The Merchandizing of Identity: The Cultural Politics of Representation in the “I Am Canadian” Beer

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. . . the ads of our time are the richest and most faithful reflections that any society ever made of its entire range of activities.

—Marshall McLuhan

Media, Marketing, and Consumer Identity

Life during the new millennium means consuming an enormous daily diet of marketing fanfare. The media affect our personal choices and decisions every minute of each waking hour. Every day, each person is actively and passively exposed to thousands of images that show and tell the standards, dimensions, and limits of who they are or should be as citizens of a capitalist democracy. The media and marketing machinery continually spins out an excess of products and services to increasingly ad-swamped consumers looking for social emancipation, a sense of identity, and meaning in life through the acquisition of goods and services. On average, we are exposed to a dizzying three thousand six hundred ads each and every day, twenty-one thousand a week, and one million-ninety thousand a year! It’s not surprising that Joe and Jane public are at least attempting to put up mental screens to find a break from it all in an attempt to realize selfhood beyond material culture. In fact, research into changing market demographics is showing that not all advertising these days is achieving the consumer attention hoped for by multinational media corporations. Consumer rights advocates such as Adbusters and the “culture jammers” movement show that resistance is there and growing among a credit leveraged buying public. Yet, simply based on the enormous amount of exposure, some messages do, however, manage to get through to us and affect the real dimensions of our identity and being.

Advertisers have tried to stay one step ahead of the trend toward greater consumer education and critical awareness of marketing ploys or persuasion tech-
niques. Whether we want them to or not! The dimensions of consumer desire are continually redesigned and pictured on the glamorized covers of popular magazines, on roadside billboards, hyper-sensationalized on the front pages of well-thumbed tabloids in supermarket checkout lines, embossed on key-chains, and raised to a surreal cult-like status through the non-stop media of television, film, the internet, and radio. Celebrities, “real people,” and sports personalities deliver sound bytes, jingles, and video clips to tell us who we should be as consumer citizens of a globalized neoliberal capitalist democracy. Images of desire that define the symbolic economy of our empirical identity are encoded in the “clipstream” of web page banner ads, chiselled on coffee mugs, stapled on ads covering telephone poles, tacked up on bulletin boards, delivered through flyers, product catalogues, note pads, labels, logos, stickers, dolls, baseball caps, T-shirts, bottle-openers, watches, necklaces, candies, and coupons. As the forces of media and the proliferation of new technologies rapidly shrinkwrap the universe in a silicon layer of bits and bytes, the new age of e-marketing is constituted by electronic infomercials, junkmail, and disembodied monologue of message postings. The discourse of consumer being-in-action “buzzes” its way around the world online in the representational form of digital simulations that promotes user engagement for fun and profit. Virtual news groups announce products, mega-viral “SPAM” marketing email campaigns ask us to buy these products, then blogs and chat rooms spring up to discuss the effects of these products on our lives. The real and imagined spaces of public and private life are invaded by images and discourse telling us who we are, who would should or could be, and what we should want.

Marketing creates needs and desires in us where there previously were none. These desires are magnified and cultivated as passions by us as people and acted upon by us as consumers who buy and store merchandize. We accumulate possessions in the name of democracy as a residual socio-political effect of unmitigating class consciousness and the need for economic self-actualization. Like it or not, this fact distinguishes us as a human species and makes sense of our willingness to labor to acquire the accoutrements of a “better life” and privileged social identity based in the material conditions of our existence. From the drudgery of work to the leisure of games, sports, and entertainment, from the glamour of fashion to the lure of television, music, and film, the cultivation of consumerism as a passion and pleasure is what drives the course of human labor. There is not a facet of human existence that is not concerned with finding satisfaction and pleasure in our relationships among the world of things in relation to each other. Do we possess what everyone else wants, too? If so, the material aspects of our existence is determined by demand and the price for what we all want to have goes up. You gotta love how capitalism works!

