflicts of the era with a symbolic cure: a humanistic plea for understanding and tolerance. Through a folk song sung as a hymn, a song that longed for friendship and understanding across races and nationalities, the brand delivered a utopian sermon enjoining John Lennon's call for love to conquer all the world's problems. The brand's myth told consumers that an act as simple as sharing a Coke could heal seemingly intractable social divides. Now Coke was construed as an elixir of universal harmony. Sipping a Coke with a friend or stranger was a symbolic act of healing racial, political, and gender divides.

Americans responded. The ad was first aired in Europe, where it received only a tepid response. But the feedback in the United States was immediate and overwhelming. So many requests for the song poured in that the song was redone, without the Coke lines, as a single. It quickly jumped to the top of the charts.[12] Americans' heightened relationship and emotional connection to Coke arose from the myth's ability to symbolically heal acute cultural tensions tearing at American society.

A decade later, the company and its ad agency again shifted the focus of the Coke myth and again rekindled the brand's emotional connection.[13] In "Mean Joe Greene," a young boy encounters Pittsburgh Steeler "Mean"

Joe Greene as he leaves the football stadium after a game. Greene, nearing the end of a Hall of Fame career, was one of the most feared athletes ever to play professional football. As his nickname implied, Greene treated football like war, and he usually won. He was an immense and immensely talented defender, renowned for his ability to overpower offensive linemen and crush opposing quarterbacks.

In Coke's ad, the kid stopped the ferocious player by simply asking, "Mr. Greene?" Hobbling through the tunnel after a tough game, the massive Greene turned to the small boy and answered, "Yeah?" "Do you need any help?" the kid asked. Greene shook him off and continued his retreat to the locker room. Unfazed by the star's grave veneer, the kid asked, "Do . . . you . . . want my Coke?" "No no," Greene said. "Really, you can have it," the boy responded. Greene finally relented, took the Coke, and, parched from the game, chugged the entire bottle. The earnest and intimidated boy expected nothing in return and walked away, but Joe shouted to him, "Hey, kid!" When the boy turned, Greene offered up a gift, tossing his game jersey to the boy. "Wow, thanks, Mean Joe," the kid said. Greene's face lit up, his big smile revealing the warrior's humanity and his momentary bond with the boy. The text, "Have a Coke and a smile," concluded the ad.

By the late 1970s, America's Vietnam wounds were beginning to heal and youth culture was no longer as threatening. But racial strife had continued to increase. Highly segregated African American neighborhoods had formed in Northern industrial cities when sharecroppers migrated in masses to take unskilled production jobs after they lost their agricultural jobs to the cotton gin. In the 1970s, as American industries shed jobs, the African American workers were the first to go. Factories began an exodus from these cities to the suburbs, to the nonunion South, and overseas, leaving behind black urban ghettos that were increasingly jobless, isolated from the rest of society, lacking families, and lacking public investments. It was not surprising, then, that these ghettos became increasingly violent in the 1970s as a new underground economy dominated by gangs and drugs formed.[14]

The ghetto became America's most acute social problem. American mass media was filled with panicky stories of marauding gangs and so-called "welfare mothers." Suburban white Americans feared the imagined threat emanating from the ghetto.

Again, Coke offered a utopian moment of healing built around a "pause that refreshes." Drinking a Coke now provided a magical salve that symbolically healed the racial divide in American society. The confrontation in the dark tunnel conjured up the growing nightmare of the ghetto in the collective imagination of the majority white population: the physically intimidating black man who threatened an innocent white child. But we soon learned Greene's meanness was just an affectation, that he was actually a sweet guy who could show real affection for the small white kid. The ad offered a story of racial healing for a country that couldn't contain its racial conflict. In this way, Coke again helped the nation momentarily forget its real problems that were then devastating its cities.

