

Reach beyond the rhythm, find the soul



Music can evoke the strongest of feelings and emotions. Whether that's a result of the unexplainable magic of certain chord combinations or melodies, or the deep associated memories that we hold with particular tunes doesn't really matter. Either way, music has this weird ability to make us feel happy or sad, calm or uplifted.

And it's not just about the piece of music itself, either. The way it is played, or the way a song is sung can dramatically affect the way we respond to it.

I've always found that Eddie and the Hot Rods' rendition of 'Do Anything You Wanna Do' has the peculiar effect of replicating the sensation of that first pint on a Friday night (probably something to do with teenage rites of passage, but it's all a bit hazy now...). However, I have to confess that the version I heard by Buzz on the karaoke at the Pudsey Sports & Social Club last Thursday didn't have quite the same effect.

While it's pretty easy to spot the difference between a well-produced track created by professional musicians and the raucous rendition of an honest, (but completely tone-deaf) working man, it's often not so straightforward to tell the difference between 'proper' singers.

There are some, though, who just have a certain something that makes them stand out. An ability to bring a captivating sense of magic to any song. Take Marvin Gaye, for example. I guess his particular vocal pitch and toning are a significant part of Marvin Gaye's appeal (hey – I've watched The X Factor, you know), but it goes a lot further than that. He seems to be able to grab hold of a song and impose his ability right through it. His delivery is unique and inimitable, and more than any other singer he truly embodies one intangible, yet wholly recognisable quality.

He has soul.

I guess the closest words that define what we mean by soul are integrity and passion. They indicate that it's more about the way in which a song is delivered than precisely what is being said that is important – 'let's get it on' is hardly the most profound lyric ever written – although when the message and its delivery are working in perfect harmony, all the better. They also imply that to deliver a song with true soul requires complete commitment; and you certainly don't get a half-hearted performance from Marvin.

Surely that's also true of the most powerful brands.

Of course brands are built on the attributes that they deliver and the benefits that are derived from their products and services. For many brands it is quite possible to see their success solely as a consequence of these readily identifiable rational features.

But, invariably, the best loved and most resonant brands have something more about them – those less tangible values or personality traits that represent the 'soul' of those brands to which their consumers are invariably (and perhaps subconsciously) drawn. It's why we do love them.

Some brands just have the ability to bring on that 'Marvin Gaye effect' – to make you feel secure (Volvo, BBC), or warm inside (Bisto, Cadbury's), or uplifted (Coke, Sky), or to make you smile (Disney, Little Britain).

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And while their rational qualities have a lot to do with those emotions – it's rare that a bad product or service lies at the heart of a strong brand (although Virgin Trains had a fair go in their early days) – it's the more elusive branding components that provide the real pull.

I've had a close affinity with Marmite for as long as I can remember. It was one of the first foods my Mum fed me. Yes, I like the taste, and it's a simple, convenient way of adding a bit of flavour to my morning toast, but my connection to the brand goes well beyond these rational aspects. It's part of my daily routine, and if the brand suddenly disappeared I'd really miss it. Don't ask me to explain why. Bovril doesn't even come close...

Uncovering, and then clearly articulating the soul of a brand isn't an easy job. It requires more than research and analysis, because it's often the case that the truly defining qualities of a brand don't emerge from rigorous examination – they hang like an aura around it, tantalisingly difficult to define.

Articulating what really makes a brand tick demands a creative leap. It means taking all of the components that make up a brand's 'DNA' and applying some imagination to arrive at a single, powerful expression of what lies at the heart of the brand's soul.

Why is this so important? After all, we don't try to put Marvin Gaye's qualities into words, do we? We simply enjoy his performance.

Unfortunately, the business world is rather less passive. Demanding shareholders and successful managers won't allow us to just sit back and bask in a brand's good fortune. Commercial pressures demand that we constantly strive to ensure brands retain and build upon their status. The value of a brand on a business ledger extends beyond the sales and profit that it currently delivers – it is a measure of the potential of that brand property. That potential is inevitably rooted in the soul of the brand. That's why it's so important to try to understand and articulate exactly what it is.

And it's equally important to be able to translate this into the rest of the business so that the daily delivery of the brand to your customers continues to build its status. Turning intellectual marketing models into practical working applications can also be a tricky business.

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