The media and marketing machinery produces cultural products that are tendered for sale publicly to consumers wanting the exchange value of their cultural capital for purpose of securing a social status by cashing in on the historical materialism of goods and services that defines and dictates what our choices are or should be
in relation to the products and services that are made available to us for consumption. Our capacity to realize an ideal state of “marketed being” enacted via the performative dimensions of consumer identity as *homo economicus* depends on our accepting a vision of reality already processed through the polished lens of the commercial media and their well-oiled marketing machinery. More often than not, the sources of influence upon our personal and social behaviours that are rooted in media and marketing—including the realization of our dreams and desires—go unquestioned. We generally accept the values and norms represented in the media, for what they are: “paid for” advertisements. We then move on to what in marketing messages is meaningful for us at the personal level by asking, “Will this product or service increase my happiness? Will it improve the quality of my life?” The answer determines our tastes and patterns our consumer habits. The value of a thing or practice, an object or a service, we may choose to buy or consume is subjective and not as universal as advertisers and marketers would like us to believe. We don’t all have the same needs, desires, and expectations. Happiness does not exist “out there” in the consumer stratosphere of marketplace production just waiting to be found on a store shelf. It is not an ideal independent from any particular points of view or life situations. The meaning of reality is bound to social contexts and personal beliefs. We place value on the things we like, when we want to buy them. But not everyone likes the same things. There are as many tastes as there are people and communities—a fact we often choose to forget. At some point or other in our consumer lives, we have all asked ourselves the question, “Do I really need or want this?” It is the job of marketers to make you think you want it and need it! This is the categorical imperative of marketing: to level the differences in taste among us for the biggest share of a posited “demographic.” Appealing to standards of judgement and taste loosen the purse strings of our heart that are always with us. Thanks to the imaginary rendering of life, history, society, and culture constructed by multinational media and marketing machines, the examples to be emulated and desired constantly lurk as the shadows of a consumer reality somewhere in the back of our minds. The apparatus of advertising is at work when the meaning of our tastes, wants, and desires become fixed through a public display of our own merchandise selections as the material conditions of our existence are universalized and duplicated around the world by media representations and marketing campaigns urging consumption of the same things. Popularity is the mark of success as much as rarefaction is a sign of distinction. Sameness validates our particular version of the consumer reality all around us and defines our identity in the matrix of media representations. The desirability of a good or service must be made to seem objective and uncontrived for the sake of making it believable to a mass audience who will take it personally and possibly make it a part of their own consumer identity. An idyllic image of material reality presented as a dreamworld without the usual complications of questioning our choices is designed to give us pleasure and make us happy in the moment. The media resist the fragmentation and
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plurality of cultural memory by allowing us to take for granted the contradictions between all of the mixed messages happening around us in everyday life. Asking us instead to buy into an idealized reality—not what life is or who we are but what life could be or who we should be!

Selling Beer: Sexual Politics and Effacing Differences

In the media dreamworld of marketing, the meaning of life is made easy if you buy the right product. No matter what form the content and the messages take through memorable images and clever sales pitches, marketing is more and more often disguised as “important information.” That is, the necessary knowledge required by consumers to educate themselves about a product before making a purchase. The advertising media cashes in on the “good faith” of shoppers with discriminating attitudes about the desirability of goods and services. When appeals to information falter, the focus of marketing then turns to “stirring up” the consumer emotions. No need to awaken the rational and critical side of our capitalistic consciousness that wants to acquire everything. In alcohol advertisements, the lure of the libido always wins over sober common sense. A beer that tastes like any other beer and is essentially indistinguishable from other brands as an alcoholic beverage needs only a couple of almost-naked women and killer biceps to help it become a smashing success and constructs a consumer. Playing on the human preoccupation with getting “downright and dirty” seems to be the key to creating riveting and informative advertising for drinkers of both sexes. In beer commercials, difference are effaced and consumer identity is “demystified” for painless consumption by linking alcohol to the promise of sexuality.

