What Is an Accidental Brand?

Entrepreneurs fascinate me. They surrounded my childhood. There was always one at our dinner table. In school, I vividly remember the day Stew Leonard came to speak to my eighth grade class in the late 1970s. He talked about listening to customers and breaking rules. He actually made running a dairy store sound exciting. I spent summers in high school and college working for start-ups. I was a terrible computer programmer, but I loved the passion of the people working around me. Yet, when I left college, I took the safe route and went to work for a big strategic consulting firm. Then, after graduate school and a stint in corporate finance, I settled into a position as a consumer-products brand manager and followed that career, in one form or another, for over a decade.

I finally became an entrepreneur in 2003 and, soon after, started teaching marketing at New York University. My students were not MBAs but working professionals. Most came to marketing unexpectedly, having been promoted from other departments like sales or finance. Brand marketing, as it is practiced in major consumer corporations today, has its own language, practices and customs. It can be intimidating to an outsider and is a small, clubby world where most of us have heard of each other or at least know someone in common. The rapid developments in new media have shaken this up a little, but our business can still be a tough field to break into.

I taught a class on positioning and brand development in the summer of 2005 and for the final class project I asked each student to research and write about a successful consumer company that had been started by an entrepreneur who was not a trained marketer or an MBA. I thought that this would give my students some confidence and inspiration in their new marketing careers. I also believed that we could take some of these brands and compare them with brands launched by big consumer companies. The results surprised me. In paper after paper, I read about entrepreneurs who beat bigger companies with their tightly focused brands. And, in case after case, these entrepreneurs were doing some of the same things. These were not the things I had learned as a corporate marketer.

In truth, I had been having qualms about the "conventional wisdom" of marketing for a number of years. Reading Seth Godin's *Permission Marketing* in 2000 was a wakeup call for me. I had just left Coca-Cola to run a marketing group at the Internet advertising company DoubleClick. Godin questioned the entire model of marketing I was practicing at that point—marketing that was very much like a military assault and used the same terminology. The game in marketing was to make sure that anyone who might possibly be interested in your product heard your brand message at least three times. An intrusive message (we called it "breaking through the clutter") would increase the odds that the consumer would remember the brand. We measured success with memory-related tools like "Aided and Unaided Recall," a metric whose two categories refer, respectively, to recognizing a brand name when it's repeated to you and remembering the name on your own when all you're told is the type of product.

Godin, an entrepreneur himself, suggested that in an age of information on demand, this strategy was bound to fail. Consumers were being bombarded with too many commercial messages, and they were becoming frustrated with the intrusion into their lives. As people gained the ability to find what they were looking for (like news or stock quotes) without commercial interruption, they were starting to tune marketers out. Godin suggested that a relationship with a consumer is a value exchange, and that marketers need to be explicit about asking for permission to initiate the relationship, as well as providing value to the consumer in order to get them interested in engaging with the brand. This would create a stronger, more lasting relationship with the brand.

I am embarrassed to say that I was still following my old marketing habits in 2003 when I was running marketing for a private-label company that hoped to launch a major branded product in the United States. I created a very traditional launch plan where millions of dollars would be spent to gain broadscale awareness of this new product. I did add some "viral marketing" elements to the mix, hired a strong PR agency, and tried to target "influencers" (people who influence the buying decisions of others, like doctors or journalists). But my marketing plan was still conventional, my wisdom outdated.

As the year rolled along, I began to have more doubts. There was a lot of data suggesting that television advertising just wasn't as effective as it had been 20 years before. I created a reading group within the company and our agencies and we read Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*, which gave me even more qualms about the plan I had proposed. Gladwell suggested that ideas spread like viruses and that marketing messages take exactly the same route. This implied that all that television advertising wouldn't work if there wasn't some underlying message that people would really want to share with each other.

In 2005, a year after I had founded my own company to teach marketing to corporate brand managers, Bob Garfield wrote an article in *Advertising Age* that seemed to crystallize all of my doubts about conventional wisdom. Garfield quoted Shawn Burns, managing director of Wunderman, Paris, as saying, "There's been research that the real cost of obtaining 30 seconds of the consumer's attention is the same in 2005 as it was before the invention of television." What Garfield was saying was that the mass market—the ability to get to virtually everyone in America at the same time with a television commercial—was dead. Moreover, it wasn't exactly clear what was going to replace it. All in all, a pretty terrifying article for a marketing person to read and no doubt doubly frightful for advertising agency folks.

