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Nostalgia Marketing

Nostalgia, an emotion appealed to more and more extensively in contemporary marketing, is a “mood produced by reflection on things associated with the past” (Holak, Havlena, 1998: 218). Holak’s and Havlena’s article reveals the complexity of the emotions evoked during a nostalgic experience. Positive emotions such as “warmth, joy, affection, and gratitude are linked with sadness and desire to produce a mixed affective response” (Holak et al., 1998: 217) through a network of connections. The nostalgic experience is basically positive with significant negative components, namely a “sense of loss associated with the realization that the past cannot be recreated” (Holak et al., 1998: 223). In the world of consumer products, buyers are “encouraged by marketers to experience nostalgic feelings through... the marketing of nostalgic products, and the utilization of consumer products to capture or create nostalgia through fantasies or memories” (Holak et al., 1998: 217).

Before diving into the use of nostalgia in marketing, it is important to discuss the nuances between the terms retro and nostalgia, which are often used interchangeably. While retro branding is “the revival or relaunch of a product... from a prior historical period... updated to contemporary standards of performance” (Brown, Kozinets, Sherry, 2003: 20), nostalgia marketing simply involves recreating an old practice. Retro products “combine old-fashioned

forms with cutting-edge functions and thereby harmonize the past with the present” (Brown et al., 2003: 20). In other words, the considerable overlap between nostalgia, brand heritage, and brand revival can be summarized by the statement that “revived or retro goods... trade on consumers' nostalgic leanings” (Brown et al., 2003: 20).

Next in our discussion is the relationship between personal and communal nostalgia, which are also closely intertwined in marketing. While personal nostalgia is associated with individual life cycles, communal nostalgia occurs at a societal level in the wake of epochal changes. When these two forms of nostalgia are used in conjunction, “long-established brands evoke not only former epochs but also former selves” (Brown et al., 2003: 20), which links people together through the common sense of a utopian past.

Transitioning to Brown’s conclusions about retro branding, four themes relevant to the discussion of retro marketing include allegory, arcadia, aura, and antimony. Allegory refers to symbolic stories, narratives, or extended metaphors. Arcadia is the sense that the past is an enchanting place and, when combined with the latest technology, can produce a magically modern product. Aura involves a feeling of ‘authenticity’ that helps make a brand unique. Lastly, antimony is the irresolvable paradox that unstoppable and overpowering technological progress is the reason behind people’s desire to return to simpler times. These four characteristics indicate that the “social and cultural forces that animate brand meaning are considerably more complex than prior conceptualizations suggest” (Brown et al., 2003: 31). Out of the four themes that Brown et al. (2003) identify in retro marketing, antimony is the “most important of all, for brand paradox brings the cultural complexity necessary to animate each of the other dimensions” (30). Retro products seem custom-made to address this core paradox since “retro combines the

benefits of uniqueness, newness, and exclusivity with oldness, familiarity, recognition, trust, and loyalty” (Brown et al., 2003: 31).

While significant strides have been made in the research of nostalgia in marketing, further research is needed to explore and define different varieties of nostalgia. Additional research is also essential to identify which market segments may be better for nostalgia-based marketing of products, and one such emerging segment appears to be the sport industry. Regarding this sector, Scola and Gordon (2018) explore sports teams and leagues that are trying to connect their fans to the past through retro-marketing. The five practical areas of retro marketing examined in sport were imagery, merchandising, venue, game-day promotions, and advertising. Drawing from their conclusions, the “most unique feature [of sport marketing] may be how fans can develop an irrational passion for their team that normal consumers do not demonstrate... despite not always being old enough to experience an era of a team, sport fans may be able to relate to this time through vicarious nostalgia and still look fondly on a past that they did not live through” (Scola et al, 2018: 206). Scola et al. (2018) also found that teams and leagues must be selective of when, where, and how to use retro marketing- it may be “dependent upon their history and past decisions” (204). Ultimately, the “extreme passion and team identification that make sport consumers unique could make nostalgic feelings more prominent” (Scola et al, 2018: 205). Going forward, it will be interesting to see if sport teams without long or successful histories can still effectively utilize retro marketing.

Marketers appear to be in the midst of a ‘retro revolution’ in which many brands have recently been relaunched and successfully revived, so much so that the “revivals of old brands and their images are [now seen as] a powerful management option” (Brown et al., 2003: 19). The

findings of Brown et al. (2003) show that the reactions of consumers to nostalgia may be difficult for marketers to predict- the combination of “positive and negative emotions means that the overall affective valence of a nostalgic episode may be unclear” (Holak et al., 1998: 223).

Nostalgia must link consumers with the past while minimizing their sense of loss that the past cannot be recreated- a product becomes a “tool or a means for the consumer to control his or her detachment from the past and to eliminate negative feelings” (Holak et al., 1998: 223).

Regardless of these obstacles, retro brands will have continuing appeal as a marketing strategy in the foreseeable future for two important reasons- “technology and imitation quickly eradicate first mover advantage, yet a competitive edge is gained by tapping into the wellsprings of trust and loyalty that consumers hold towards old brands” (Brown et al., 2003: 29). It is rather ironic then, that, through nostalgia, the past is becoming the future of marketing.

References

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