What does the depiction of sexual politics have to do with beer? Everyone knows that the free-flow of alcohol enhances the libidinal buzz of healthy males and females (although it sometimes also inhibits performance). It is hard to imagine an adult party or get together without some form of “spirited” beverage acting as a lubricant for social interaction between the sexes. In Western culture, consuming alcohol has become almost second nature for adults wanting to let go of inhibitions, help romance along, and generally have an all round “good time.” So, marketing tends to exploit the theme of sexual politics in liquor advertisements for profit at the expense of good taste. No doubt about it. Some ads are more tasteful than others. A recent beer advertisement depicted animals, rhinos and giant tortoises, having sex. The tag line was: “Research says sex sells beer.” So, why the subliminal hard sell? Beer is marketed to adults anyway.

The lure of sexuality is just the right tonic for sparking brand memory. Not many consumers will find a commercial of a man with a beer-belly lying prostrate on the couch, washing down the last dregs of a Corona Light, while channel surfing and looking bored, a particularly desirable image. Now put beside him a shapely woman salivating over his sweating bottle and you’ve just given male viewers’ a
consumer identity and a motivating reason to buy the brand. *Corona Light* = sex. It doesn’t matter that the vision is essentially unrealistic or presents an incongruous presupposition linking the desires of the “couch potato” and the vivacious woman. The more controversial the premise, the more sexual the image, the more likely it will be memorable and take root somewhere in the consumer’s imagination in association with the brand as a fantasy dreamscape. Advertisers want full shock value by forcing us to look at what it is they are selling in a positive way as it relates to our fantasies and perhaps, this will motivate an unconscious impulse in us to buy the product brand or not. The *Bud Light* beer we have just decided to try has no relation, or so we think, to the commercial we viewed seven times during the first 90 minutes it was aired on during the *Super Bowl* telecast, the “Granddaddy” of all marketing bonanzas, for a cost of $2 million per 30 second spot. Standing in line at a NASCAR race, waiting to acquire an “adult beverage” and wondering what brand label to try? The catchy jingle and comic relief of the *Bud Light* advertisement comes to mind, reminding us that it “tastes great” but is “less filling.” After all, we just saw the logo speeding around the track 30 times at 100 miles an hour on the hood of a racing car. In scanning the selection of brand names placed confidently on the walls behind the servers, we recall the images of laughing faces, the “Bud Light Girls,” or the handsome sports heroes telling tall tales while basking in the glow of buxom beauties and neon signs tracing out the *Bud Light* label. Beer advertisements are emotionally provocative and often rely on male heterosexual fantasy stereotypes. If you drink beer and you are a man, you will miraculously be surrounded by bikini-clad beauties of all shapes and sizes, hanging breathlessly on your every word. Some ads play on the female sexual imagination. All a woman need do is to pop the top off a “cold one” and, presto, men will be groveling at her feet and fighting over her. The good times and the beautiful people enjoying a cold and refreshing drink are attractive. The appealing images that pervade consciousness make a well-marketed beer like *Bud Light* a good enough choice to consider.