In the two decades following this off-the-charts success, The Coca-Cola Company and its many ad agencies have failed to pull off another significant performance of the Coke myth. They've brought in a Hollywood talent agency to make the brand famous through entertainment. They've hired the hippest creative boutiques in the business to make ads that would appeal to younger generations. Along the way, Coke has aired many entertaining ads and many less impressive ones, but none of these ads have ignited a passion for Coke among the generations that came of age since the 1980s. In fact, considering Coke's monstrous equity and media weight, the brand has had some of the least effective advertising in the industry. How could this be?

Since Mean Joe Greene, The Coca-Cola Company has become a leading advocate of mind-share and emotional branding. The company's strategy focused on advancing Coke's abstract associations (refreshment, authenticity, and social bonds) and forging emotional connections with its audience, resulting in the most entertaining and heart-tugging communications its vast resources could buy. In its halcyon days, however, Coke did much more than combine copy points with Spielbergian cinematic tricks.

Coke's product benefits worked as a platform on which the brand built powerful identity myths that spoke to American ideals. In these myths, the irrepressible American spirit always overcame otherwise divisive problems. By sharing a Coke Americans of very different ethnic and class backgrounds could revive their commitment to a common moral charter. Coke called its followers into a world in which the ever optimistic and indefatigable American spirit overcomes seemingly intractable social problems. As these social challenges changed, Coke's myth changed accordingly.

Perhaps more than any other brand, Coke had earned the authority to promote a utopia in which American citizens come together to solve social problems that threaten the commonweal. Yet, since the 1980s, Coke has failed to engage social issues that are utmost on the minds of the brand's customers. Today the United States is a troubled empire, maligned by people throughout the world. These circumstances provide potent cultural material that Coke could forge into myth. Coke's managers, however, are so beholden to the logic of mind share and emotional branding that they've missed opportunities like this time and again.

Poignant evidence that the company misreads the value of the Coke brand comes from a much promoted ad that ran several years ago. Company managers wanted so desperately to recapture the magic of Mean Joe Greene that they commissioned a sequel. This time, however, the commercial used famed Baltimore Orioles shortstop Cal Ripken Jr., who gets a Coke from his son at the ballpark. The Ripkin ad suggests that Coke managers understood the Mean Joe spot as simply an emotional bond formed between a famous sports star and a kid, rather than a symbolic resolution to racial strife. They missed the ad's symbolic importance because they stripped away the particulars of the ad's story and yanked the ad out of its historically specific cultural context.

Today Coke exists as a nostalgic brand, harking back to the day when the drink enjoyed its peak iconic stature. Coke now stands for 1950s Americana. Not surprisingly, then, one of Coke's few recent bright spots occurred when it brought back its classic bottle design and redesigned its plastic bottles to mimic the glass, encouraging customers to indulge in the Coke myth of old.

Why Can't Emotional Branding Build Iconic Brands?

From the 1940s through the 1980s, no American brand did better than Coke in forging potent emotional ties with its customers. But the mere documentation of these strong attachments does not explain how they came to be. Gurus of emotional branding encourage managers to give their brand a personality, to build emotional content into communications, and to emphasize emotional benefits. While appropriate for some categories, these recommendations are wrongheaded for identity brands.[15] Observers have rashly inferred that the emotional connections between the brand and its customers are the result of emotional branding efforts. This erroneous conclusion has led to many misguided branding efforts that seek to build identity value by provoking an emotional reaction from the audience.[16]

Rather, the emotional connections we routinely witness between iconic brands and their core customers are the result of potent identity myths spun by the brand. Coke didn't compel its customers to form an emotional bond by airing generic emotional communications. Many sappy ads intended to pull at the audience's heartstrings come and go with little fanfare. Rather, Coke developed these emotional ties just like other iconic brands. The right identity myth, well performed, provides the audience with little epiphanies—moments of recognition that put images, sounds, and feelings on barely perceptible desires. Customers who find this kind of identity value in a brand forge intensive emotional connections. Emotional attachment is the consequence of a great myth.

