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“Do you know me?” The ‘doodling’ of iconic mink, milk, booze, and fruit campaigns

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Abstract - Anyone who has paid attention to advertising for the past several decades is familiar with five iconic campaigns: Blackglama mink “What becomes a legend most?”; American Express “Do you know me?”; Absolut vodka “Bottle”; Fluid Milk Processor Board “Got Milk?”; and Apple computer “Think Different.” These smart, successful, and long-running campaigns share an important characteristic: they rely on the audience to have a certain level of cultural literacy in order to interpret them. However, an advertiser in today’s digital world can no longer take cultural literacy for granted. Yesterday’s common experiences in all facets of life are being replaced by individual experiences. For example, if two people enter identical search terms into Google, they will quite possibly receive different search results. They will be targeted with different advertisements. The order in which they navigate the links they choose to follow will differ. This study examines five, historic advertising campaigns dependent on established cultural literacy for their communicative value along with the rapid response format of the Internet search for information.

Keywords - Cultural literacy, Blackglama mink, American Express credit cards, Absolut vodka, milk advertising, Apple computers, Google Doodles.

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and/or Practitioners - Five elegant, long-running campaigns dependent upon a level of cultural literacy resident in their readers’ minds to be effective are set against the new digital reality of searching for meanings in cyberspace where cultural literacy continues to expand.

Introduction

Culture is transmitted from generation to generation through the artifacts of society’s creative processes: art, music, literature, journalism and by extension, advertising. E.D. Hirsch in the third edition of his tome on Cultural Literacy

concludes “that both learning and reading are powerfully affected by the degree to which background knowledge is shared between writer and reader...” (Hirsch, et al., 2002) Advertisers have long depended on this notion of cultural literacy in creating messages designed to weave deeply nuanced associations across products, brands, companies, and consumers. The more levels of connection forged between consumer and company, the more solid the link and the loyalty.

In order for this “meeting of the minds” to occur, the advertiser and the consumer must “visually, auditorially, and kinesthetically” share a common language (Berman et al., 2009). Upon encountering an advertisement, the reader must dip into his/her reserve of knowledge and match up a context into which the advertisement fits neatly. This could happen by recognition of a logo, recollection of a theme song or tag line, or appreciation of an inside joke based on wordplay. The more numerous the touch points between advertiser and consumer created by the message, the deeper the connection between the participants and the deeper the message seeps into the conscience of the receiver.

The standard employed in the advertising industry to solidify this connection with the consumer over time is the well-crafted campaign designed to last as long as creatively possible with the goal of continuing to reinforce a core message. Each installment should build on the foundation of the concept underpinning the creative execution. Simplicity is the hallmark of an elegant campaign. A logo, package, spokesperson, theme music, tag line, color scheme, graphic device, play on words, and/or setting are elements blended to create the framework of an enduring, powerful campaign. These many elements must work together as the brushstrokes on the canvas of a masterpiece blending into a single image charged with conveying the essential story. The simplicity of the core idea lends itself to replication through retelling of the story in various ways while the unifying thread is picked out by the viewer/reader. This process repeated over time reinforces the message and allows the participant to become a part of the interpretation. The experience of “getting” the message strokes the consumer’s ego and fosters a feeling of self satisfaction. The advertiser is emotionally credited with recognizing the reader’s intellect and worldliness by continuing to create ads the reader understands immediately or is willing to dig deeper to interpret.

Recognition of each new facet of a campaign draws in the reader/viewer. This forces consumers to “play along” in sequence. First, they must recognize the connection of the new advertisement to earlier iterations of the basic message. Second, they must spot the variations on the initial theme. Third, they must add these new impressions to the growing string of impressions linked to the product or company in their minds. This process of fitting these parts into the whole of their comprehension with regard to the advertiser’s message engages them with the many threads woven carefully into the creative execution of the campaign.