In media representations of reality, messages are often mixed and contradictory. Government-sponsored ad campaigns warn us against the dangers of promiscuity, unprotected sex, and the spread of AIDS. And yet, shots of sweaty, unrestrained girls grinding their bare, pierced midriff against the undulating six-pack of eager, hard-bodied guys is the norm for beer commercials. Advertisements are created to conform to certain assumptions about the people who are targeted as the potential purchasers of the product. The demographics might relate to social class, gender, age, sexuality or other market defining characteristics of a buying public. Advertisements are placed across different media platforms (i.e., television, magazines, radio) in the hopes of reaching their ideal consumer base. Recently, Anheuser-Busch was running print ads for *Bud Light* aimed at securing the gay community’s beer money. Don’t expect to see them soon in even the most “middle-of-the-road” liberal-minded magazines. Those ads were limited to gay publications only and featured same sex partners. But is that all there is to it—sex sells beer?
Advertisements offer a consumer the promise of sheer pleasure through stylish packaging and the pretty prompting of mega-realities that echo the possibilities of a life of virtual happiness always within our grasp yet so far away. If only we would buy “Brand X” instead of “Brand Y,” then everything would be perfect. The messages in advertisements act at the subliminal level of self-consciousness, where our deepest and most profound desires are situated and can be influenced by emotional appeals, not logic. The strongest sensibilities—fear, love, hate, and envy or greed—are the main targets of marketers. Advertisements are designed to intensify the desire for products and services, even if we don’t really need or want them. Consumers have always been subject to clever promotional gimmicks and hard sell pitches as the goods prowl the media catwalks of culture. But it changes when products and services have the status of a brand. That is, a recognizable image and identity whose “core meaning” has real and residual cultural value. Coca Cola is “The Real Thing”; Audi will lead but “Never Follow”; and, as if we didn’t know, “There’s a little bit of McDonald’s in everyone.” The brand is the commercially enacted philosophy of a corporation. More than a public face or symbol. It is the spirit behind the novel names and knick-knacks that symbolize the well-marketed fruits of labour produced by a post-industrial, media-saturated generation. The brand is the living will of a corporation—its heart and soul. It is an ideological testament that induces big audience appeal and trades for big bucks on the stock market floor because it has the power to frame the popular tastes of a nation. For some economic analysts, the financial state of mind among American consumers is measured by their trips to McDonald’s. Above all, a brand has the power to earn a profit. Products have become marketing tools for selling illusions and dreams. Quality is no longer a major selling point because of stiffer competition in a global economy where someone will find a way to make a better widget at a lower price. The charisma of a marketing campaign evolves through the characterization of a product or service by way of a brand identity as the demarcation point of difference.

Molson’s “I am Canadian” beer campaign broke the mould of sex-based beer advertising. Successful advertising for alcoholic beverages that doesn’t appeal to sexuality offers consumers images and jingles that become signposts of an individual’s history by equating alcohol consumption with life’s great moments. The brand, the badge, and the label personalize a beer. The “I am Canadian” campaign proved to be a very successful campaign even though it didn’t opt for the usual “sex sells” marketing approach so common in the advertising of alcoholic beverages. The commercials gave an amusing take on “Canuck” patriotism and played off ethnic stereotypes to nationalize a brand and acculturate good taste using the cultural politics of identity and difference.
Hey, I’m not a lumberjack, or a fur trader. I don’t live in an igloo or eat blubber, or own a dogsled, and I don’t know Jimmy, Sally or Suzy from Canada, although I’m certain they are really nice.

I have a Prime Minister, not a president. I speak English and French, not American, and I pronounce it “abOUt,” not “a boot.” I can proudly sew my country’s flag on my backpack. I believe in peace keeping, not policing, diversity, not assimilation, and that the beaver is a truly proud and noble animal.

A toque is a hat, a chesterfield is a couch. And it is pronounced “ZED” not “ZEE!” Canada is the second largest landmass, the first nation of hockey, and The Best Part of North America. My name is Joe, and I Am Canadian! Thank you.

On March 26, 2000 during the Academy Awards broadcast, the “I am Canadian” beer commercial was aired for the first time to an unsuspecting audience north of the American border. The original ad had been in movie theatres since March 17, but the television premier launched a lengthy debate on the politics of identity, nationalism, and the ethics of representation. The advertising campaign for the “Canadian” brand of Molson beer is an excellent example of how the cultural politics of identity is merchandized and marketed for public consumption in order to tie the representation of national identity to consumer practices. Seemingly overnight, the slogan “I am Canadian”—the tag line of the commercial—took on a life of its own and became a rallying cry for reviving a patriotic ethos to “set right” stereotypical representations of a national identity north of the 49th parallel. This was something wholly other than its originally intended purpose, which was to revive the commercial viability of a brand of beer by marketing to a niche demographic of relatively affluent nineteen to twenty-five year olds. On the one hand, the stirring monologue by the protagonist “Joe Canuck” was seen as an impassioned declaration for the acknowledgement of a Canadian national identity as distinct and separate from American political influence. While on the other, the attempt to “set the record straight” was perceived as an insidious form of jingoistic propaganda that excluded aspects of cultural heterogeneity and social differences.
rooted in historical reality. The ad, however, achieved its marketing goal. It was an instant hit with the Canadian consumer and the sixty-second television spot became an unequivocal sensation, boosting the brand’s beer sales.\(^3\)

