

intelligence vault MARKETING

how to elevate your brand

~ Mark Healy / Partner / Torque

Remember that kid from your high school? The quiet, hard working one. A little awkward at times. Made dorky jokes. Didn't make a big splash in class, but always had the right answer. Got really high grades. Maybe wasn't fantastic at sports, but had mad skillz at music or theatre or writing. Didn't have a huge group of friends, and wasn't in the in-crowd. But would surprise you with at times with remarkable kindness, even when you maybe didn't deserve it. Remember her, or him? What s/he doing now?

Everyone I talk to has a story that goes like this: "yeah, man, I ran into so-and-so for the first time in like ten years. Wow. Has s/he ever changed! Looks fantastic. Totally successful. S/he has really made it." That's elevation. Some brands elevate over time as well.

Take Volvo for example. My dad has always driven Volvos. I mean always. North of 34 years, and counting. We think of Volvo now as a hip, safe, near-luxury brand. A brand chosen by young professionals and the established set alike wearing beards or power dresses, built for agency meetings-by-week, and kayaking-by-weekend. This wasn't always true. Volvos used to be – and I'm being kind – dependable but boxy, un-sexy, affordable, pedestrian cars, normally thought of as station wagons when station wagons weren't cool. The Volvo brand has elevated, arguably dramatically, over a fairly short time period (10-15 years) – in both stature and value.

Volvo is that kid. And if you think back now with a little more clarity, you'll sort out that s/he possessed a focus on achievement, a tremendous depth of quality and character, a centered sense of practicality, and kitschy sense of humour. Aren't those the key elements of cool now? And isn't that exactly what Volvo, the brand and company, has always possessed?

Volvo isn't the only brand to have achieved a significant elevation by staying true to itself. Here are a few others:

- Lee Valley Tools. Once the bastion of only the hardest of hard-core cabinet makers. Purveyors of fine, in some cases hand-made, tools, implements and works of craftsmanship. Found in a limited number of cities, pushed into industrial parks on the edge of town. Or worse, available by catalogue only. No more. Now Lee Valley has fancy downtown showrooms and a wider customer base, coupled with premium prices. It is a cool place to buy a friend a gift. The brand is spoken of or displayed with pride in homes of amateur craftsmen and non-handy folks alike.
- Dickies. Clothing for workmen, who actually get dirty everyday, right? Coveralls? Painting pants? A brand known only to the lunch pail set, to those who drive pick-up trucks for the practicality and not for the optics? That may have been true a few years ago. Now, not so much. I see the brand sold in surf shops, and skate shops. By tattooed, edgy haired hotties with face piercings to tattooed, edgy haired hotties with face piercings. I see shirts and backpacks proudly worn by masters and PhD students on their way to school. Holy Moly.
- TSC Stores and Shopper's Drug Mart. If you haven't lived in or spent time in small town Canada (well, Ontario and Manitoba), the TSC brand may not be overly familiar. It is kind of like the Home Hardware for farmers and other country folk. The stores were once confined to strip malls and b-tier stand alone locations. In small towns. That's certainly not true anymore. Private equity money and strong leadership have pushed the brand to where Shopper's Drug Mart, another elevated brand, has gone in recent years



– strong retail outlets in bigger centers with a focus on in-store experience. In Shopper's case, they are closing in-mall stores and shifting fully to a destination brand. Big time elevation for both brands in less than a decade.

So the question is not 'can it be done?' The question is 'how did they do it?' There are some excellent take-away's which you can use to elevate your brand, if you pull these examples apart. Here are some common themes to the Volvo, Lee Valley, Dickies, TSC Stores and Shopper's Drug Mart brand elevation stories:

1. Start with a focus on quality.

We just completed a large study of SMB purchase decision makers. One question we asked was 'how do you define quality?' In the examples above, I'm talking about two elements of quality: craftsmanship and value-for-price. Each of the brands which eventually elevated, just like that kid from your high school, focused heavily on very well crafted products or services in their earlier days. No one would ever say Volvo used to produce a shoddy car. Or that Dickies' jeans wore out quickly. In fact, most would tell you the products/services noted were over-engineered/solid/hearty. And the prices charged or associated with the brands were not out of line with value derived from the products or services.

Throughout the elevations, that focus on quality remained. Each brand has a reputation for robust quality. What is remarkable in each instance is the price premium now charged. The brands have steadily increased price, in some cases to near-premium, at a pace outstripping the increase in quality and service.

If you want to elevate your own brand, and you have any questions about your own product/service quality, this would be the place to start. If you have a lot of confidence in your quality – as measured by your reputation for quality with your customers, not by your own QA metrics – you are in good shape to start a directed brand elevation.

2. Don't forget practicality.

Each of the profiled brands also had its roots in practicality. Lee Valley didn't make slick looking tools, it made useful tools. Shopper's Drug Mart sold shampoo and ibuprofen, not fancy chocolate and flash-in-the-pan personal care products. And they still do. It is part of their heritage, and everyone associates the brands with this trait.

There seems to be a stickiness rooted in practicality needed to achieve a sustainable brand elevation. Tab is a brand which was popular in the early 80's, all but died, and came back with a vengeance re-positioned as the energy drink for women (and nicely re-branded) about two years ago. But I'm not sure where this brand is now. The quality was always there but perhaps not a heritage of practicality.

To elevate your brand, a concentration on communicating a heritage of practical application or service is a step you need to start taking right now (if not already part of your branded value proposition). And this will take time, so be patient.

3. The kitsch factor.

A final common theme for the elevated brands we've discussed is a kitschiness, in some cases bordering on campy. Volvos were so well known to be a college professor's car, movies would reinforce this notion by ensuring the character of the professor drove a used Volvo wagon. Some of Lee Valley's marketing and communications pieces were/are so timeless, they are now retro cool.

The point is that while each of these brands takes the business of what they make/do seriously, they don't take themselves so seriously as to be offended when others take a light hearted swipe at them.



Two brands I think of that really embrace kitsch, coupled with their well known quality and practicality, are Electrolux (yet another example of a brand which has elevated) and Steam Whistle (which is not all that old, but appears so due to some very clever branding and positioning). Having a little fun with your own brand, and acting somewhat self-deprecating in a genuine manner are also key to transcending the too-cool-for-school brands which will eventually fade away – and achieving an elevated status.

So, want to elevate your brand? It will take time, money and focus – that is a given. But it will also take a focus on quality, a documented heritage of practicality, and an embrace of mild irreverence. No easy task but the end result will be a virtually unassailable brand position.

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