

Harley Davidson perfume

The sweet smell of failure

In various magazines, at various conferences, and in his online newsletter, Saatchi and Saatchi's worldwide chief executive officer, Kevin Roberts, has talked of the 'mythology of the brand'. The most powerful brands, according to Roberts, are those that have built their own mythology, or rather, that have helped their loyal customers to build this mythology. The one brand with perhaps more mythology attached to it than any other is, without doubt, Harley Davidson. Harley Davidson owners aren't just loyal. They *love* the brand. They do not care that the motorcycles they ride are not the best in terms of technology or that they may be prone to the occasional oil leakage. What matters is the biker myth – the freedom of the open road, and all its macho connotations. This myth is vividly conjured up in the book *Hell's Angel: The Life and Times of Sonny Barger and The Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club* by Sonny Barger (the original Hell's Angel). In a chapter entitled, 'Harleys, Choppers, Full Dressers and Stolen Wheels,' Barger writes: What it's really about with a Harley Davidson is the sound. . . everybody loves that rumble. Another thing Harley owners really crave about their bikes is the low-end torque, the raw power coming out of the gate. It runs out pretty quick once you get up past ninety miles an hour. Most Harley riders don't care about high speed, they'd rather have that lowend torque, the one that gurgles down in your groin and gives you the feeling of power. The Japanese bikes, while they *have* the power, they don't quite have the *feeling* of power. The appeal of the Harley Davidson is essentially masculine and its customers take brand loyalty to extreme levels. Indeed, many testosterone-charged Harley owners even tattoo the Harley Davidson name and imagery onto their bodies.

The company has attempted to capitalize on this unique strength of feeling towards the brand, by pushing the Harley Davidson chain of shops selling a wide variety of branded merchandise – Harley Davidson T-shirts, socks, cigarette lighters and ornaments. While Harley Davidson's core fans may have accused the company of 'Disneyfying' the brand, the real problem occurred when Harley Davidson attached its name to a range of aftershave and perfume. For lovers of the motorcycle, this was an extension too far. Harley Davidson had fallen into the trap of thinking that more products equals more sales. And it usually does, at least in the short term.

But as Al and Laura Ries write in *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, this type of strategy can have negative consequences in the long term: Do you build the brand today in order to move merchandise tomorrow? Or do you expand the brand today in order to move the goods today and see it decline tomorrow? [. . .]

Line extension, megabranding, variable pricing and a host of other sophisticated marketing techniques are being used to milk brands rather than build them. While milking may bring in easy money in the short term, in the long term it wears down the brand until it no longer stands for anything. Ironically, though, this quest for more products and to broaden the Harley Davidson line went against the way the company had built the brand in the first place. In *Hell's Angel*, Barger writes: Harley has enjoyed a huge share of the large bike market for decades. They control about fifty percent of cruiser sales, with Japanese bikes making up the other half. As a result, they often act a little high and mighty toward their customers.

An official at Harley Davidson was once quoted as saying, 'Enough bikes is too many, and if we make enough, we lose mystique.' While they keep saying they're building more and more each year,

up until a couple of years ago I believe Harley Davidson intentionally held back production to stir up demand.

The implication is that Harley Davidson originally understood that its customers could have too much of a good thing. Not only had it stayed focused on motorbikes, but the company may have also limited their availability in order to generate the Harley Davidson 'mystique'. By the 1990s, however, the brand was clearly heading in the other direction. Alongside aftershave and perfume, the company also launched Harley Davidson wine coolers. As you would expect, the bikers were not impressed. On her Internet homepage, one biker girl, who calls herself 'Tinker', recounted her experience of seeing all these inappropriate items on sale in a Harley Davidson chain store: Drifting closer, I found myself dazzled by the seemingly infinite variety of stuff. Man, they had everything under the sun! There were H-D socks, perfumes, infant clothes, an entire line of kids wear, tons of ornaments and collectables, even ties, all stamped with the official HD license logo. Everything, from the truly nice to the frankly ugly, was on display. Everything that is except an actual Harley Davidson motorcycle. No parts, even. There was a Buell [a Harley Davidson model] in the window, with a 'Do Not Touch' sign on it. A salesperson wandered over. 'Can I help you find something?' she asked brightly. 'Sure,' I said. 'Have you got the official licensed Harley Davidson shampoo?' 'Shampoo?' she asked, a little uncertain. 'Oh absolutely,' I said. 'It looks and smells just like motor oil, but it makes my hair so manageable!' I smiled as I made my escape, but I know it's just a matter of time. Tinker was not alone in her criticism. And pretty soon, it became clear that the motorcycle giant was alienating its core customers.

'Harley Davidson values are strong, masculine, very rugged values,' says Charles E Brymer, chief executive officer of the Interbrand Group, a branding consultancy based in New York. 'For Harley Davidson to go into a sector that doesn't live up to what those values are would be disastrous.' However, the disaster was a relatively limited one. The company has now admitted its mistake, and stopped producing perfumes and other inappropriate products.

In an interview for *The Business Knowledge Network*, Joe Nice, the director of corporate communications for Harley Davidson, spoke candidly of the company's branding failures. 'Over the years,' he said, 'we're tried a number of different approaches to merchandising and put the Harley Davidson brand on some things that, in retrospect, we may not have been well-advised to do. The company is much more selective today about who we work with and how we go about extending the brand.'

Lessons from Harley Davidson

Focus on your brand values. If your values are ‘strong, masculine and very rugged,’ you shouldn’t be selling perfume or wine coolers. A range of baby clothes may also be a bad idea.

Don’t alienate your core customers. For brands that inspire strong loyalty, the temptation is to test that loyalty to its limits by stretching the brand into other product categories. However, this is a dangerous strategy and can lead to what marketing experts refer to as ‘brand dilution’ – in other words, a watered-down brand.

Remember that more is less. ‘When you study categories over a long period, you can see that adding more can weaken growth, not help it,’ writes Jack Trout in his book, *Big Brands, Big Trouble: Lessons Learned the Hard Way*. ‘The more you add, the more you risk undermining your basic differentiating idea, which is the essence of your brand.’

Keep it tight. Harley Davidson built its brands by staying true to what it does best, namely making big, classic, US motorbikes. The further it moved away from this original focus, the further it got into trouble. Any brand which attempts to be a ‘Jack of all trades’ will ultimately fail to carve a strong identity in any category.

Handle ‘lovemarks’ with care. According to advertising guru Kevin Roberts, truly successful brands don’t have ‘trademarks’. They have ‘lovemarks’. In a now famous article for *Fast Company* magazine’s September 2000 issue, Roberts cited Harley Davidson as a supreme example of a lovemark and commended the company for not following the marketing rulebook. Although Roberts says that the motorbikes themselves are ‘actually pretty average’, the nature of the brand has meant that the motorbikes don’t have to be compared to others in terms of performance. Roberts says: As a lovemark, Harley Davidson has two things. One is its signature rumbling sound. The other is that you can’t go very fast on a Harley, so you have to ride in a pack [. . .] The mystery of the Harley isn’t in its performance, and it isn’t in any of the words that end in ‘er’. Most brands are built on ‘er’ words – faster, bigger, better, cleaner. Mystery doesn’t need those words. Mystery also doesn’t need hundreds of themed stores to push its brand extensions. In fact, such an approach tends to erode the mystery altogether.