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FALL 2011
VOLUME 10 • NUMBER 1

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USING ARCHETYPES to Build Strong Brands

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For many years, I was in charge of marketing for Johnson & Johnson's line of baby products. One of our products was Johnson's Baby Powder, which was always, for me, a great example of the emotional power of branding. When we conducted focus groups, consumers talked about the brand as if it were a close friend who gave them caring and love. Yet, we all knew that inside the bottle was simply talc (a rock ground up into a fine powder) and fragrance (a very special fragrance). What I learned from Johnson's Baby Powder was that consumers don't just buy products — they buy the story about the products, and all the emotion that comes along with these stories.

Companies can develop their brand strategies by identifying the “archetypal” story that best expresses their brand

experience. These are stories like the *hero*, the *caregiver* and the *mentor*, stories that have been told around the campfire since the dawn of man. Archetypes prove to be very powerful tools to align a brand around a key emotional need in a way that both the client and the consumer can readily grasp. This approach has worked successfully for some of the largest consumer brands in the country, as well as for small non-profits and even business-to-business companies.

Archetypal Stories Are Universal

C.G. Jung used the term “archetype” to refer to universal ideas or characters he found appearing consistently in dreams and stories from cultures around the globe. He felt that the archetypes were what made up the content of our “col-

lective unconscious.” These characters shared fundamental similarities across time and across geographies.

For example, the story of Achilles starts with his mother, Thetis, trying to make him immortal by dipping him in the river Styx. Unfortunately, she had to hold him by something — his heel. Thus, later in the Trojan War, he was killed when Paris shoots his arrow into his vulnerable heel.

In Germanic Nibelungenlied, we find a similar story of the great Siegfried, who as a young man fights the dragon Fafnir. Unfortunately for Siegfried, a Linden leaf happens to fall and cover the small of his back just before he kills the dragon, and Siegfried is bathed in its blood to become immortal. Siegfried later takes a fatal spear right in this spot.

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The power of identifying a brand with one of these timeless stories is that the story already exists deep within our subconscious — it does not need to be created. The task for the brand is to simply evoke the story with cues. If it does this well, the brand will also evoke the emotion that consumers seek to derive from the brand.

These are the retellings of the universal story of the “hero.” All heroes share a vulnerability. Think of Superman and Kryptonite or Sampson and his hair. All cultures at all historic times have told the hero tale. Heroes are typically orphans called to a quest. The hero myth follows a very distinct story arc, regardless of the culture telling the story. Joseph Campbell described this phenomenon of the universal hero story masked by local details in his book *Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Archetypal stories like the “hero” story have existed through the ages because they deliver on very important emotional needs we all share. The

hero story helps us understand our mortality and speaks to our desire to achieve great things. Such timeless stories bring understanding and meaning to our lives.

In his work, Jung identified seven of these archetypes, but said there were many more to be discovered. In their work, *The Hero and the Outlaw*, Margaret Mark and Carol Pearson expanded this thinking to identify twelve specific archetypes and showed how these could be used to guide brand strategy. The power of identifying a brand with one of these timeless stories is that the story already exists deep within our subconscious — it does

not need to be created. The task for the brand is to simply evoke the story with cues. If it does this well, the brand will also evoke the emotion consumers seek to derive from the brand.

Archetypes' Power

Here are a few things we have learned about the power of telling an archetypal story with a brand.

Brands that consistently tell one archetypal story perform better financially.

Mark and Pearson cite a study they conducted with Stern Stewart, which demonstrated that brands closely

associating themselves with one of their twelve archetypes had a significantly higher economic value added over the six-year time frame than brands telling either no archetypal story or multiple stories.

For instance, without their brands' packaging, Coke and Pepsi could be seen as basically selling carbonated sugar water with cola flavoring. However, as we all know, both brands have built distinct, powerful identities supported by years of marketing and advertising.