The commercial, made for the Montreal-based brewery, became known as “The Rant.” The ad became so successful that it was widely recognized as a popular culture milestone in advertising because it used beer marketing to address the need for the reappropriation of Canadian national identity and the recognition of difference without prejudice or ideological precharacterization. It depicts a “Canadian” everyman named “Joe” who is standing behind a podium, addressing an implied audience before a projection screen. Images flash on and off behind him as he speaks and there is a thunderous ode that accompanies the rant. He starts off rather stilted, speaking in a soft and uncertain tonality, but ends up confidently shouting statements that are contrary to stereotypical representations of Canadian identity (eg., “I’m not a lumberjack or a fur trader. I don’t live in an igloo or eat blubber”). The ad itself attempted to debunk the typical Canadian stereotypes propagated by the American media and tried to use them as a source of humour—much like a bad taste, inside joke—to fuel its feel-“good” message of national resistance to jingoistic misrepresentations. Essentially, it played on the erroneous and mono-dimensional image of Canadians as a self-effacing people with no national pride or unique identity—a long-standing myth about “mondo Canuck” and a source for cultural humour among social commentators and politicians. Canadians are uneasy when it comes to cultural identity. The Canadian ethos of self-deprecation and humility is mocked in the commercials because the speaker shows reticence in highlighting the county’s accomplishments and attributes. There are historical reasons for this insecurity.

Canada had been a British colony until the constitution was repatriated in the 1970s during the Liberal government of Pierre Elliot Trudeau, and Quebec nationalists have been demanding separation for a long time. This split in cultural identity, coupled with multicultural social policy, has led to very un-nationalistic tendencies due to an uneasy state of affairs. What constitutes a universal Canadian identity is a controversial point. This will not change. Molson first introduced the “I am Canadian” campaign with the slogan “Here’s where we get Canadian” and then revised the premise. Many wondered aloud if it was ethically correct to use an alcoholic beverage to galvanize Canadian nationalism. The fate of the commercial took an unexpected turn when “The Rant” began to unsettle politicians. The Ontario Minister of Consumer affairs quickly denounced the campaign for stating for trivializing the complexity of national identity. Various other well-known Canadian figures such as historian Michael Bliss called the ad “pathetic, depressing, and an embarrassment to Canada.”\(^4\) Some “Quebecers” were also displeased with the blatant use of stereotypes of Canadian identity in the commercial and did not wish to be bunched together with the other Canadian provinces when this particular beer brand was not even sold in Quebec. They also stated that they wanted “pro-Quebec advertising,” not simply “pro-Canada advertising.” “The Rant” exacerbated and
highlighted the tensions permeating the cultural politics of identity and representation. A silent question that has haunted the political landscape of provincial and federal politics in Canada since Confederation: “Who are we?”

The “I am Canadian” commercial premiered the same night as the Academy Awards show performance of South Park’s “Blame Canada” by Robin Williams. Surprisingly, both the parodic song “Blame Canada” and “The Rant” shared a similar feeling and aim. The two were essentially poking fun at Americans and their unrealistic and stereotypical view of Canadians, although in very different ways. The song “Blame Canada” and the “I am Canadian” commercial culturally reference Michael Moore’s Canadian Bacon (1995), which presented a depiction of America invading Canada in a similar fashion as the South Park movie. Canadian Bacon is focused on America’s need to have an enemy in order to self-actualize an image of melting pot patriotism and identity. Moore depicts how the illogical animosity and stereotypical representation of Canadians that breed cultural misunderstandings and dissension are fuelled by economic and political motives. Perhaps it is not surprising that right wing pundits were actually calling for the annexation for Canada by the United States in the New Republic article “Bomb Canada: The Case for War.” If anything, the possibility of alienation leading to aggression between two neighbouring countries reinforces the need for clarification of the myopic visions of Canadian identity exposed in the song “Blame Canada” and the movie Canadian Bacon. “The Rant” is, at some level, a rebellious social and political statement wrapped up in a commercial media package that teaches us how to critically read the rhetoric of an image on various textual levels.

