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Go Ueber: Start with ideals

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GO UEBER

START WITH IDEALS

Elevate your brand's
prestige—even during crises.

By JP Kuehlwein and Wolf Schaefer

The Great Recession of 2008 was a time of foreclosures, insolvencies, and investment catastrophes across the globe. Companies were going bankrupt. People were losing their jobs, savings, and homes. Consumerism was at its lowest levels, and even large well-known brands were struggling to stay afloat. With the largest financial crisis of the 19th century at hand, this was hardly surprising.

However, there was concurrently a significant anomaly in play. In a counter-intuitive manner, cheaper mass-market brands were losing out to premium brands, often even considered niche players heretofore. And this trend has been sustained until today, even during the current Covid-19 pandemic. Many categories have been 'upgraded' in the meantime and a lot of brands that were barely known 10 years ago, if at all, have since upstaged the traditional category leaders or created new categories altogether.

These new prestige players, which secure a price premium and a disproportionate share of voice and mind without spending accordingly, are what we call 'Ueber-Brands'. Why and how do they continue to grow, even during a crisis?

Becoming an Ueber-Brand

Brands become 'Ueber' when they create meaning beyond the purely material and logical aspects. They do not merely represent a commercial proposition, but an aspirational value that consumers want to buy into. They lead their categories and their fans into the future, based on clear convictions and ideals.

But they also play a larger role within the company. They are no longer seen as mere marketing instruments to attract

consumers. They are embraced as a guiding force for the entire enterprise to inspire and engage all stakeholders inside and outside.

There are two big drivers that have propelled the emergence of these modern prestige brands: technology and people.

The digital revolution has brought transparency and accessibility. Transparency forces brands and companies to practise what they preach. Accessibility empowers and commands direct brand-consumer interaction. Together they have made it impossible for the brand to have a purely external 'image' or 'label'. The desired brand image must be embraced and lived.

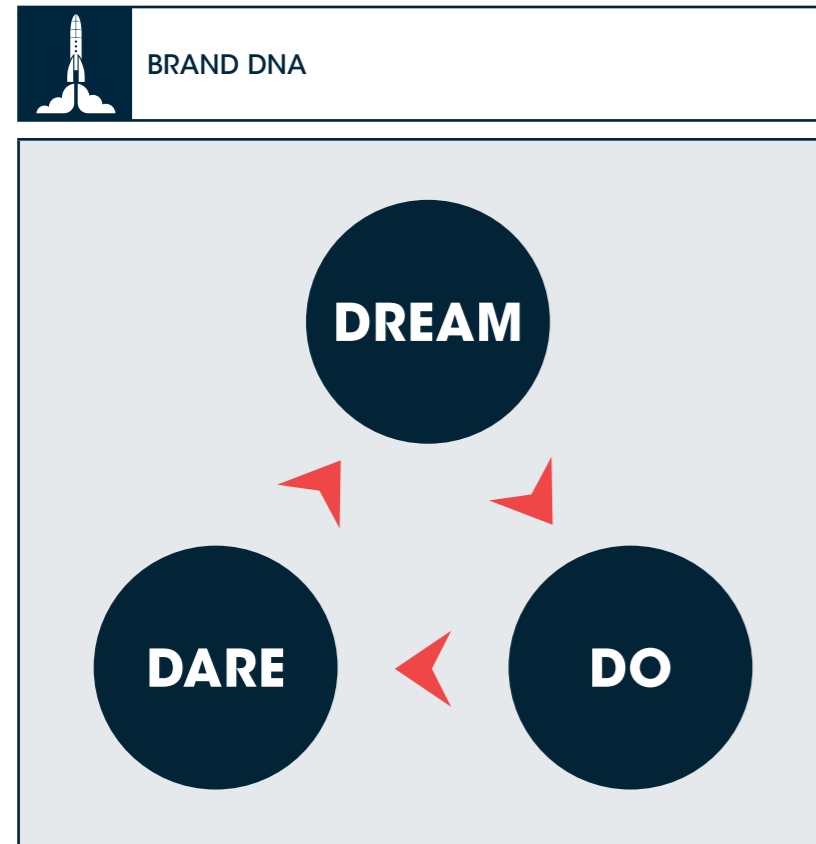
People are the other big driver of brands going Ueber. We want to shop ourselves a better world. We've all been over-marketed to. The 'hidden persuaders' are quite obvious to pretty much everyone by now. And we have also gotten generally more critical of crude commercialism, expecting more reflection and responsibility, while of course still running for the sale.

But how do these modern Ueber-Brands answer to this? How do they elevate themselves to appear above and beyond their competition: peerless and priceless?

The two big drivers that have propelled the emergence of these modern prestige brands: technology and people.