Coke has done a masterful job of staying unwaveringly true to the archetypal story of the "innocent" (a story of optimism, hope and a desire to be virtuous). On a functional level, Coke stands for refreshment. But on a deeper emotional level, Coke's alignment with the innocent story helps its fans believe there is an innocence and virtue about the brand. In each Coke ad, from the hilltop singing of "I'd like to teach the world to sing," to Mean Joe Greene sharing a jersey, a Coke and a smile, to the polar bears, to the latest campaign of "Open happiness," Coke has consistently told the innocent story.

Pepsi, on the other hand, has strayed in the past two years from its archetypal "jester" story (a story of spontaneity, fun and living in the moment). For years, Pepsi ads always had a humorous twist (e.g., Ozzy Osborn becomes Donny Osmond) or singing and dancing (from Michael Jackson to Britney Spears). This brand strategy helped them maintain the number two spot in the category for two decades. Recently, Pepsi has departed from this path and tried to be more like Coke, with its "Refresh everything" project, focused on a grassroots philanthropy that has led to significant market-share losses. This past March,

Ad Age declared, "Pepsi has lost the cola war," after it fell to third place in market share behind Diet Coke's share.

Brands stray from their original archetypal story at their own peril.

For two decades, Target has been nipping away at Walmart's share of the market. Target has consistently marketed its brand as a stylish, innovative and cool place to find common household staples — repeatedly telling the archetypal story of the "creator." When Walmart opened its first store in Bentonville, Arkansas, it adhered to an archetypal story embodied by its founder Sam Walton — the "regular guy" — a story about accessibility and unpretentiousness. It espoused a belief that nobody is better than anybody else.

As Walmart grew, the management team forgot its core story. Walmart became the largest company in the world, and a large group of disgruntled consumers decided that the company was not a regular guy, but rather was acting out the dark side of the "ruler" story by bullying communities and vendors and running small retailers out of town. Fortunately for Walmart, its marketers discovered this error just before the economic downturn of 2009, and they successfully relaunched the brand with a new visual identity and a "regular guy" tagline of "Save money. Live better," resulting in a very strong sales rebound.

Sometimes, the archetypal story is not obvious.

Understanding the underlying archetypal story takes a careful analysis and understanding of the emotional connection that the brand has established

with its consumers. It would be easy to assume that Apple is telling the "creator" story, given the brand's use by creative types and its track record of amazing innovation. When you dig below the surface, though, it is clear that Apple, at its core, has always told the story of the "rebel." It is a brand about challenging the status quo and changing it.

From the "1984" big brother spot that ran once on the Super Bowl, to the taglines of "Think Different" and "The Computer for the Rest of Us," Apple has always understood that its brand was about taking a different path than the crowd. Even the logo, which shows not just an apple but an apple with a bite out of it (Eve's first act of rebellion in the Garden of Eden), subtly reinforces the rebel story.

A rebel needs a "ruler" against which to rebel. In the early years, IBM played this role for Apple, but for the past two decades, Apple has brilliantly positioned Microsoft/PC into this role. The "I'm a Mac" campaign, which brought to life the anti-establishment Apple brand personality, was recently named "Campaign of the Decade" by *Advertising Age* and has helped make Apple the world's most valuable brand.

The task of an established brand is to discover and clarify its core archetypal story.

It is always amazing to me how little institutional memory exists in most big marketing companies. Many of the young brand managers have no idea of the story of how the brand came to be, what fundamental consumer need it addressed or even how the brand got its name. When you conduct interviews and dig into the historical files of well-

Psychological interviews and their projective techniques are essential because we need to discover the core emotional benefit that these fans derive from the brand, and consumers often cannot tell us or are hesitant to tell marketers their true reasons for buying a brand.



established brands, you will invariably find meaningful nuggets from the brand's founding.

Often, the brand remains a perfect reflection of the forgotten philosophy of the brand's founder. Consumer perceptions of brands change quite slowly, so it is always enlightening to go back to the earliest TV campaigns to see what the original "imprint" of the brand was.