By definition “campaigns tell a product or service’s story through multiple media, employ one unifying message and image, and talk to a specific target audience” ((Berman et al., 2009). This paper will highlight five long-running campaigns, four (Absolut [7], American Express [17], Blackglama [73], and Milk [79]) were included in Advertising Age’s “100 Best Campaigns of the Century” (Garfield, 1999) and a fifth (Apple) had an antecedent included in the list (“1984” [12]). However, membership in this list is not the defining variable binding these campaigns. These five share a creative device designed to heighten the audience experience with the campaign. These campaigns ask the reader/viewer to participate in the decoding of the full message by searching out a cultural reference at the creative center of each ad. If the reader does not know the person, place, or thing signified, the ad may still make some sense to the reader, but the shared meaning will not run as deeply.

The Campaigns

“What becomes a legend most?”

The Great Lakes Mink Association (GLMA) is a group of ranchers who produce black mink pelts. In 1968, this organization sought the creative help of Jane Trahey Associates of New York to “remodel public opinion” of their product (Rogers, 1979). Waxing and waning popularity of various types of fur coupled with the growing animal rights movement caused this trade group to seek help with establishing a stronger market position for their product. Ms. Trahey realized the challenge was to foster recognition for the fur itself. She created the brand name, Blackglama, combining the color of the fur with the name of the producers’ organization. Trade names are rare in the luxury goods business, but the name Blackglama became synonymous with prestigious mink. This was accomplished through the simple yet profound question, “What becomes a legend most?” Ms. Trahey devised a simple formula for the black and white print campaign – show glamorous people wearing the furs. The headline featured wordplay on the word “becomes” with the use of “legends” in the arts as models. The campaign was launched in 1968 featuring Melina Mercouri, Lauren Bacall, Bette Davis, Barbra Streisand, and Lena Horne photographed by the well-known Richard Avedon. The hook drawing readers was to have them identify the “legend” as no caption revealed their names (Rogers, 1979).

The campaign still employs the original concept although Ms Trahey sold her agency to her partner, Peter Rogers, in the 70s and Bill King replaced Richard Avedon in 1972. In 1987 the campaign was taken over by the LaspataDeCaro agency with Rocco Laspata as photographer. This agency celebrated 25 years (of the full 44-year run) in March of 2012 featuring Janet Jackson as the “legend” of choice still without revealing her name in the copy. In the recent iterations of the campaign, the definition of “legend” has migrated toward “celebrity” featuring more stars of television, movies, and music videos

and fewer ballerinas, opera singers, and writers. The portrait gallery can be viewed at www.blackglama.com.

“Do you know me?”

This series of commercials ran for American Express beginning in 1975 and following with twelve-years’ worth of people whose names were more famous than their faces. The brainchild of Ogilvy and Mather, the television commercials featured a spokesperson asking the tagline question followed by a few brief clues as to his or her occupation. The final frame was a close-up of the traditional green American Express card where an invisible typewriter inscribed the cardholder’s name one letter at a time. Between the verbal clues and the typing of the name, enough time lapsed for the viewer to guess the identity of the spokesperson. This creative strategy relied on the viewer’s ability to follow the clues to a logical conclusion based on knowledge of the notoriety of the perhaps visually unrecognizable cardholder. Writers, musicians, political figures, scientists, and corporate executives invited viewers to join their exclusive club through association with the prestigious card.

While American Express is often given credit for pioneering the celebrity advertising genre, (McCarthy, 2005) they were extending the creative concept of the Blackglama campaign with the Avedon portraits. The print versions of the “Do you know me?” campaign featured Annie Leibovitz portraits of notables such as Stephen King, Jim Henson, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Mel Blanc, Cynthia Gregory, and Ella Fitzgerald. In these early campaigns, the artists behind the camera were as famous as those in front of it. For an example see www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxsayi0ZpVs.

“The Absolut Bottle”

In 1981, a Swedish vodka could not take itself very seriously considering the country-of-origin effect Russia possessed. So the creative folks at what was then TBWA (now TBWA Chiat/Day) chose to focus on “the bottle.” This bottle became a blank canvas for their creativity which extended over 26 years with more than 1500 ads which can be viewed through www.absolutad.com. Again, there are some shots by Leibovitz, but she is only one of a multitude of artists, designers, and architects called into creative service by the instigators of this playful campaign. The Absolut fill-in-the-blank campaign was a print-only campaign asking the reader to do much more than recognize a person and bring along salient details of said person’s contribution to our culture. The ability to interpret an Absolut ad called for broad knowledge across art, fashion, geography, film, literature, design, kitsch, fable, mythology, and more.

