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The President of Fresh Squeezed Ideas discusses the impact of culture on today's consumers and why marketers must consider culture when building brand attraction.

What do you consider to be the most profound culturally rooted forces and tensions driving or influencing contemporary American consumers today?

We live in an era of chronic uncertainty. The 2007/2008 economic meltdown was a pivotal experience for America. While the too-big-to-fail banks were bailed out, regular Americans lost their homes, their retirement investments lost tremendous value, and the prospects for the younger generations are as bleak as they have been since before World War 2. All of this is a betrayal of the American Dream—the promise that if you work hard, you will be rewarded in the meritocracy that is America.

At the same time, there has been a collapse in the authority of institutions, with events such as corporate corruption, religious organizations perpetrating unspeakable crimes against innocents, and government leaders deadlocked and unable to find a way to work effectively together. Society lacks a unifying moral authority.

These experiences create two cultural forces of interest. First, “expect the unexpected” demands a constant level of readiness to deal with adversity. Secondly, “frontier logic” is based on the belief that no one will catch us if we fail (i.e., get downsized out of a job), and therefore, we are on our own as a self-sufficient family unit. Amazingly, we can observe a wide range of interesting behaviors that are cultural responses to this force, like people taking matters into their own hands instead of waiting for the institutions to lead. Take for example, the surge in entrepreneurship that has disrupted industries by “amateur professionals,” proteurs creating their own economic engines as seen in the craft beer industry, new business models like Airbnb disregarding regulatory frameworks and plowing forward with determination, or even yoga being used to provide a way for a secular society to practice spirituality along with fitness.

What I really think is most fascinating is the rise of the social enterprise. Philips Design suggests we are poised to exit

the knowledge economy and enter the transformation economy, in which social networks come together to transform society. If you watch TED Talks, you can see social entrepreneurs seeking to change the world through organizations such as Global Citizen, Me to We and Social Capital while others are embracing organizational concepts such as the B-Corporation and Holocracy.

New organizations are being created to solve many of the world's critical challenges, in part because of a shift in values, but also because, frankly, we don't need more stuff! For example, I am involved in a new venture called The Leaders Expedition that is dedicated to changing the culture of leadership to being responsible to people, the planet and profit. We will do that by connecting, empowering and mobilizing the talent of extraordinary leaders to help them be successful so they can transform what a great leader is. This is a much better way for me to spend my time than shopping for disposable things that I don't need. It is an interesting time.

On a more conventional consumer level, the attraction to authenticity is a cultural trend that stems from the persistent economic uncertainty. Modern society can often feel disposable. As economic precariousness has become chronic, the middle class has had to economize more, which pushes down the price of goods and services such that the only parts of retail that are growing are the premium and discount segments while the middle segment stagnates. Lower prices mean cost-reduced quality, less durable designs, or in the case of certain popular mobile devices, it seems obsolescence is baked in the product lifecycle in order to disrupt the likelihood of slowing the repurchase cycle.

So, in many ways, we look to the past as a simpler time with more clear values and a united society—when things were more “real” than now—hence the popularity of revivalist goods and services. Facial hair is probably the most obvious example. Men have reached into the early 1960s and ‘70s. With the resurgence in the art of shaving, we see them reaching even further back to the 1930s styles. This is also reflected in the roots revival music scene with Mumford & Sons, Nathaniel Rateliff, Pokey LaFarge, Jack White and many more. There are endless examples of food and beverage products, vacation destinations, movies and more that serve as antidotes to modern society by borrowing heavily from the past.

What market-sensing models, frameworks or processes need to be in place for brands to be culturally informed?

The critical need is to understand, make sense of and track over time how culture defines and alters the context in which a brand exists. Culture is always ebbing and flowing, and therefore, the value attributed to certain goods and services will also change alongside. For example, Toyota created the Scion badge because they couldn't attract the young generations to their Toyota brands; their parents' Camry was not nearly cool enough. But following the 2008 economic crisis, this audience began to appreciate their parents' frugal choices, and suddenly, making a choice based on practicality and economy was actually savvy and a trait to be appreciated. The context shifted, and Scion was suddenly a brand without a reason for being and is now folded under the Toyota banner.