Brand elevation

We have identified and laid out several steps, organised in three core phases, in our book *Brand Elevation: Lessons in Ueber-Branding*. These core phases are: 1) *Dream*, 2) *Do*, and 3) *Dare*.



1. DREAM—HAVE A MISSION AND ELEVATE BRAND STORY TO MYTH

In a world where there is too much of everything—including irresponsible sourcing, production and waste, and the damage these cause to our environment—people are shifting from quantity to quality. They want to gain meaningful experiences, rather than simply own things for their utility value.

How can brands deliver on this? Think Patagonia, a brand that successfully sells premium-priced outdoor clothing. Its customers are not only buying fleece sweaters that might be of somewhat better quality, they are also buying *into* a philosophy of preserving the environment and doing their best to address climate concerns, which is priceless.

Does that mean all Ueber-Brands need to have a socio-ecological mission and embrace higher order values? No, they can just as well focus on reimagining or upgrading the category they belong to, and its approach or experiences. Let us consider the case of Airbnb, a vacation accommodation rental online marketplace platform. You could describe the company as connecting travellers who seek affordable rooms (cheaper than a hotel) with homeowners who want to make

some extra money. But the brand has elevated its value proposition by embodying the mission ‘we believe in a world where people belong anywhere’. A stay at an Airbnb home promises travellers a sense of belonging to the place they are visiting, in contrast to the sterile hotel environment that might as well be anywhere in the world. Airbnb’s mission makes buying into the brand much more meaningful and aspirational—far beyond its utilitarian value.

How can brands achieve such elevation from the mundane? Among others, we recommend the following two key strategies.

Start with yourself

This is nothing less than turning the traditional brand strategy model on its head or feet. A company must not start with market research when developing its brand; it should start with its ideas and ideals. Of course, the customer and business realities still matter. But they come into play once the firm is clear about its value proposition—what it wants to dedicate its brand to and why. It should then use these insights to validate and adjust its concept, find the right target, and ensure profitability.

If you start by looking outside for consumer needs and market gaps, you’ll never be anything but opportunistic.

You’ll be running after opportunities rather than leading with a sense of mission.

You’ll be defined by what is, rather than inspiring what could be.



Just associating emotions with your products and services, your brand and its relations, is not enough. You need to lift people and connect them with what they want to be, and what they could be. Thus, not just any story for your brand will do; you need one with mythical qualities.

Elevate the tangible by reaching for the intangible

“The mystery and the protocol—it’s not there to keep us apart. It’s there to keep us alive,” says Queen Elizabeth II as played by Olivia Colman in the 2020 Netflix blockbuster series *The Crown*. The same holds true for building Ueber-Brands. They need proper context and entourage to elevate themselves. But above all, they need mystery and myth. To transcend the everyday, a brand must rise to a higher level.

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Myths aren’t just ‘false stories’ as the word is often used colloquially. They talk about our “collective dreams” as stated by author and professor Joseph Campbell, who worked in comparative mythology and comparative religion. They not only hold us together as societies, they also connect groups and inspire movement. Just look at Tesla for example. It is much more than a story of technological advancement. It is also the myth of Elon Musk, a maverick breaking the boundaries of the world as we know it, inspiring us to think that we can go higher and further than we have ever thought possible. And this is what makes Tesla such a strong Ueber-Brand.

2. DO—MAKE YOUR PROMISE AND DREAM COME TRUE—FROM THE INSIDE AND OUT

The second and probably hardest phase in building a Ueber-Brand is ‘Doing’, and it will never stop. It is the rule for living the brand mission and myth in all that a company does, from sourcing to sharing. In today’s digital

world, any discrepancy between a brand’s mission and action is immediately spotted and criticised. Failure to live up to the declared brand mission—be it material or beyond—is the biggest threat. It is therefore better to be humble and overdeliver, than to disappoint and be ‘found out’ as inauthentic, or worse.

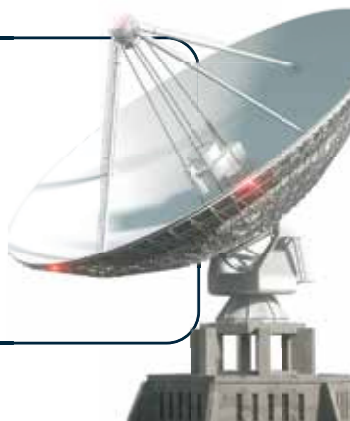
Ueber-Brands and their myths must be built inside out. Product, process, organisation, and culture are all key to sustainable and successful engagement with their targets. One of the biggest advantages of the digital revolution is that brands have so many more (and often more economic and effective) opportunities to engage with people directly.