The “I am Canadian” commercial features a youngish man engaged in a rousing diatribe on what it means to be Canadian. At the same time, viewers are treated to a catalogue of well-known, stock images that are part of a moving slide show on the screen behind him and punctuate the speech with concrete pictorial references parallel to the spoken text. Igloos, hockey players, great expanses of thick nature, and hikers with a flag patch sewn on a tattered knapsack are shown in a sequence of shots complimenting the lexical text. The “I am Canadian” commercial nurtures a visual emblematic ontology because it presents an idiosyncratic image of Canadian society and identity through symbols like the Canadian flag, the beaver, hockey, and the Canadian landscape to create a feeling of nationalism and pride in Canadian society through these familiar social images that define “Canadianness.” The iconographic code of the ad manufactures identity by using these symbols to clarify the narrative logic or the meaning of the deigetic code—the semiotic structure of its narrative exposition—that is built on a series of oppositions to persuade viewers to associate the images displayed with the product in a psychological fashion. Canadian identity is manufactured in the commercial through the mutual supporting syntagms or “chains of representations” constituting the proairetic codes of linguistic and visual texts of the ad. The ordering of signs leads to the meaningful resolution of its elements as it constructs the hermeneutic framework for interpret-
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ing the message of the total cross-medial text of words and images. Essentially, the commercial is built upon a series of oppositions and negations. An alternative title could have been “What is Not Canadian”:

I have a Prime Minister, not a president.
I speak English and French, not American, and I pronounce it “abOUt,” not “a boot.”
I can proudly sew my country’s flag on my backpack.
I believe in peace keeping, not policing,
diversity, not assimilation,
and that the beaver is a truly proud and noble animal.

The point of contrast is the ideological small-mindedness of American culture and its assumptions about Canadians and their way of life. Each image takes a shot at or resists the categorical reduction of the meaning of Canadian subjectivity and nationalism that is a political hallmark of Canada-U.S. relations. Canadians are uneasy when it comes to cultural identity and the commercial magnifies the insecurities in a person of “the misunderstood underdog and all-round good guy” fighting back against the semiotic effects of American imperialism. The Canadian ethos of self-deprecation and humility is mocked in the commercials because the speaker shows reticence in highlighting the country’s accomplishments and attributes. The ad presents a vision of human nature and the system of beliefs structured around the public image and rhetoric what it means to be Canadian. It depicts the illusion of an authentic “Canadianicity” and naturalizes it by referring to the stock images we associate with what it means to be through a negation of certain values. The chain of visuals is metonymical syntagm of how Canada and Canadian identity is constructed around cultural clichés, objects, and practices. It is not that the images are misleading or erroneous, or even objectify a false reality or inauthentic subjectivity. On the contrary, the mental and emotional associations evoked by the chain linking of these popular images forms are a vital source for the way in which national identity and cultural difference are defined by and for Canadians that are echoed in the symbolic imagery of the country’s mythological fabric. And yet, the objectifiable reduction of Canadian subjectivity to token representations of what “Canadianness” is, ultimately has become a national sore spot for a country trying to make its presence felt on the world stage. As any appropriation of cultural stereotypes for the purpose of ridicule and shame would be. Canadians have a history of poking fun at themselves and believe they are good natured about not taking themselves seriously. The “I am Canadian” beer commercial is the expression of a cultural reappropriation of a global stereotype revolving around the recasting of essential differences between what is means to be Canadian and what it means to be American. The commercial succeeds in joining the visual and lexical text at the end in a climax of images, words, and music settling around the representation of a beer, its label, and the badge of honour: “I am Canadian!” The imperative of cultural authenticity and democratic representation are subsumed and totalized in a
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The totality of representations articulate the cultural implications of a specific interpretive codex associating the product with national identity. The end result is simple: if you are truly Canadian, there is only one brand of beer you drink, Molson Canadian. National identity is reduced to a democracy of beer exemplified in the “I am Canadian” brand.

