

Rhythms & Brands: How a rhythmical conception of time can help brand management

By Callum Lee

RHYTHMS AND TIME-

Budweiser has a giant billboard in South London with a clock that tells you how fresh the latest batch is. This use of time combats stale perceptions of the mass-produced beer and adds some kinetic action to a static ad. But effectively, as a regular clock counting from some irrelevant moment and sited above an unpleasant overpass, it looks banal and humdrum. Time, as one of the key concepts in understanding the world, is a better tool than this.

Normally, analysts have an awareness of time only in avoiding a static view; we try to think of brands as they will develop or change through time. Or we think of how to associate our brands with different times, whether in history (as Disney associates itself with nostalgia) or of the day (as Kellogg's does for breakfast). A further temporal basis for brands, encompassing both of these perceptions, is a view of them through rhythms. I believe that brands can develop more successfully from a careful awareness of these temporal structures.

These temporal structures depend on how we define time. In our understanding of how our advertising or product reaches the public, brand managers (and the whole of the Western world) conceive of time as linear, as a constantly moving dimension that we can visualise with calendars and diaries. Time passes, we look "ahead" at future events and "back" for past ones. But this calendar does not explain help understand how our lives are repetitive, defined by recurring events and based around routine.

To conceive of time as repetitive means viewing it as cyclical. Time for most people is measured by recurrence: by the dawn, the seasons, annual events, that are repetitive but which function as markers to show the passing of time. Each repetition can be more poetically called a rhythm, and the combination of all these rhythms a chorus or harmony.*

HOW BRANDS WORK WITH RHYTHMS-

This rhythmical approach helps us see how our brands fit into the changing world of perceptions. All consumers wake up in the morning, have breakfast, take the same route to work past the same billboards, return home and watch the same TV shows before

going to bed at the same time. As depressing as this is, if brand managers are aware of these rhythms they can ensure their brand has deeper penetration into people's lives.

Look, for instance, at how Colgate dominates toothpaste: the most routine of everyday products, used every morning and evening, usually at the same time. The Colgate brand is reassuring, well-known, unexciting, and so can dominate a daily rhythm of familiarity. This is an everyday rhythm, dominated by an everyday product.

It is different for brands that need to develop a sense of excitement. As well as creating their own rhythms (to ensure recurring spend on the product) these brands need to interrupt mundane, routine rhythms to create excitement. A comparable example is the birthday, which cuts across the normal calendar and creates a sense of excitement because of its difference from routine.

Place brands have recognised this. Edinburgh has famously developed a cultural calendar that (inevitably) works on a cyclical basis by understanding who to attract at which part of the year to boost the city's tourism. It began with the successful Edinburgh Festival in the summer, and built up the New Year festival of Hogmanay from a small-scale gathering to an international party. By consistently building on these festivals, either overlaying festivals to capitalise on the tourists and publicity already there, or by adding new ones to compensate for seasonal lulls, it has created a series of festive rhythms, that help Edinburgh promote itself as a festive, fun city.

To develop this calendar relied on an awareness that these events are recurring, and so the need to build repeat custom. Edinburgh's brand was developed from a temporal perspective. Some of the most successful brands have managed this combination of repetition and the mundane with festivity. Coca-Cola, for instance, is currently portraying itself as a festive essential here in Melbourne, by associating itself (and, historically, developing) the symbols of this festivity. During the rest of the year, it can be shown on a bus, in the street or at work- as a product of everyday, regular use.

Brands already cope with their rhythmical character. Some are clearly seasonal. Pimm's, drink of the English summer, sits nicely in the mighty Diageo drinks portfolio although nearly all of its consumption is done in the summer months. They can cope with the seasonal troughs, knowing that fickle summer Pimm's drinkers like nothing more than a warming pint of Guinness in the dark winter. As a brand, Pimm's utilises annual rhythms to sell more, and becomes an aspect of festivity in doing so.

THE POTENTIAL OF RHYTHMS-

To emphasise the importance of these rhythms, we can list the potent rhythmical events that create our lives. Rhythms of the commute, the shower, the Friday night, the weekly club meeting, the sports event, the final, the opera tour, the pantomime... Most important for those focused on sales is Christmas and the annual spike of consumption it produces. The efforts made to accommodate a product for the seasonal period, by repackaging or redesigning it, or the creation of entirely new products (mince pies, trees etc), suggests

there is some preparedness for rhythmical events already. Historically Christmas has been a festival that cuts through mundane rhythms to provide a holiday during the winter. A rhythmical analysis helps to explain its success.

These two basic techniques – associating with everyday rhythms, or cutting across rhythms to produce festivity, can be used by managers in defining their brand identity. There remain a number of other ways in which to use rhythms, either by targeting the product, associating the product or advertising the product. A number of these suggestions are:

- as the site of rhythms
- to disorientate rhythms
- to cuckoo rhythms (to mirror then claim as your own)
- to stop or disrupt rhythms
- to build rhythms in harmony...

* This is based on the work of the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre.

This discussion paper is based on research carried out at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 2005.