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Old or new?

In uncertain economic times many brands look back to the past. In this way, they wish to demonstrate to the buying public that they are durable, authentic and sustainable. Research shows that brands with a 'history' evoke powerful emotional associations in consumers. However, other research indicates that brands need to do more than simply recycle their glorious past. It is important that brands continue to invest in innovation and user-friendliness, since this will give consumers precisely what they want: the best of both worlds.

The US comedian George Carlin has been claiming for years that society is dominated by what he calls 'yestermania'. This is an excessive attachment to the past.

Our culture is composed of sequels, reruns, remakes, revivals, reissues, re-releases, recreations, re-enactments, adaptations, anniversaries, memorabilia, oldies radio and nostalgia record collections.¹

This attachment to the past is also gaining ground in the advertising world. Old TV commercials are being dusted off, revamped and re-broadcast, such as the Mars ad, where a young man knocks on the door of a monastery after a broken romance, but suddenly finds the desire and energy to face the world again after a bite of his favourite chocolate bar. The trash can full of Mars wrappers suggests that this is not the first time this has happened. Nor was it the first time for Mars: the original commercial dates from the beginning of the 1990s. The only difference 20 years later was new background music and a more raunchy ex-girlfriend in the young man's photo.

In much the same way, the discontinued ‘mascots’ of yesteryear are also being resurrected. Chiquita Banana is a good international example, while in The Netherlands the HAK brand has recalled the legendary (in Holland, at least) Martine Bijl to star in its TV ads. This is a tried-and-tested advertising strategy, and one that has proved its worth on more than one occasion in the past. At the start of the 1980s, new life was blown into the flagging Levi Strauss jeans brand, with an unashamedly nostalgic campaign, including the music.

Newer brands can also achieve the same effect, but in a slightly different manner. Part of the success of the relatively new Bops Potato Chips is attributable to its ‘vintage’ style packaging. Other, more-longstanding brands, such as Coca-Cola and Mars, prefer to focus on the unbroken continuity of their products. A good way to do this is by celebrating anniversaries: Mars has celebrated its birthday in many countries, Coca-Cola recently honoured its 125 years and Bacardi partied for 150 years. Some brands even create a history – and consumers are happy to believe them. The popular US clothing brand Hollister has the date ‘1922’ on all its products, even though the brand was only founded in 2001 as an offshoot of the more famous Abercrombie & Fitch. In other words, retro is ‘in’. But does it really add as much value as the advertisers think it does?

Nostalgia in uncertain times

In today’s modern world, characterized as it is by uncertainty and crisis, we are more often inclined to look back to the ‘good old days’, recalling memories of the past, when everything seemed ‘better’. In turbulent times, nostalgia can offer a feeling of comfort. This, of course, is nothing new. Consider, for example, the wave of nostalgia that swept over the world around the turn of the century. Marketing professor Barbara Stern (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey) has called this the *fin-de-siècle* effect: the tendency people have to look back whenever the end of a century is approaching.² At the same time, it is also an indication that people want to ‘wipe the slate clean’ and start again. ‘Out with the old, in with the new.’

A combination of these elements – the socio-economic crisis, the *fin-de-siècle* effect, and the increasing unpredictability of consumer preferences – has led to a kind of retro revolution in marketing and advertising. New

life is being breathed into old brands, brands that remind us of better and happier days in the past.³

In the eyes of the consumer, the history of a brand – even if it has disappeared from the scene for a time (like the Mini Cooper) or even if the history is ‘fake’ (like Hollister) – represents a kind of reliability. These nostalgic brands evoke various associations and each association has its own emotional connection. In this way, there is potential for the more effective registration and even activation of brand information.

But not everyone sees it this way. At the opposite end of the marketing spectrum we have the counter-theory of ‘neo-nostalgia’, put forward by Fredric Jameson, one of the most important theoreticians of post-modernism. He claims that nostalgia has nothing to do with emotion, but is more a kind of aesthetic reaction to the past.⁴ Our nostalgia is activated by external stimuli, such as classic slogans, names and packaging.