Recent work with the Lubriderm brand showed that consumers had a deep memory of the alligator used in the early campaigns with the tagline, "See you later, alligator." Even though these spots had not run for over 20 years, this was the primary memory that consumers retained of the brand because it struck a deep emotional chord.

The task of new or undefined brands is to identify an archetypal story and stick with it.

For a new brand, archetypes can be extremely helpful in establishing the underlying emotional need and the guardrails for how the brand tells its story. Half the value of using archetypes to guide brand strategy is that the marketers align around a single story, rather than trying to tell several.

The key to selecting the right story is to conduct the projective qualitative research to understand consumers' emotional needs in the category. Once the emotional need is identified, the team should select the archetypal story that delivers this need (e.g., if soup purchasers ultimately want to feel nurtured, the

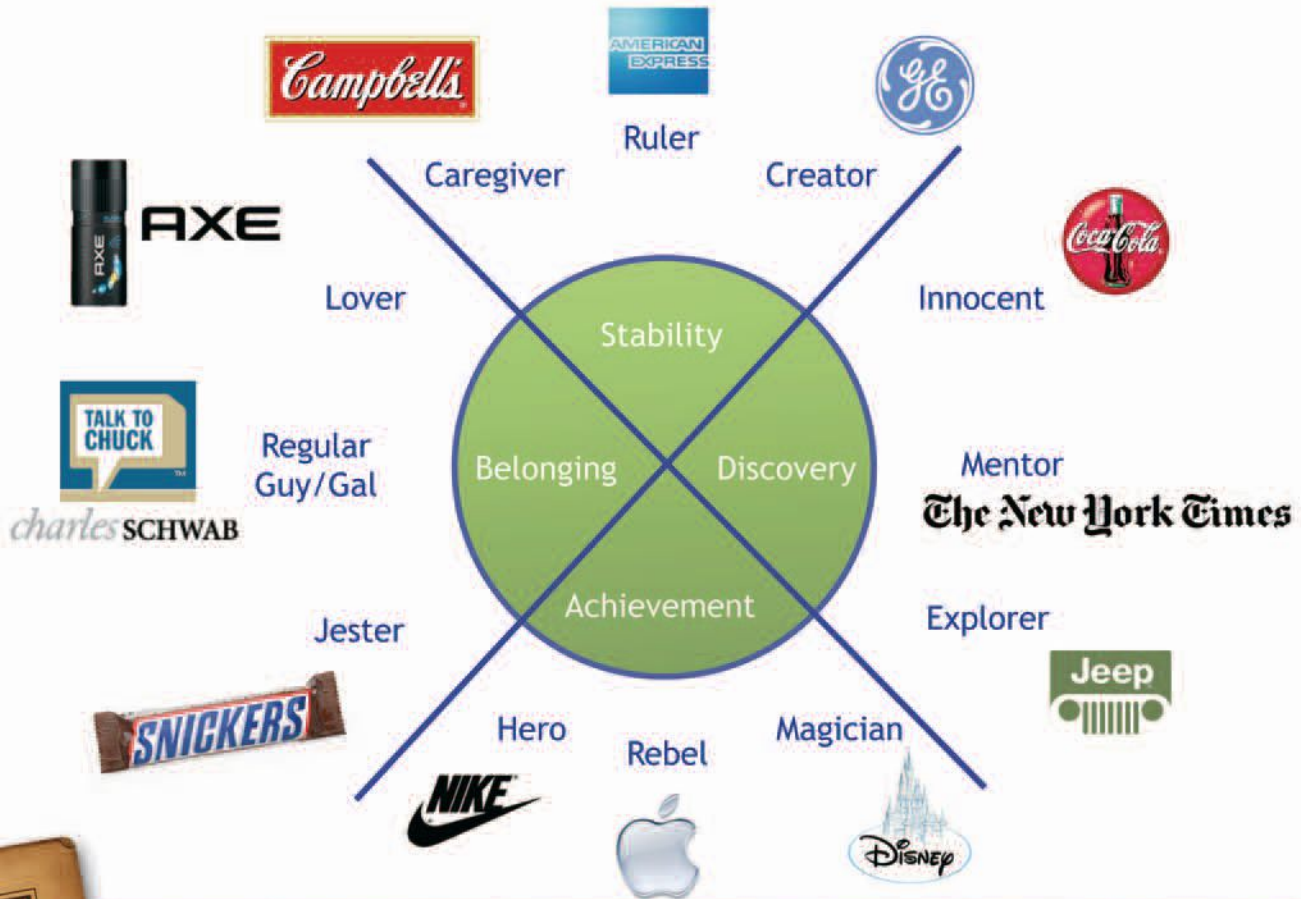
"caregiver" story delivers on this need — a story Campbell's tries to own).