Unwittingly, the final phrase of the commercials—“I am Canadian”—became a rallying cry for renewing a sense of nationalism and pride in the idea of “Mondo Canuck,” the beer-swilling pacifist world traveller who wears a toque and lives on the frozen Great Lakes. The cultural signposts that had become a painful source of global embarrassment and self-deprecating jokes had provided a source of national glory. Canadians were forced to celebrate and renew their sense of identity, all because of an advertising campaign for a brand of beer that was perceived not “cool enough” to drink. It is both a fitting and ironic tribute to marketing. A young generation of beer drinkers were reintroduced to Molson’s Canadian, an old brand of beer with declining sales. It worked. Brand visibility and sales increased. Eventually, parodies of the “I am Canadian” beer commercial sprang up all over the internet as a testament to the widespread cultural influence of the ad and the need for self-deprecating critique of identity politics: “I am Pakistani,” “I am American,” “I am Manitoban,” and of course, “I am Not Canadian.” The actor who played Joe, Jeff Douglas, became a celebrity and performed at NHL games, talk shows, and eventually moved to Hollywood. The “I am Canadian” commercial won various industry awards and caused the brand to have a 2.5% increase in market share. Molson’s chief competitor Labatt’s Blue lost 2.9% in market share. “The Rant” was undoubtedly a very successful advertisement. Only in Canada you say? Pity.

Ex-Post Facto: What’s Next?

We spend a lifetime faithfully serving and rejecting brands. Advertising cannot be called a public service announcement. It wants your shopping behaviours and choices to be influenced by the marketing twist on information—especially when the form and content of the message is being paid for by companies hoping to separate you from your money. Advertising helps you to become an informed consumer who recognises brands and sales pitches—that is a good thing. But marketing campaigns ask you to buy into illusions and dreams as much as merchandise and services. Women will not fall at your feet when you wear a particular brand of aftershave lotion, deodorant, or cologne, unless it contains traces of chloroform. Men will not follow you around the world because you use a specific herbal shampoo, shiny lip gloss or nail polish. Marketers maintain that branding is about ensuring customers are happy dealing with a company, and loyalty is a by-product of buyer satisfaction. You still need an “unbeatable product” to urge consumers to spend money on your gadget or service—no one will buy something that does not keep its advertised promises. But consumers are creatures of habit, always gravitating to safe and familiar buying
territory. All shrewd marketers know that reinforcing perceptions about a brand is easier than changing them if a product offers real value.

A company has to stand by its advertising claims and offer tons of customer service and support to back up its claims. They need to keep customers not only happy, but loyal. Especially since it costs six times more to attract new customers than to keep existing ones. Eighty per cent of sales usually come from the top 20 per cent of a company’s clientele. The average business in the United States loses half of its customers every five years. If to achieve a yearly growth of one per cent a company needs a fourteen per cent increase in sales annually, then the effect of “disloyal consumers” is devastating for the profit margins companies forecast. Thus, behavioural and emotional loyalty to a brand are the main targets of marketers. Companies make income and dividend projections based on consumer demographics that segment the population into groups with specific characteristics relating to income, age, personal habits and possessions, marital status, profession, hobbies and interests, group affiliations, education, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and so on. The point is to “know your customer,” so that advertisements can make value propositions about products and services aimed at well-defined target markets who could want them. Surveys and focus groups are conducted to create a “living snapshot” of the consumer’s world. Market research is straightforward in theory: it will allow a company to better understand how its customers think and feel, why they behave the way they do, as well as explaining the perceptions and attitudes governing their behaviour. Branding depends on understanding how to stimulate the feelings of loyalty and commitment, which nurture habitual actions and responses in consumers by turning wants into needs. Advertising has relied on the principles of behavioural modification that the psychologist B. F. Skinner used to train pigeons to fly in circles during the 1950s. He discovered that you if you reward certain “desired” behaviours by providing positive reinforcement for some actions and punishing others, then you can get animals and people to do what you want. Armed with all of this rudimentary psychology and customer demographics research, companies can then create marketing campaigns that match specific messages to appropriate media for a particular consumer and use the desired emotional stimuli to get the right behavioural response. Why? The financial formula is simple: BRANDING + LOYALTY = PROFITS. The key to a company’s success is a high level of customer commitment. As loyalty and emotional attachment to a brand increases, consumers are less sensitive to price changes and competitive marketing campaigns. Less advertising is required to maintain sales and the costs of product information and media distribution are decreased. But can you love something that can’t love you back?