The text was a simple, two-word, Absolut _____, leaving the reader to interpret the use of the bottle’s image. For example, a bottle-shaped stack of film cans side labeled with “Schindler’s List, Jurassic Park, Jaws, etc.” with the headline Absolut Achievement translates into a celebration of Steven Spielberg’s American Film Institute’s Lifetime Achievement Award (Lewis, 1996). A reader must know political symbolism to connect the white dove perched atop the bottle

with the headline Absolut Summit in an ad which ran whenever Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev met (Lewis, 1996). TBWA Chiat/Day created hundreds of variations on the bottle theme: Andy Warhol painted the bottle, the bottle was featured as a Playboy centerfold, Manolo Blahnik designed Absolut boots, an Absolut Wonderland was created in a snow globe...all in print advertisements. Needless to say, these ads have become collectors' items.

In 2007 the company continued to expect a good measure of cultural literacy from its readers by launching its "In an Absolut World..." campaign. In this perfect world "the Curse of the Billy Goat is lifted from the hapless Chicago Cubs and the garish billboards in Times Square are replaced by masterpiece paintings" (Elliott, 2007). Visually invoking sports legends and reimagining landmarks extend the company's long-standing invitation to the reader to participate with the message in continually deep and creative ways.

"Got Milk? + Milk Mustache"

This is a tale of two campaigns becoming one. In 1993, the California Milk Processor Board hired Goodby Silverstein to polish the image of the commodity, milk, which had been losing sales for years to carbonated beverages, fruit drinks, and even plain old water now bottled. The resulting "Got Milk?" campaign was based initially on the trials and tribulations of everyday people being deprived of milk when consuming gooey, yummy foods such as chocolate cookies and cake.

A year later, in 1994, the National Fluid Milk Processors hired Bozell Worldwide to boost milk consumption. Bozell's creative director at the time was Jay Schulberg, who had come from Ogilvy and Mather where he had long before worked on developing the "Do you know me?" campaign for American Express. The creative team chose a milk mustache as the universal symbol for the product. The client wanted to use it on celebrities. Cue Annie Leibovitz. The mustache campaign launched with portraits of Naomi Campbell, Christie Brinkley, Joan Rivers, Lauren Bacall (legend of Blackglama), and Isabella Rossellini (Schulberg, 1998). For examples see <http://www.milkdelivers.org/got-milk-campaign/>

In 1998, the campaigns were merged by overlaying the "Got Milk?" tagline on the milk mustache portraits. This campaign continues today. Over the years, Muppets such as Cookie Monster, cartoon figures such as the Simpsons, superheroes such as the Phantom, athletes, politicians, directors, singers, convicted criminals (Martha Stewart with a cow), talk show hosts, magicians, Elvis impersonators, and vampire slayers have shown their milk mustaches. Some "celebrities such as Ron Howard, Steven Tyler of Aerosmith and Muhammad Ali actually asked to be [included]" (Sampey, 2004). This campaign does not rely as heavily as the first three on the reader's memory. The name of the celebrity is revealed at the bottom of each ad. However, the reader who wants to play along can easily resist reading the fine print.

“Think Different”

Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. (see Dru, 2007, p. 206 for full text). The year was 1997 and Steve Jobs had just reclaimed the helm at Apple. He called in the legendary Lee Clow of TBWA Chiat/Day who had created the “1984” miracle to introduce the Mac. This campaign was to lay the groundwork for once again reestablishing Apple’s role as a creative and technological force in the twentieth century. The execution began with a television commercial followed by a print campaign. The commercial, in black and white, shows footage of historically significant people and features a voiceover of Richard Dreyfuss and the text of the *Crazy Ones*. The print ads extended the theme with black and white portraits of the figures with the Apple logo and two words, “Think Different,” in the corner. There was no caption. Again, the reader was left to remember or learn the identity of the icons. Martha Graham and Maria Callas, alumnae of the Blackglama legends campaign, were joined by Ansel Adams, Richard Feynman, Frank Lloyd Wright, James Watson, Buckminster Fuller, Jim Henson (with Kermit sans mustache) and Amelia Earhart. Those easier to recognize included Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi, John Lennon, Bob Dylan, Pablo Picasso, Thomas Edison, Charlie Chaplin, and Martin Luther King. The full campaign can be viewed through <http://creativecriminals.com/print/apple-think-different/> .