The other key consideration is how competitors have positioned themselves and whether or not they own a relevant archetypal space. If so, you have two options: (1) outspend them and try to usurp the archetypal story, or (2) pick a different story.

Archetypal brand-building starts internally.

Companies like Johnson & Johnson, Eli Lilly and Rawlings use the power of archetypes to build their brands. These strong brands are built from the core. If the senior company executives and brand leaders do not grasp the fundamental essence and emotional appeal

Brands telling archetypal stories



of the brand, it is difficult for the front-line employees to deliver the right brand experience, and it is particularly hard for consumers to connect emotionally with the brand.

Therefore, start with the core team of a company and brand, conduct interviews with the key executives and do a deep dive into the history of the brand. Administer a survey to all the employees familiar with the brand to better understand which archetypal stories they believe could be true for the brand. This is an essential part of the process because, ultimately, the brand story around which your team aligns needs to be true. The company should be able to deliver on this story with its products and services at all the key brand touch points.

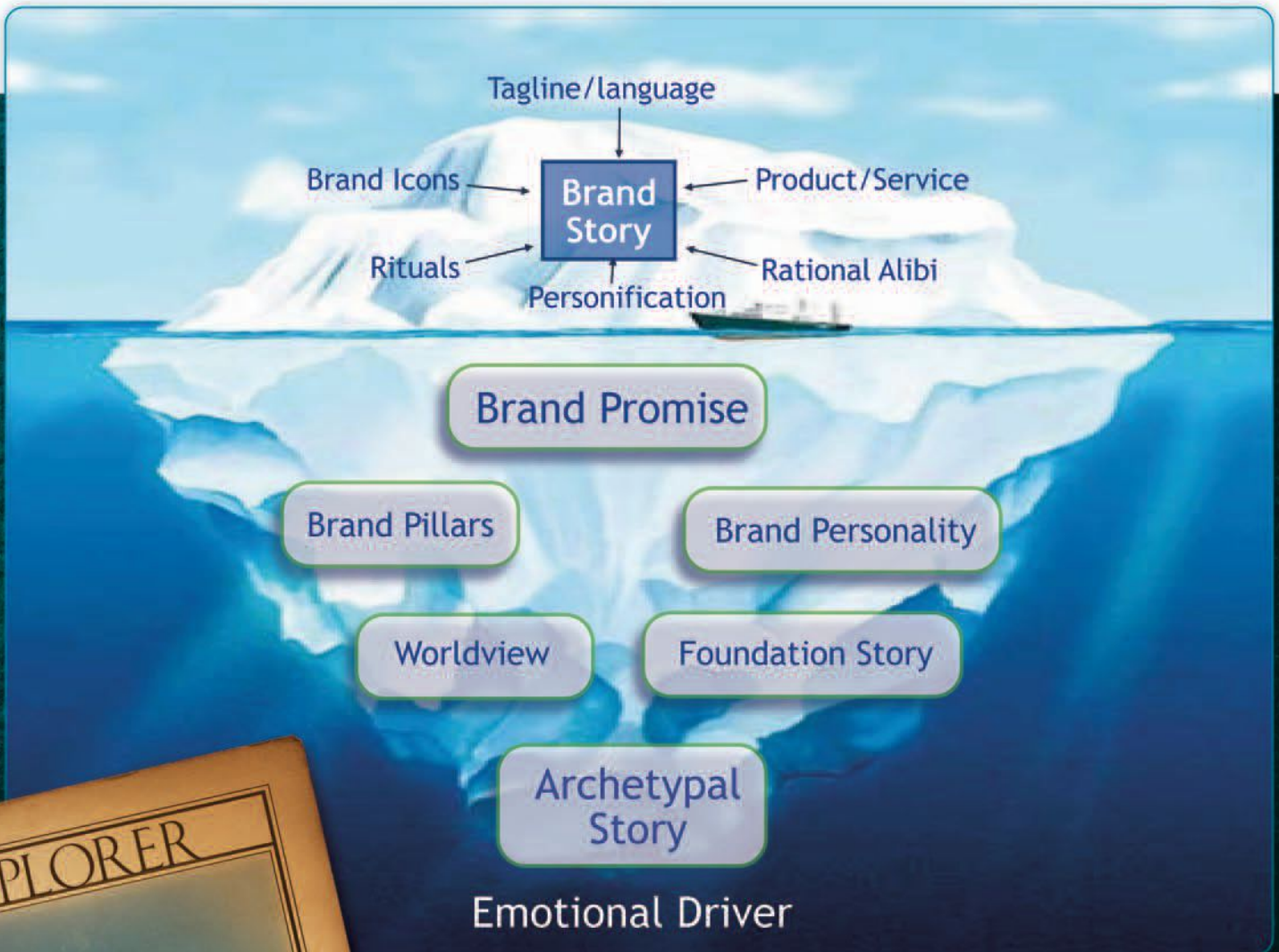
With this understanding, conduct a series of in-depth interviews among the brand's most devoted fans. These are the consumers who have the strongest emotional connection to the brand. I recommend conducting these interviews with a trained consumer psychologist. Psychological interviews and their projective techniques are essential because we need to discover the core emotional benefit that these fans derive from the brand, and consumers often cannot tell us or are hesitant to tell marketers their true reasons for buying a brand. When was the last time you heard a Mercedes driver tell you that he or she chose the brand for its prestige and power?