There is no public or private space that has not been branded with a logo. There can be no “product recognition” without a name. The lack of a brand can be a powerful logo too, when used to market the quality of simple packaging as a selling point for cheaper goods and services. Advertising dominates the cultural landscape of our modern information society. Unless, of course, we move to the outback and
are willing to shepherd a vulnerable and almost unimaginable existence away from
the industrial web of the consumer market in a life without factory manufactured
products and the relentless “happiness machine” that is the media. But the idea of
elitism and rebellion has been overdone so many times as a marketing strategy that
we no longer fully buy into the notion of products making us hip or successful. A
sign of the times, the “I am Canadian” beer campaign was successful because it
hit a nerve among Canadian consumers and galvanized their resistance around the
question of cultural difference and the politics of representation with respect to
stereotypical global images of what it means to be Canadian. Marketing executives
dream of being the first to harness an original idea or to appropriate it for a new
demographic that still lies waiting in uncharted copyright territory. Not everyone
has the foresight of Bill Gates, the god of Silicon Valley, who licenses the Microsoft
operating system to all personal computer manufacturers on the planet, including
the latest deals with Apple. So, who would have thought that a new sense of cultural
identity and nationalism could be forged on the label of a beer bottle!

What’s next? As difficult as it may seem to comprehend today, a pastoral
existence of perennial self-sufficiency and naivete or ignorance about issues of
cultural imperialism was the norm for many hundreds of generations that preceded
the age of technological achievement and rampant consumerism we now enjoy in
capitalist democracies. The inconvenience of technology that was tied to a wall
inspired a wave of cordless gismos and gadgets that have become part of who we
are as people and citizens. Wireless telephones, computer keyboards, and the latest
craze of Palm Pilots and Blackberries now offer mobile access to all the consumer
amenities. Hand-held access to data banks, messaging services, word processing,
and email conferencing is conveniently able to sit in your pocket waiting for the
touch of a hand to engage this movable technology. Now that text messaging is go-
ing hypercommercial, mobile phones are becoming electronic billboards on which
advertisers can reach you anywhere, any time, transmitting commercials, offering
sales promotions, and asking you to enter contests for prizes to be won simply by
dialing a toll-free number or typing in the correct answer on your keypad. Thanks
to the inclusion of GPS tracking systems on cell phones, advertisers can find you
anywhere. As you walk by Starbucks, imagine getting a text-message offering
you 25% off the price of a Frapuccino. Brands and stores will be brought to your
hip pocket. There is convenience in being able to access a deal spontaneously and
everybody loves a discount or “free stuff.” But the personal “ad-free” space we
have at our disposal is being further reduced. Soon, there will be no place to hide
from the long arm of marketing as it constructs the cultural sites of your identity.
We are all consumers now! Even Canadians, eh?

Notes
1 David K. Foot. (1996). Boom Bust & Echo: How to Profit from the Coming Demo-
The Merchandizing of Identity


2 © 2000, Molson Canada


4 Ibid., p. 280.

5 Ibid.


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