

The challenge of turning a brand into an object of love

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By John Gapper.

Krispy Kreme doughnuts, Poilâne bread, Tide soap powder, Harley-Davidson motor cycles, Cheerios cereal, Herman Miller's Aeron office chair, the Google search engine, the children's book *Where The Wild Things Are*, Crayola's Burnt Sienna shade of crayon.

What do these things have in common? According to their supporters, they are remarkable products that are more than brands. They provoke such affection – even love – that their owners often evangelise about them to the underprivileged folk who have not yet tried them.

Some of them have now been dubbed “lovemarks”, a name devised by Kevin Roberts, chief executive of Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide, the advertising agency (or ideas company, as it likes to be known). Mr Roberts is fondest of products that are “mysterious” or “intimate”, rather than being useful or keenly priced, and that can inspire “loyalty beyond reason”.

A sceptic (OK, a cynic) such as myself is tempted to dismiss this as the kind of preposterous nonsense that only someone from Madison Avenue says with a straight face. The feeling is exacerbated by his new book, *Lovemarks*, which is chock-a-block with fonts and colours, photos and scribbled notes. Like Tom Peters's *Re-Imagine! Business Excellence in a Disruptive Age*, reading it makes you want to lie down in a darkened room.

There is clearly something to it, to judge by the number of books, such as Seth Godin's *Purple Cow: Transform by being Remarkable*, that preach a similar gospel. Indeed, we all know of some products that give us warm feelings, that we bore our friends about and for which we willingly pay a high price. As a loyal – and regular – reader of *Where The Wild Things Are*, it gets my vote.

But love is not a word to bandy about lightly. For most of us, it implies exclusivity: we are not intensely attached to lots of things because we are not built that way. Companies must try either to make products that many people quite like; an attempt to achieve both will be fraught with obstacles and conflicts. In markets, as in real life, love does not usually coexist with promiscuity.

Two factors lie behind the craze for emotional involvement. The first is overcapacity: a proliferation of products in every market segment means it is hard to gain attention for anything conventional. Mr Godlin, a marketing

consultant, cites Frito Lay's launch last year of Stax, an intended rival to Procter & Gamble's Pringles potato crisps. He says that, despite a \$50m (£27m) marketing campaign, fewer than half of those people polled by market researchers recognised the name, even when prompted.

Mr Godlin's solution is for companies to make only "remarkable" things that will make consumers take notice. "The temptation with any industrial or consumer good is to keep making it a little bit better, but that does not help one bit," he says. A product must be revolutionary, or at least innovative, to attract more than cursory attention from jaded shoppers.

The second factor is the enhanced ability and willingness of consumers to spread their views about products, whether good or bad. "In the age of the internet, goods have real-time résumés," says, Ben McConnell, co-author of *Creating Customer Evangelists: How Loyal Customers Become a Volunteer Sales Force*. He says that the internet has increased by a factor of 10 the number of people that one consumer can influence.

A company can take advantage by cultivating a band of zealots who will generate buzz about its products. One company that does so is Krispy Kreme, which puts enormous effort into store openings. To help spread the word and provoke excitement, it distributes free doughnuts to community groups in the lead-up to a launch. These openings then become theatrical events: some fans camp overnight to be first to get a doughnut.

All of this makes sense, but they are hard lessons to apply to mass brands. A lot of companies know the emotional playbook by now. Most airlines want to be like Virgin Atlantic or Southwest, and every second bank has adopted lurid colours and pushed the staff out from behind counters to mingle with customers. The ante on being remarkable is steadily upped: hot pink and mint green have become the new corporate grey.

Mr Roberts, who tends to work for big companies such as P&G, would have us believe that consumers can form an emotional bond with any brand. This is wishful thinking. Telecommunications companies urge us to "keep in touch" and soap operas are used to sell soap powder. But even if consumers link a product subconsciously with a feeling, that does not equate to adoration of the thing itself.

Niche products with bunches of die-hard fans are a more fertile place for emotion. Part of the appeal of owning an Apple computer or a BMW car is that not everyone has one. Since these companies do not have to sell to the mass market, they find it easier to remain distinctive. As long as they stick to their niche, they can achieve a virtuous circle: innovative products attract devoted fans who sell them to potential buyers.

That does not make it easy: love implies commitment. If customers feel strongly about a product, they react badly when the company changes it in ways they dislike, as BMW has found with the new designs for its 7 and 5 Series cars. A company such as eBay, which is built around communities of

loyal users, must put a lot of time and effort into consulting them and be willing to alter course if it gets something wrong.

The alternative is to try to outgrow the fan base and turn the product into a mass brand. Some companies will always be tempted to make more of a successful product by broadening its appeal. That usually means making it blander, or adding things that undermine its original character. "You know that, at some point, most products will tend gradually, inexorably, to get worse," says Mr Godin gloomily.

Perhaps the circle can be squared with a Saatchi & Saatchi tear-jerking ad, but I doubt it. Mr Roberts, a creature of the mass market, dismisses early adopters as "a pain" because they feel betrayed when products they used to cherish become big brands. But such emotion is the price you must pay for attachment. Love means sometimes having to say you're sorry.