Instead, consumers typically list the "rational alibis" for choosing the brands

they use. It is simply human nature to assume that the decisions we make are based on rational thought processes, but think for a moment about how you went about buying your house or your car. Was it really a purely rational decision? Be honest! These interviews help us determine the key emotional needs and the most compelling archetypal story for consumers in a specific category.

Brand Strategy Iceberg

In the last phase of a project, make the key findings of the research actionable for marketers. I have developed a brand iceberg model (below) that has been very easy for clients to understand and for agencies to use as guidance. It is based on the idea that a large part of your



brand is never seen by the consumer; it is below the waterline in our model.

Below the waterline

These are elements that all strong brands share.

- They include a **foundation story**, which helps employees (and sometimes consumers) understand why the brand came to be in the first place, what problem it was solving and what its reason for being was. A well-researched foundation story can often provide strong guidance and meaning for the employees or brand team.
- Strong brands have a set of **brand pillars**, which can be values or traits of the brand that have always been part of the brand and always will be. We like to limit these pillars to no more than five. Some of the pillars may be shared with competitive brands, but as a whole, they should differentiate the brand from any other brand.
- Strong brands also define their **brand personality**. Whether we like it or not, consumers will tend to personify brands they desire. Apple, which for years ran the “I’m a Mac” campaign, made it easy for consumers to understand the brand personality and to identify with it.
- Strong brands also define their **brand worldview**. This should be an inspiring belief statement — the brand’s take on the world. It should be a belief that is shared by the brand’s most ardent fans. It should be a worldview that permeates all aspects of the brand’s offering and communication.
- Finally, strong brands are able to internally articulate their brand strategy to their employees in a memorable way in just two or three words — a **brand promise**. The brand promise is always an *internal* mantra. It

should never be used in the external communication of the brand because it lays bare the emotional strategic intent of the brand. Let your advertising agency help you develop a compelling tagline that brings this strategy to life in consumer language, but keep the brand promise internal. I often like to explain the brand promise as what the consumer actually gets, emotionally, from the brand. For example, Nike sells shoes, but their brand promise is “authentic, athletic performance.” Hallmark sells greeting cards, but their brand promise is “caring shared.” Notice that these promises are just a few words and anchored by a noun. This is the emotional benefit that their consumers get from the brand.