‘The definition of ‘nostalgia’ that will be used in this chapter was first coined by marketing professor Morris Holbrook (The Columbia Business School of New York): ‘a sentimental yearning for a product or experience from the past’.⁵

Nostalgia is commercially attractive because it can influence the mood of the consumer in a positive manner. It makes the consumer happier. We see this happening around us all the time, in our everyday life: people are always looking for ways to make themselves feel better, by modulating their own mood. In this sense, our mood is both cause and consequence. But a mood is not the same as an emotion. A mood is less intense, is longer (on average) and is usually experienced unconsciously, in the sense that it does not require any direct link with an object/cause. In contrast, emotions are more intense, shorter in duration and do require the stimulus of a direct link with an object/cause. An example: when someone is wrestling with the emotion of sadness, he or she is usually sad about something specific, such as a personal loss; but when someone is in a sad mood, this does not necessarily need to be connected to any specific object or cause, but is more a case of being sad ‘in general’ (as opposed to ‘in particular’).

Emotions imply a certain understanding of something. Cognition is therefore necessary before we can experience emotions. This is not the case with moods, which do not require knowledge, cause or object. Consequently, a mood is a general rather than a specific condition.

‘There is evidence that nostalgic brands – thanks to the stimulation of positive moods – can encourage purchase behaviour.’

The German professor Ulrich Orth (Christian Albrechts University) and the Austrian lecturer Steffi Gal (St. Pölten University) have recently published the results of their experimental research into the relationship between nostalgic brands and consumer moods and, in particular, the effect that this relationship can have on purchase behaviour.⁶ Fifty respondents were asked to complete a test in a room with pleasant background music; 51 others were asked to complete the test in a room with sad background music. Before the test started, all 101 respondents were required to describe their ‘mood’ under the influence of the music. They were then shown stimulus material from both nostalgic and non-nostalgic brands from three different categories (body care, perfume, confectionery). They were asked to evaluate the extent to which these stimuli evoked nostalgic memories and had an effect on their mood and their purchase intentions.

Before the experiment, Orth and Gal assumed that the nostalgic brands would have a stronger, more positive effect on the mood of consumers than the non-nostalgic brands. They thought that consumers make purchases as an expression of the need to improve or repair their mood. These hypotheses were confirmed by the results of their empirical research: there is evidence that nostalgic brands – thanks to the stimulation of positive moods – can encourage purchase behaviour.

The researchers also formulated a number of other hypotheses, in which they assumed that the encouragement of purchase behaviour first requires the consumer to have a degree of knowledge and hope. Some people have a greater need for knowledge. They are more comfortable with tasks that require them to process information and they obtain pleasure from the cognitive effort that this involves. Other people are more intuitive and pragmatic, and therefore have a lesser need for knowledge. The Orth and Gal research showed that the moods of consumers with a high knowledge requirement are more positively influenced by nostalgic brands than consumers with a low knowledge requirement. The researchers went on to identify ‘hope’ as the stimulating parameter for the positive moods created by the nostalgic brands. Hope is a positive attitude, an expectation that something good will happen, even though that something is uncertain and lies in the future. In this respect, the test results showed that individuals with more hope are more positively influenced by nostalgic brands than individuals with less hope.

What general conclusions can be drawn from this experiment? Nostalgic brands, through their associations with nostalgic memories, can influence the moods of consumers. This is particularly the case for consumers who have plenty of hope and a high requirement for knowledge. Moreover, this positive mood in turn has a positive effect on purchase behaviour. This led Orth and Gal to draw a further conclusion; namely, that a nostalgic strategy targeted at consumers in a less positive mood has potential to succeed. Many of today's brand managers also seem to have grasped this point (in part, at least), as witnessed by the numerous nostalgic advertising campaigns that encourage consumers to escape from their negative moods by returning to the better times of the past, even if only in their imaginations.

Furthermore, another study – a 2012 collaboration between researchers from Cornell University, the University of Washington and Old Dominion University – also confirms that nostalgia has a positive impact on attitudes towards the advertisement and on the bonding with the brand. One of their main conclusions is that nostalgic ads work better than non-nostalgic ones, even among the less loyal – light – consumers.⁷

These research findings allow marketers to better position their nostalgic brands, at least in terms of time and their choice of points of sale, since these can be arranged to coincide with the moments when the target consumers are likely to be in a less positive mood. In addition, a better understanding about which consumers (in terms of characteristics) are more likely to buy a nostalgic brand makes it possible to select target groups and attract potential buyers more efficiently.