From Viral Branding to Cultural Branding

Cultural branding also stands apart from another recent challenger to mind share, so-called viral branding (some authors and managers also call this approach *grass roots* and *buzz*).[17] As the name suggests, viral branding focuses on the paths of public influence: how noncompany actors influence customers to value the brand. The viral approach is a compendium of ideas rooted in the classic ideas about public influence—diffusion of innovation, word of mouth, and public relations—that responded to two major shifts in the 1990s: the increased cynicism toward mass marketing and the emergence of the Internet.

Viral branding assumes that consumers, and not firms, have the most influence in the creation of brands. Cynical consumers will no longer heed the missives of mass marketers, so instead must "discover" brands on their own. The Internet provided a means to accelerate this discovery. As a result, what was once considered an important process that marketers might want to stimulate has now often become an end in itself.

In addition, many experts today recommend below-the-radar marketing, which seeds the brand among the most influential people. The basic idea is that if the firm can convince these people to make the brand their own, and configure the brand, like a virus, to make it easy to talk about, these influencers will rapidly spread their interest in the brand to others through their social networks, just as a virus spreads. At the beginning of the new-economy era, Douglas Rushkoff warned the world about what he termed *media viruses.* Brand managers quickly turned the tables and decided that going viral was the quickest and cheapest path to brand heaven. The more velocity through the system, the better the brand does.

A related idea is what New Yorker writer Malcolm Gladwell has called the coolhunt.[18] In this view, brands are no longer led by corporate activities but rather given meaning and value on the streets by opinion-leading trendsetters who adopt the brands and give them cachet. Consumer goods companies send out cultural detectives onto the streets of cool territories, like the playgrounds in poor urban neighborhoods or underground clubs, to scout out new trends. The race is to grab the newest, coolest culture the fastest, before it becomes mass culture.

In viral branding, a covert public relations mode becomes the core of the branding effort. The ad agency Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB) champions its ability to create "talk value" as its core competency, for instance. Many major ad agencies and consultancies have launched specialized groups, such as Young & Rubicam's Brand Buzz, to deliver viral branding plans to their clients. Streetwise research consultancies like Sputnik make a living hanging out with the right trendsetting fringes and filing reports with multinational companies.[19]

In sum, the viral approach presumes that consumers—not marketers—create identity value. Consequently, identity branding has turned into the task of stealthily seeding brands with the right customers so that they will take up the brand and develop its value. The company takes a back seat to consumers in forging what the brand stands for.

As we will see with Snapple, while viral processes are (as always) important for the diffusion of branding efforts, viral branding itself is not a viable approach for building an iconic brand. The primary source of Snapple's identity value comes from the company's marketing activities, not from its consumers. And, like Corona and Coke, Snapple's efforts created a potent identity myth.

A Short Genealogy of Snapple

Snapple is often used as a poster child for viral branding.[20] In the early 1990s, Snapple developed tremendous buzz among cognoscenti in New York and beyond, eventually spreading across the United States. In fact, Snapple's climb to iconic stature was due to its owners' idiosyncratic cultural branding strategy. The brand's viral characteristics—its buzz, its underground coolness, and the ragtag community of fans that formed around

Snapple—all are consequences of the resonance of the brand's myth, which became embodied in the large-mouthed bottles of juices and teas.

The Snapple line of teas and juices was founded by three Brooklyn entrepreneurs who, in the process of goofing around with their small company, eventually stumbled on the brand's myth. Through the company's new products, advertising, promotions, distribution, and even customer service, the founders authored a quixotic script about a radically different kind of company, one run by amateurs who shared their customers' cynicism toward how large companies were managed. Everything the company did was antithetic to marketing as practiced by The Coca Cola Company, PepsiCo, and other sophisticated marketing Goliaths. Instead of looking to grocery chains and fast-food franchises, Snapple distributed its products in restaurants, delis, street carts, and mom-and-pop groceries. For product, the founders continually rolled out odd and seemingly ill-conceived blends, a few of which became hits. They relied on their most zealous customers for product and packaging ideas, rushing oddball requests into production without so much as a focus group. For example, customer Ralph Orofino's affinity for melons inspired Ralph's Cantaloupe Cocktail, a drink that featured Ralph's face on the label. Customers loved to try these weird drinks, even the bad-tasting ones, which offered surprises compared with the least-common-denominator processes of corporate marketing.