The print campaign was enlarged to include posters, murals, and buses. Later, a set of 30 posters was packaged and sent to schools across the country. Given this unique form of distribution, it is difficult to pinpoint the duration of this campaign. In fact, thanks to the long-tail effect of the Internet, all of these iconic campaigns still exist.

The Doodles

August 30, 1998, Google’s founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, violated a cardinal rule of branding. They fiddled with their logo by adding a stick figure with raised arms behind the second “o” in Google on their website while it was still in beta form. This image was known to Google insiders as an ‘out of office’ message indicating Larry and Sergey were off to the annual Burning Man festival. Thus, the first Google Doodle was launched and eventually became a regular feature on the Google homepage. The doodle gallery can be found at <http://www.google.com/doodles/finder/2012/All%20doodles> .

Google marked Halloween in 1999 by turning the “o”s in Google into jack o’lanterns. Thanksgiving and Happy Holidays images followed. In 2000, an intern named Dennis Hwang (currently Google’s webmaster) created a doodle for Bastille Day at the request of the Google’s founders. Mr. Hwang quickly rose through the ranks to become chief doodler thanks to the popularity of his creations. Now a team of designers and engineers create doodles which have become bold abstractions of the Google logo. On August 6, 2002, these designers

repeated the logo in four colored blocks depicting Andy Warhol's 74th birthday. On March 29, 2005, in celebration of Van Gogh's 152nd birthday, the logo morphed into the curlicue style of *Starry Night*. These early examples of the extravagant images to come depict international events relating to the arts, science, technology, politics, invention, sports, holidays, and obscure celebrations.

As an extension of the recognition trope followed by the five campaigns discussed earlier, interpretation of the Google Doodles relies on the reader's responding to the visual clue provided by the revised logo. For example, on January 4, 2006, the logo turned into a series of dots (in traditional Google colors) in honor of Louis Braille's 107th birthday. In 2008 creative license with the logo increased. Wes Craven designed the Halloween logo and raised the bar for more complex interpretation from the viewer. The doodles' sophistication made a giant leap forward on January 4, 2010. The first animated doodle presented an apple dropping onto the page from a bough above the logo; the apple bounced a couple times in honor of Sir Isaac Newton's 367th birthday. Clever animated doodles followed to highlight events such as birthdays and invention dates featuring the Muppets serenading Jim Hensen, Lucille Ball's 100th birthday video clip from her TV show, a moving Alexander Calder mobile, a Google movie featuring Charlie Chaplin, a working zipper, a Moog synthesizer, a tribute to Nam June Paik, and a blackout protest of SOPA/PIPA. With each animation, the doodles become more interactive--sometimes playful interaction such as picking out a tune on a Les Paul guitar and other times the intellectually stimulating interaction of trying to comprehend the binary code of a Turing machine.

At some point doodlers added a feature whereby a rollover of the logo with one's mouse revealed the meaning of a perplexing doodle. If the viewer was stumped, the answer was close at hand. Some years later a left click on the doodle would link to a Google search of the topic encouraging the viewer to delve more deeply into the subject and continue their search ad infinitum. One finds instant gratification with the click of a mouse. This is the present and future of cultural literacy. No longer does one depend on the mind's storage capacity as long as we are connected by live feed to the cloud. The hieroglyphics of Google Doodles and other digital iconography have become the lingua franca.