Sometimes I think the need to explore culture may be difficult for marketers to embrace when they are under pressure to show a quick return on their efforts. Maybe it feels like learning for the sake of learning if there is no clear action to take as a result. But by adopting a brand strategy framework that directly integrates cultural forces and tensions as a brand strategy input, there is a very tangible way to make this data highly relevant in planning all parts of the marketing mix. At Fresh Squeezed Ideas, we call our model the Brand Ecology to accurately situate the brand within a cultural, consumer and competitive context. In fact, we have shown that there are almost endless possibilities to create new communications, new innovation strategies and new marketing interventions by tapping into the power of a culturally informed brand strategy in such a structured way. Sometime clients come to us looking for a growth corridor for a stagnant brand. We always note the fact that they are desperate for a single growth opportunity. Why stop at just one? Culture can give you 100! Who wouldn't want that?

How does the role of large-scale social media analytics contribute to this?

The greatest thing about social data is that it is a map of behavior, and the quality of the data is high because it is volunteered, meaning it is passively collected and not extracted under interrogation (once you clean out the bots). Any anthropologist or behavioral psychologist will tell you to follow the behavior if you want to know what people value. Of course, what people value is an outcome of culture, so we look at social data as the ethnography of everyone.

Social data is the weak signal detection tool of culture as it evolves. When we put social media analysis tools in the hands of our anthropologists and let them observe consumer behavior virtually, they make sense of the behavior based on their anthropological expertise. They see much more in the data than only how viral a video was and give us an opportunity to see cultural shifts as they are emerging. Forget trend spotting—cultural emergence is much more important.

What techniques should be employed to better connect with the mood, motivation and mindset of consumers on a sustained basis?

There are four areas of focus that every brand owner needs to master before diving into marketing tactics.

1. Understand the cultural context in which your end user is living and influenced. Culture creates social and economic value because it shapes beliefs.

2. Connect the most pressing cultural forces to the consumers' lives to clearly understand exactly the role your goods and services play in their lives. You would be surprised at how seemingly benign products and services play very critical roles in our modern lifestyles—Maslow would be impressed!
3. Be objective about the conventions of the category, considering the past, present and emerging future. It is impossible to differentiate if you don't actually map the competitive landscape and choose a fertile place to plant your flag.
4. Be objective about what your brand brings to the table. Each brand has boundaries around what it can and cannot be stretched to. You need to know your right to win.

Once you master your areas of focus, it is then critical to use a strategy model to guide the development of a number of strategic options for the brand. The key is to diverge by ideating aggressively to develop as many opportunities as possible. These can be in the form of new product ideas, communication concepts, promotions and so on. Then, evaluate these options using techniques from behavioral psychology to identify on an emotional, impulsive level which ones are most attractive and motivating. This is the best means to get a predictive assessment of the alternatives. The scientific literature has clearly demonstrated that people act irrationally based on emotional impulses within milliseconds. Marketers need to stop with the purchase intent questions; that kind of post-rationalization data is useless.

How does this translate into brand purpose and ultimately to improved brand performance or attraction?