For advertising, the company hired "celebrities" it liked and could afford. The ads were so poorly produced and odd that they became cult classics among the growing legion of New York Snapple groupies. For example, in one ad, less-than-charismatic tennis player Ivan Lendl, with his thick accent, mispronounced the brand's name "Schnahpple." Another spot featured Richie Sambora, the rock band Bon Jovi's only sort-of-famous guitarist, because one owner was a fan.

Especially critical to Snapple's rise was the hiring of "shock jock" talk radio personalities Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern as spokespersons. Both men conveyed real affection for Snapple and gave the drink extemporaneous plugs on the air in addition to the paid-for sponsorships. It would be hard to pick two more different advocates: Limbaugh was the self-righteous voice of the reactionary right, leading a loyal following of angry white men who called themselves "dittoheads" to blast the liberal tendencies of Washington politicians (Hillary Clinton was a favorite target) and stem the tide of political correctness. Stern, on the other hand, was the comedic and paranoid voice of slutty anarchy. He thrived on a nihilist attitude that involved celebrating whatever polite society considered tasteless, and dissing whatever it considered important. Stern loved to call the bluff on America's puritanical tendencies by stuffing as much sexual innuendo into his program as possible. But, while diametrically at odds in terms of politics and tastes, the two radio jocks were united in that they were America's most provocative populist voices denouncing the priorities and tastes of American elites.

Snapple had ultimate credibility as an amateurish company because its three entrepreneurs knew nothing about professional marketing. Nor did they have any interest in learning. They ran the company according to what made sense and seemed like fun. Snapple's customers knew as much and loved them for it.

When private investors bought majority interest from the entrepreneurs in hopes of expanding the Snapple magic to Americans across the country, they faced a huge risk: How could they apply professional marketing to a brand that attracted legions of devoted followers for Snapple's amateurism? By hiring a young ad agency copywriter to run the marketing department, the new owners avoided brand management orthodoxy. The copywriter, in turn, hired an upstart New York ad agency, Kirshenbaum & Bond, to create a national branding platform for Snapple.

This unorthodox brand team did not attempt to reduce Snapple to a set of brand essence adjectives, seek out deep consumer truths, or plumb Snapple devotees' emotional connections to the brand. Rather, they searched for ways to further extend Snapple's odd, amateurish performances. At the time, Snapple's followers were so touched by the brand that they flooded Snapple's small office with fan mail. Over two thousand letters a week poured in, not to mention original videos, songs, artwork, and poetry, all odes to Snapple.

The team found a promising story in Wendy, a woman who did clerical work for Snapple. Wendy had taken it upon herself to respond to mail as best as she could. The brand team cast "Wendy, the Snapple Lady" as the letter reader in dozens of TV ads. The ads opened with Wendy seated behind the real-life Snapple receptionist's desk, throwing out an unselfconsciously friendly "Hi from Snapple!" Viewers could clearly see that the chatty and plump Wendy was the real thing, not a Hollywood actor. She would then read a letter from a customer with a fussy question about one of Snapple's products, a question that could only be of concern to a devotee. After Wendy answered the question, the ad would cut to a camera crew shooting documentary style in the customers' homes to capture their reactions. None of the spots were scripted, and various bloopers were often left unedited on the film. The tag line "100% Natural" captured the idea that Snapple was not only a natural product, but, even more important, a transparent company run by well-meaning amateurs. The company was run by eccentric people who shared their customers' enthusiasm for frivolous pleasures, not by M.B.A.'s and their spreadsheets and market research.