Above the waterline

Above the waterline are the key elements of your brand that consumers experience. These include things like:

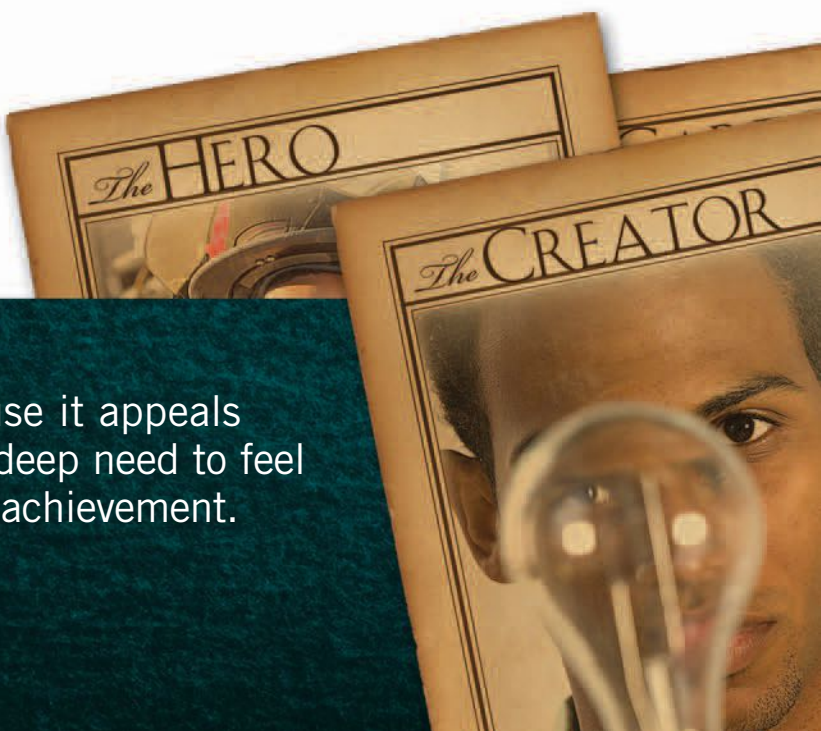
- a brand’s **product or service** and how well it delivers on the story
- the **iconography** of the brand (e.g., logo, smell, sound and feel that your brand owns)
- the **personification** of the brand, whether it is a founder (e.g., KFC), a character (e.g., Tony the Tiger) or an association with a celebrity (e.g., Nike and Michael Jordan)
- the **tagline or language** you use to voice your brand (e.g., on the website, in your ads, on Facebook)

- **rituals** associated with your brand, like the way you order your Starbucks coffee and then step to the end of the row and put the sleeve on it
- the brand’s **rational alibi**, or the reason a consumer might justify her purchase to a friend (e.g., the “No More Tears” formula in Johnson’s baby shampoo)

Final Thoughts

In summary, strong, iconic brands evoke a timeless archetypal story. This story connects them emotionally with their fans. Brands keep the story relevant by retelling it over and over again in fresh, contemporary ways, and they pay attention to the details of the story because the little things a brand does often matter much more than any big thing a brand says. They are fanatical about the consistency with which they tell the story because it is easy for the spell of the brand story to be broken if even minor details are out of sync with the story that consumers have come to know and trust.

Archetypal branding works because it appeals to us as humans. We all share a deep need to feel stability, belonging, discovery and achievement. As with the runner who on a cold morning laces up her Nike shoes to go for a jog because she wants to “just do it” in today’s world, our brands have taken on the role of important props in our own personal mythologies. 📖



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