Just a couple of months later, I read Douglas Atkin's book, *The Culting of Brands*. Atkin talks about the deep relationship that certain brands develop with consumers and how these brands end up resembling cults—according to the strict sociological definition. I had the opportunity to interview Atkin for an article I was writing a couple of months after his book came out. We fell into a deep discussion about brands and the changes we were both seeing in the marketing community. We were both convinced that traditional marketing practices did not reflect the complexity of the brand experience. Atkin had done an excellent job of looking to the sociological model of cults to understand how consumers connect to brands. I wondered how else we could understand this connection.

The answer came to me as I was reading the student papers later that summer. The entrepreneurs they had chosen were not all of the same ones you will read about in this book (only two made the final cut—John Peterman and Roxanne Quimby), but they all had some important things in common. They were real people, mostly from very modest backgrounds. None of them had MBAs or a lot of special training. And although they were bright and incredibly motivated, these people were not geniuses. They were ordinary people.

Their brands, however, were not ordinary. Even from the original list of case studies from students, which included some Fortune 500 companies like Nike, Starbucks, and Apple, as well as brands created by entrepreneurs who were long deceased, I could tell that these brands were something special. Some of them had legions of fanatic followers. Others had assumed a cult standing and become cultural icons. It made sense that these entrepreneurs might know something that I didn't.

It also made sense for another reason. What I was looking at—in the 20-odd cases from students and the dozens of others that I subsequently investigated—was not just the results of a few individual efforts. It was the result of a Darwinian competition for resources that ruthlessly weeds out half of all start-ups. An even smaller number grow into large, profitable businesses. When you're talking about the kind of brands I was looking at—those with sales over $20 million that were 10 or more years old—the odds of success were even smaller. Thus, the companies that I actually investigated in depth represented hundreds or even thousands of others who failed. And there were a lot of similarities in these success stories. It's not just that people who start successful consumer brands have a lot of inherent traits in common—they also do some of the same things. Most important to me, I realized that this list of common practices was not the same list I'd been taught in my marketing classes at Harvard Business School, or while working for Johnson & Johnson or Coca-Cola. It was different stuff.

I ended up calling this book *Accidental Branding* because I realized that every brand that I wanted to write about started with some fortuitous accident. This does not mean that the founders didn't work hard and make a lot of smart decisions along the path to building huge businesses. But every story here starts with something unexpected happening, whether it is a cyclist realizing he can't eat his sixth consecutive energy bar because it just doesn't taste good (Gary Erickson of Clif Bar), a mother trying and failing to find videos with classical music, foreign language, and poetry for her baby (Julie Clark of Baby Einstein), or a hitchhiker getting picked up on the side of a road in Maine by a beekeeper who shares her values (Roxanne Quimby of Burt's Bees). I think the accident is important, because the foundation of all of these brands—what I'll call the brand architecture—was molded by that accident. These entrepreneurs all had a very clear set of values that they brought to the brand. Even though the actual products they sold would change over time for some of them, the values remained consistent. Moreover, these entrepreneurs were trying to solve their own problem. They were not listening to some focus group of consumers tell them what to do; they *were* the consumer. There has been a lot of controversy about the practice of following intuition and the value of making decisions from instinct. In my own career, I have seen and have made terrible decisions based on intuition. But after studying these entrepreneurs, I realized that most of those decisions came when I was very different from the consumers with whom I was trying to connect. These entrepreneurs could trust their instinct because they had retained the ability to think like real consumers. In fact, several of them got into trouble when they turned their businesses over to people without the same instincts.

I ended up with a definition of an *Accidental Brand* that has three tests:

1. An individual who is not trained in marketing must create the brand.

2. This individual must experience the problem that the brand solves.
3. The individual must control the brand for at least 10 years.

By applying these three tests to my list, I was able to choose a set of brands that I felt I could learn from. Very early on, I also decided to limit my investigations to entrepreneurs that I could meet personally and who would spend time with me. This made the research a lot harder, but it allowed me to tell a more personal story about the brands. My thought was that because these entrepreneurs relied heavily on their personal tastes and instincts, I would see many echoes of their brand-building practices in their personal lives. This is exactly what I found.