To complement the advertising, Snapple sponsored many events, but not the usual blockbuster sports, music, and celebrity spectacles of Coke and Pepsi. Instead, Snapple staged events that mocked big corporate promotions: Cherry spitting in Minnesota, yo-yo tossing in New York, and the Miss Crustacean contest in New Jersey were among the sanctioned contests.

The founders had stumbled on, and the brand team nimbly amplified, an identity myth that responded to a burgeoning contradiction in American society. To understand why Snapple connected so profoundly with a significant slice of the American public, we must place Snapple's amateurish brand performances in the context of social tensions that were becoming acute in the early 1990s. During the 1980s, most Americans, particularly men, had signed on to Ronald Reagan's call to arms to get tough again, like the pioneers of the West, to revive the country's economic and political stature. With gung-ho entrepreneurs, tougher business practices, and painful but necessary reorganizations, Reagan promised that the United States would lead the world again. By the late 1980s, the U.S. economy had been largely reinvented as a much more dynamic and much more cutthroat economy, with the constant threat of downsizing and reengineering disrupting labor markets. Profits began to surge, and the country found a new set of heroes in its swashbuckling entrepreneurs (e.g., Ted Turner, Bill Gates) and athletes (e.g., Michael Jordan), who exhibited the "Just do it" spirit. But, while companies and corporate elites profited handsomely, the constant restructuring pushed many other American workers into service-economy McJobs.

As it became clear that trickle-down economics wasn't trickling down, this dissonance bubbled to the surface in both popular culture and politics. The populist backlash of the early 1990s gained political expression in the massive defection of Republicans and Democrats to the populist candidacies of Ross Perot, Pat Buchanan, Jessie Jackson, and Jerry Brown. Americans suddenly had a tremendous appetite for highly cynical and nihilist counterpoints to Reagan's spin on American ideals. Television programs like *The Simpsons* and *Beavis and Butthead* became hits. *Wayne's World*, Nirvana, and the cartoon strip *Dilbert* painted culture-leading myths that responded to these tensions.

Snapple (along with Mountain Dew, as we'll see later) jumped into this swift current of discontent and devised a blissful rebuttal. Through its marketing activities, the company authored a myth that suggested that big corporations and the overpaid elites who ran them only gummed up the works. In the utopia Snapple acted out, companies were run by amateurs who cared more about having fun with their customers than in generating profits to stockholders. The amateurs inspired their customers to dream the craziest drink-inspired dreams, and they played around with products and promotions, however crazy. This myth of a world turned upside down—in which amateurs win over the bureaucratic elite—was plunked into bottles of sugary tea. Gulping down a bottle allowed customers to experience this fantasy as a salve for the identity anxieties they faced.[21]

As Snapple's myth engaged these emerging veins of social discontent, sales rose rapidly from less than $50 million in 1987 to over $200 million in 1992. A legion of hard-core devotees were inspired by Snapple's voice in the wilderness. Then, as mass culture responded to raise the populist revolt to a fever pitch in 1992–1994, with everyone from Wayne and Garth to Kurt Cobain joining the chorus, Snapple sales soared skyward, approaching $700 million in 1994.

The Quaker Oats Company purchased Snapple at this juncture, believing that Quaker's professional marketing operations could further leverage the brand. The company implemented a new strategy based on conventional mind share and emotional branding ideas. Quaker managers completely misunderstood what had generated Snapple's awesome identity value—its myth of anticorporate amateurism. They fired Limbaugh and Stern, scrapped Wendy and the "100% Natural" campaign for a more professional and conventional treatment, and instituted a rationalized new product development process. The company thought that it could optimize Snapple's value by applying its expertise in mind-share branding. Instead, Quaker killed Snapple's myth, and soon enough, Snapple lost its iconic stature. Because Quaker marketers failed to grasp the principles of