The days of a brand as a mere marketing mirage are over in this experience-led economy. People are sick and tired of dull, self-congratulatory brand promotions interrupting their lives, even if they’re just watching some tacky ‘unboxing’ on YouTube. They want brands to add value right when and where these brands pop up, not just promise it.

Consider the example of Yuan Soap, a Taiwanese company. Founded in 2005, Yuan uses indigenous herbs and plants, along with an Oriental philosophy of promoting good health, to offer naturally made cleaning and skincare products with medicinal properties. Consumers at a Yuan store first go through a traditional tea ceremony to relax and feel calm. Then they are consulted by a staff member who walks them through their symptoms, introduces herbs that would be helpful, and prescribes a range of suitable personal care products, just like a traditional Chinese physician. At the end, the satisfied consumer walks out with a bag of premium-priced household goods.

Everything about Yuan reinforces its natural and traditional image: its fields for growing herbs, its 18-step process to make the handmade soaps, the rustic and pure

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look of its natural products, the open and simple interiors of its stores, as well as its solicitous in-store consultations and tea ceremonies. Moreover, Yuan grows all its herbs in the mountains of Taiwan and makes all its products on the island. All these elements contribute to the consumer experience and come together to create a meaningful premium brand that represents the ideals of caring for both human beings and the environment.

Another example that comes to mind is of a humble 200-year-old American brand, King Arthur, which sells flour, a commodity product like sugar or salt that typically costs little to buy in large quantities. But King Arthur Baking

Company is able to maintain a premium. In complete contrast to America's fast-food and delivery culture, it focuses on bringing people back to doing things with their hands by teaching them to make their own dough, bread, biscuits, and cakes. On its website, it provides wide-ranging recipes and cooking videos, and through its helpline, it offers the assistance of its professional bakers to help customers overcome any baking challenges. It also has a baking school and a coffee shop. Co-owned by workers, the company has three CEOs who have been around for more than 20 years, and are fully committed to propagating health and education through the brand.

BRAND ELEVATION DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

As we saw in 2008, Ueber-Brands can come out of a crisis stronger. But can they leverage it to further enhance their meaning? A crisis can lead to two interesting developments. First, crises like the Covid-19 pandemic can accelerate the pace of future developments and push brands right into the thick of things. Second, good brands can harness the socio-cultural forces that come to the fore in such situations, provided these forces fit into the brands' DNA and elevate the brands to a stronger position.

Use crisis as an opportunity to make your brand stronger, and at the minimum, avoid a situation where the crisis may dilute your brand.

Reinforcing the dream during crises

Many companies do not reflect on their dream or mission during a crisis, and instead attempt to connect with the consumers with superficial claims of empathy, usually via digital marketing platforms. These tactics often backfire as consumers are quick to see through such claims. Rather, brands must act differently to create and maintain their meaningfulness. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (LVMH) was one of the first brands to deploy its resources used in making high-end fragrances to produce hand sanitisers, a utilitarian product. This sent out a strong message about the luxury brand's true empathy and support during the crisis.

In addition, it is important for a brand to continue to follow a DNA-guided approach in translating and expressing its position during a crisis. For instance, due to the lockdowns across the world, Louis Vuitton's (LV) narrative of 'life's journeys as epic occasions' was fast losing its relevance and meaning. To counter this, LV doubled down on reinforcing the concept of meaningful journeys through its new electronic campaign using

3. DARE—FIND YOUR MUSE AND APOSTLES, THE UEBER-TARGET AND LET THEM IGNITE ALL YOUR TARGETS

'Daring' is about taking your Dream and all you Do out into the world, engaging all your targets again and again. It's about brands creating compelling provocations through brazen activation strategies. It's about making Ueber-Brands interesting and inspiring their followers, befitting their distinct lifestyles and choices. And for those standing on the outside, it builds aspirations, and nurtures a sense of intrigue and longing for the brand, such that people wonder about the exciting things that would be in store for those who are 'in'.

The most important element for creating this provocation is the brand's muse—its Ueber-Target. For example, how would you describe the Harley Davidson biker? Ninety-nine percent of responses to this question, across age groups and geographies, describe this fantasy person as an outlaw, a hell's angel who is loud and lavishly tattooed—as often depicted by the company in its campaigns. However, if you look at the profile of actual Harley customers, the majority are middle-aged working professionals who love being outlaws for just a weekend or a ride. After that, they wash off their tattoos, and it is over till the next time they head out on the bike; this is all a dream that is being played out over and over again.

comic characters. The campaign featured a global canvas with LV symbols and the characters were portrayed travelling around the world during a fantasy-filled voyage. It was intermixed with actual runway shows to create a beautiful fantasy-cum-reality trip experience.