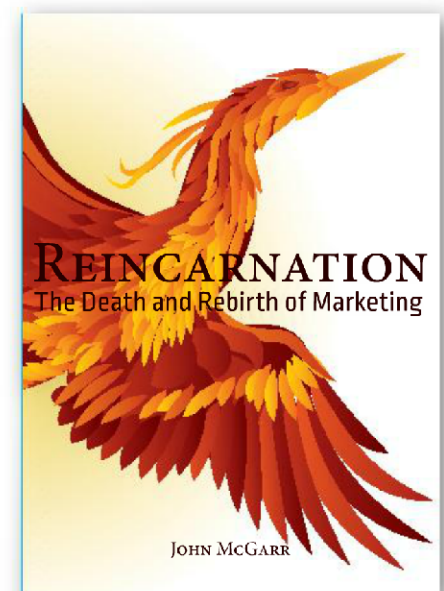
If you truly put the human at the center of your business strategy and dig deep into the unconscious forces that shape their values and behaviors, you will find it quite easy to identify a purpose for your brand that will successfully differentiate you from your competition and be of high value to your end user. Brand purpose is found at the intersection of the customer, the culture in which they are immersed, the category conventions and your brand assets. When these are well understood and articulated clearly, the puzzle can be completed to define a purpose that is built to serve the end user and is rooted in respect and empathy, which they will find very attractive indeed.

Which enduring heritage brands have done the best job of staying relevant, respected and real across generations of consumers? What have they done to evolve, adapt and refresh themselves?



BIO

John McGarr is the President of Fresh Squeezed Ideas, an award-winning insight boutique based in Toronto with clients from Los Angeles to Tokyo and most points in between. Amassing rich and varied experience in sectors including food, beverage alcohol, beauty and pharmaceuticals, McGarr developed a sophisticated understanding of how important cultural context is to the success or failure of marketing and branding. He is driven by a conviction that marketers have the opportunity to help customers live the most meaningful lives ever lived. He brings more than 15 years of marketing management and consulting experience from AC Nielsen, Kraft Foods, Chef Boyardee, Pillsbury, Mike's Hard Lemonade, A.G. Hair Cosmetics and In-Sync before starting Fresh Squeezed Ideas. He recently wrote his first book, *Reincarnation: The Death and Rebirth of Marketing*, now available in print.



I couldn't possibly go without mentioning Dove and the Campaign for Real Beauty. This brand was

previously all about having a one-third cup of moisturizing cream, but they grabbed ahold of a great tension in how women are harshly self-critical in the shadow of perfect supermodels. They built pool-out campaigns that were still interesting while they stayed rooted in the core tension.



Of course, Marvel and DC Comics have fared exception-

ally well in retelling their narratives for new generations. The medium has certainly evolved, but their stories are timeless, though particularly culturally relevant over the past several years. Batman is probably the best example of an interesting evolution from a campy '60s TV show to a cartoonish flick featuring Jack Nicholson as the Joker and finally to a very dark and serious set of films. The style evolution matched the darkening mood of America.



But Lego is my favorite—it's a great, enduring brand that has performed exceptionally well, pulling itself from the brink of bankruptcy. Brand Consultant Martin Lindstrom tells a great story about how Lego used ethnography to discover the single end user insight that spawned the entire strategy from that point forward. The idea that there was social currency in being good at an activity, any activity, inspired LEGO not only to face the digital video game era, but to succeed. It is an awesome tale.

Which new digital brands do you think have done the best job of acquiring consumer fan following and cultural connectivity?



While not a digital brand, I am a huge fan of what William Espey and his team did for Chipotle over the past few years with some amazing digital content that clearly aligned with consumers' anxiety over the industrial food system that props up America's cheap food culture. Their "Scarecrow" film is essential viewing for any marketer. And if you like humor in your marketing, their spoof mini-series, *Farmed and Dangerous*, is the best—even the trailer is awesome.

I am also big fan of VICE media. In an era in which news organizations are struggling with their business models, VICE has created an empire based upon the number-one rule of marketing: being different from the rest. Their voice is completely unique and has attracted a subculture that feels alienated by the mainstream media. *Huffington Post* is another similar success story, although less disruptive in tone than VICE.

I am very excited by Amazon Alexa and how this virtual assistant will change how people interact with brands. This kind of connection is one with some interesting cultural tensions, including but not limited to privacy and surveillance fears and the impact of children's behavior, but it is an exciting development.

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