Iconic Brands Versus Fads and Fashions

The viral model is essentially a fashion branding model.[22] The model relies on taste leaders who set trends and create the brand's must-have desirability when they use it and talk about it. Viral efforts thus seek to influence tastemakers. While numerous fads and fashions have been established through viral processes, iconic brands operate above this cycle. In fact, getting caught up in a fad cycle can destroy an iconic brand. The once-iconic retailer Gap hooked into a fashion cycle when its innovative ads for its classic chino pants placed the brand at the epicenter of the swing music craze of 1997–1998. After enjoying its two years of fame and sky-high stock prices, the brand collapsed when it failed to package another hit. Meanwhile, the new young customers who hopped on the brand to be part of Gap's cool factor combined with Gap's newfound interest in delivering fashion hits scared away the brand's much more durable iconic consumers.

Identity brands that are developed through viral approaches have a fatal flaw—they are authorless. The firm relinquishes control of the brand to consumers and cultural tastemakers. The problem is that these authors thrive on influencing the next big thing. As soon as they make a brand famous, they move on. Fad brands are dumped by fashion-forward tastemakers as soon as their cachet has been depleted, as Corona's first flash-in-the-pan success attests.

When properly managed, iconic brands are much more durable than fads and fashions. Rather than ride boom-and-bust cycles of fashionability, icons address acute social tensions that usually last for many years.

cultural branding, the company lost some $1.4 billion when it had to sell off the Snapple brand in a fire sale as sales came crashing down.[23]

Why Can't Viral Branding Build Iconic Brands?

By 1994, Snapple had generated plenty of buzz, was considered by many to be a cool trendsetting brand, and had even attracted a hardy band of followers who formed an occasional Snapple community. But these viral effects were artifacts of the brand's success, not causes. Snapple earned these desirable qualities because the brand pushed a compelling new identity myth. Snapple's company of amateurs championed a fantastic populist alternative to the growing disgust with the new-economy labor market and the elites in government and business who were installing it. Consumers loved Snapple for acting this way, talked about the brand, considered it ahead of its time compared with conventional soft drinks, and even enjoyed gathering sporadically with people who felt the same.

The buzz that Snapple generated was the consequence of the power of its myth. Simply getting people to talk about something—say, repeat a catch phrase from an ad—is not a particularly noteworthy event. Most such talk quickly fades from memory and, regardless, becomes detached from the meaning of the story. What sticks are stories that affect how people think about themselves in the world. The problem with the viral model is that it assumes that any communication is good as long as it's retold. Much more important, however, is what people remember and use symbolically in their everyday lives. Snapple didn't just get people talking. Instead, the brand served as a role model, a rather absurd one, which provided a silly but meaningful critique of corporate life in the early 1990s.

The Path to Cultural Branding

All iconic brands enjoy the characteristics of strong brands described by the conventional models: They have distinctive and favorable associations, they generate buzz, and they have core consumers with deep emotional attachments. But these observed characteristics are the *consequence* of successful mythmaking, not the cause. The identity myth embedded in the brand leads customers to associate the product with category benefits, to spread the myth by word of mouth, to emote, and to gather together. Hence, while these measures serve as useful metrics for appraising identity value, they offer little strategic help in directing how companies should build iconic brands.[24]

Rather, managers can build iconic brands only if they apply the tacit cultural strategies that supported the success of brands like Corona, Coke, and Snapple. Initially, a company may have difficulty assimilating these principles because they differ so much from conventional branding ideas. To introduce the next chapters of the book, which will develop cultural branding strategy in considerably more detail, let me reprise three of the most difficult shifts in mind-set evident from the three case studies in this chapter.

From Persuasion to Mythmaking

Conventional branding models hold an instrumental view of brand communications. These models assume that the purpose of advertising is to influence consumer perceptions about the brand (e.g., associations tied to quality, benefits, personality, and aspirational user imagery). Communications should use whatever creative content will do the best job of persuading. But, ultimately, this content is instrumental rhetoric that shapes perceptions, not an end in itself. Customers presumably discard this rhetorical material once they believe what the communications was designed to make them believe.