Airbnb also did something similar. To continue to keep its host and guest communities engaged during the pandemic, Airbnb introduced 'online experiences', which were unique activities on its platform led by hosts from around the world. These included 'Zoom around Paris with a Parisian' by a French host, 'Make Mexican Street Tacos' with a Mexico-based host and 'Meet the Woolly Sheep & Lambs on My Farm' by a New Zealand host. These virtual activities became very popular, and they have now become a standing offer from the brand.

Ben & Jerry's too highlighted their *dōing* by educating people about the pandemic, and how it has been particularly harsh for the coloured population. CEO Mathew McCarthy openly called out the systemic racism in the U.S., and pointed out how racism and Covid-19 together have been catastrophic for the marginalised. The brand has also taken a stand against mass incarcerations, pointing out that Covid-19 is rampant among the inmates in crowded prisons, and that the majority of inmates are Black Americans. Having translated its mission unequivocally into strong actions, Ben & Jerry's has successfully endeared itself to its Ueber-Target. In fact, the ice-cream brand's limited editions of variants such as 'Justice - Remix'd' sold out in no time, even when there was no crisis.

Flour manufacturer King Arthur, in response to Covid-19 restrictions, has launched 'the isolation baking show' for people who have no idea about baking, teaching them the fun way to bake in their own kitchens. The company also posts varied recipes, including those that need less flour as flour became scarce during the lockdowns,

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These initiatives have helped the brand to portray itself as 'a friend who helps you out when you are in need', which gave a huge boost to the company's business. In March 2020, King Arthur's flour sales increased by 2,000 percent, and its baking school has already been booked out for 2021, even though in-person classes may not start any time soon.

And yes, even mass-market brands that have become run-down over the years can seize the crisis as an opportunity to re-energise themselves. For example, with schools shut down during the lockdowns, children from poor families in the U.K. and the U.S. no longer had access to free meals provided by their school cafeterias. Heinz beans, a brand under a dull product category like canned foods, used the moment to highlight the importance of comfort food, and stepped up by distributing millions of free meals to these children outside of schools.

However, the thing to watch out for is whether such an initiative would last beyond the crisis, or be a typical mass market campaign that would be abandoned soon after. Would the brand be smart enough to integrate this into its mission and elevate itself, into something more meaningful?

What Ueber-Brands have done is to create tension among their audiences based on the psychological concept of real versus ideal self.

By portraying people's ideal or fantasy selves, these brands create desire and a positive bias. Look at Rapha, a premium sportswear and lifestyle company, which offers the world's finest cycling clothing for sophisticated bikers. Its target audience is attracted by the possibility of becoming members of its exclusive club comprising passionate and active cyclists across the globe. By celebrating this Ueber-Target, the brand creates a positive vibe among its wider strategic target group who feel that when they put on a Rapha apparel, they come a little closer to what they aspire to, even though it costs a lot.

Daring to dare

But beware. Daring is not about just hiring a bunch of influencers to talk about how great a brand is for some cold hard cash. Rather, daring requires the ability to identify and create a truly exciting relationship with a brand's Ueber-Target so that they become its strongest advocates authentically, with little or no bribing involved.

Consider how Airbnb was able to harness its Ueber-Target, the super-engaged host community, by collaborating with them to come up with its varied initiatives. Besides the online experiences, it launched 'Frontline Stays', which are complimentary for healthcare and frontline workers who need to isolate themselves from their families or live closer to their place of work. Airbnb's commitment to house 100,000 medical staff and nurses hit headlines in leading newspapers in the United States. It also introduced 'Monthly Stays', which are stays of a month or longer to help people stuck in different parts of the world due to travel restrictions. In addition, the brand created a higher level of engagement and support for its host community by introducing enhanced features like meet-ups, host voice, and host-sharing clubs, as well as social groups on third party social media platforms like Facebook.

Brand elevation no longer optional but a commitment

A brand's DNA is not just the desired identity it plans to adorn its products with; rather, it concerns what the entire organisation is really about—across its functional areas, business divisions, processes, and markets. More importantly, it is about being consistent over the long term. If the strategy to elevate the brand is simply a public relations exercise or an advertising campaign, it will be forgotten as soon as the creative gets old or the brand manager changes. Then it is

nothing but opportunism. And such short-term tactical moves always flop, crisis or no crisis.

People will associate meaning—positive or negative—with a brand, whether it wants to or not. Hence it is better to be aware of this and seek to stand for things people value or even admire. Brands today are first and foremost change agents, and their job is not to make overblown promises their products cannot keep. They must give people genuine hope for a slightly brighter, better tomorrow. They must help these people to become who they want to be and live how they want to live. And the best approach for a brand to do this is to Dream, Do, and Dare.

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This article is based on the authors' latest book "Brand Elevation: Lessons in Ueber-Branding", Kogan Page, 2020.

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