According to Knobel and Lankshear in *A New Literacies Sampler*, "...new literacies have both new "technical stuff" (digitality) and new "ethos stuff." The new "technical stuff" includes manipulation of digitized text, sound, image, animation, and communication functions using electronic devices. As for the new "ethos stuff" "new literacies are more 'participatory,' 'collaborative,' and 'distributed' in nature than conventional literacies. . . and 'less published,' 'individuated,' and 'author-centric'. . . as well as less 'expert-dominated'" (Knobel et al., 2007).

The early campaigns share similarities with the Google-era images. The do-you-know-me-game is afoot in both cases. Both rely heavily on recognition of faces and places. The Absolut _____ campaign comes closest to offering the diversity of the doodles. By inviting artists, industrial designers, and fashion mavens into the creative process, the Absolut campaign added freshly constructed artifacts to the cultural base. The ongoing Doodle-4-Google contest encourages anyone with a doodle idea to submit their sketch for consideration. Both the quintet and the doodles benefit from the Internet's long-tail effect to provide access to the examples for generations to come; this helps each achieve cult status in some cases as collectors and aficionados grow their ranks. Several glossy picture books are devoted to detailing these campaigns thus becoming cultural artifacts themselves. As vintage images function as works of art, advertisements are elevated to lofty status within the culture. Just as the "Got Milk?" campaign received media attention for adding an automatic sprayer releasing the scent of chocolate chip cookies at bus shelters carrying their message (Berman et al., 2009), now Google Doodles are routinely covered by media outlets (Cavna, 2012).

The differences between the two subjects are few, yet powerful. In the campaigns, the size of the audience who recognizes and remembers first-hand the legend or celebrity is waning. However, the international nature coupled with the broad spectrum of topics of the doodles gives them a larger potential audience. According to comScore's March 2012 U.S. Search Engine Rankings, Google's share of the search market is 66.4 percent which translates into 12.2 billion explicit core searches in one month. Closest competitor Microsoft posts a 15.3 percent share. (comScore, 2012) In the campaigns, personal knowledge allows the viewer to bring his or her own memory to the interpretation. The doodle's provision of instant access to greater quantities of published information becomes far less personal and perhaps much less memorable. A daily doodle's information may not make it into the viewer's long-term memory at all.

The greatest point of divergence between these two categories of images is the motivation behind their creation. All five advertising campaigns were devised essentially to promote products: minks, credit cards, vodka, milk, and computers. One may argue Google itself is a product. This is true. However, Google's present business model dictates revenue generated through AdWords and AdSense programs. Google is considered a medium. Its doodles are PR tools for Google, no question. But, doodles do not yet feature commercial products of other vendors unless it is of Google's choosing. For example, January 28, 2008 was the 50th anniversary of the Lego brick. Legos featured prominently in the lives of Google's founders as hobbies as well as materials to use for early hard drive enclosures (van Dyk, n.d.). The producers of Legos did not approach Google nor does Google currently "sell" doodle space. But, imagine their doing so. Advertising has been known to colonize most any space available on the planet. Thus far, it has not been featured on the Google's homepage. Google Doodles come closer to becoming a primer for a broader form of cultural literacy.

If our culture is indeed transmitted from generation to generation through the products of society's creative processes, Google is at the forefront of extending cultural literacy around the world.

The Future

The process of communication changed when the people at Apple began to 'think different,' and unleashed the Mac, iPod, iMac, iPhone, and iPad. These disruptive forces and their clones created an asynchronous world. Mass customization allows an individual to experience cyberspace uniquely. Digital iconography has become part of our new cultural literacy. Advertisers are already creating campaigns for audiences of one member. These campaigns are short lived. Change is the constant. The speed, velocity, and complexity of cultural change can only be tracked electronically. However, the faster our culture expands the deeper the database grows. Advertisers will continue to sharpen their focus to reach more precise targets with more precise messages. Consumers now vigorously seek out information from providers of goods and services as well as from peers. Product promotion is more dialogue based. Common frames of reference for individuals are quickly becoming less and less common. Cultural competency will be derived from connection to search engines rather than connections to the past. Advertising campaigns such as the early examples presented here as well as the Google Doodles are now part of the culture along with works of art, music, and literature. They remain forever accessible through the medium of search.

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