Cultural branding turns this approach to communications on its head. In cultural branding, communications are the center of customer value. Customers buy the product to experience these stories. The product is simply a conduit through which customers can experience the stories that the brand tells. When consumers sip a Coke, Corona, or Snapple, they are drinking more than a beverage. Rather, they are imbibing identity myths anchored in these drinks. An effective cultural strategy creates a *storied product,* that is, a product that has distinctive branded features (mark, design, etc.) through which customers experience identity myths.

From Abstract Associations to Cultural Expressions

Conventional branding models propose that the brand consists of a set of abstract associations.[25] Consequently, managers obsess over the concepts that the brand should own. Strategy meetings extend for months in which managers debate which adjectives best suit the brand. Meanwhile, tracking studies meticulously measure whether consumers associate these words with the brand.

With cultural branding, in contrast, the brand's value resides in the specifics of the brand's cultural expression: the particular cultural contents of the brand's myth and the particular expression of these contents in the communication. For Corona, the brand exists in the Mexican beach and its "nothing's happening" style of advertising. For Coke in the 1970s, the brand existed in the idea that the hippie counterculture contained the seeds of peace and racial harmony. For Snapple, the brand was centered in loud-mouthed Wendy telling silly stories of Snapple drinkers and in the barbed political soliloquies of Howard and Rush. Abstracting these cultural expressions to the generic qualities of relaxation, friendship, and quirkiness, respectively, strips these brands of their most valuable assets.

It's impossible to build an iconic brand with mind-share principles. Mind share demands intensive abstraction. Managers systematically cleanse their strategies to rid the brand of the messiness of society and history in search of its purified essence. Endless haggling between brand managers, ad planners, and market researchers yield strategy documents consisting of montages of generic phrases. Mind share is driven by a logic of quantification—the drive to simplify the world so that it can be contained through measurement. The memorability of adjectives, unlike culturally specific stories, can be quantified and examined via benchmarks.

The distilled strategies of mind share, however, disable identity brands because they deny the brand a role as a historical actor in society. In their continuous effort to lodge a transcendental brand essence in consumers' minds, mind-share strategies fail to recognize that identity value is created and transformed in particular historical contexts. To create identity value, brand managers must instead detail the brand's stakes in the transformation of culture and society and the particular cultural expressions the brand uses to achieve these transformations.

From Consistency to Historical Fit

Conventional models assume that managing a brand is the art of insisting on consistency in the face of organizational and competitive pressures that push for zigging and zagging. Brand management is about stewardship: finding the brand's true essence and maintaining this compass point, come hell or high water.

Yet Corona and Coke both succeeded by moving away from their initial branding—their supposed brand essence at the time—to address shifting currents in American society. Of the iconic brands that I've studied with histories extending more than a decade, all have had to make significant shifts to remain iconic. These revisions of the brand's myth are necessary because, for a myth to generate identity value, it must directly engage the challenging social issues of the day. Coke celebrated America's triumphs against Nazi Germany in World War II, shifted to dramatize ways to heal internal strife around war in the early 1970s, and then shifted again to attend to racial divisions in the early 1980s. Corona, originally a brand that represented collegiate hedonism, later evolved to become a soothing antidote to the compression and anxieties of the networked free-agent work that came to a head in the 1990s.

Mind share assumes that brands exist outside of history, as transcendental entities. Managing a mind-share brand thus requires consistency, staying above the fray of changes in culture and society. Iconic brands apply precisely the opposite philosophy: The brand is a historical entity whose desirability comes from myths that address the most important social tensions of the nation. For identity brands, success depends on how well the brand's myth adjusts to historical exigencies, not by its consistency in the face of historical change.[26]