

Loyalty, Harley Style

Every year, some 20,000 bikers rumble their way along the 50 or so miles between a Harley-Davidson dealership in Glendale, California, and Castaic Lake, where they are treated to a huge barbecue and concert.

This annual ritual began 23 years ago, and originally was intended to change the image of bikers as outlaws and thugs by raising money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. That first event raised just \$1,500, but last year's brought in a total of \$1.45 million, not only for Muscular Dystrophy but also another 20 charity organizations.

The Love Ride, as the event is known, is just one of the many ways in which Harley-Davidson helps guide its acolytes to astonishing levels of brand loyalty.

The appeal is not just to the brand's storied attraction as a metaphor for "freedom." Nor is it purely a payoff on the promise of feeling good by doing good. It is both of those things—in addition to the camaraderie it creates among Harley's faithful, which, for some, borders on a religious experience.

"You start shaking," one participant told *The New York Times*. "This noise, this roar—it sounds like an earthquake. The windows of the stores start rattling from the roar of the motorcycles."

The result is a *deep-soul connection* between Harley-Davidson and those who love their motorcycles. It is the highest-level relationship a brand can have with its consumer. It transcends the brand's own products and services as well as those of its competitors. The outcome is undying brand enthusiasm for, and loyalty to, the brand.

Harley-Davidson does this better than just about anyone else; indeed, not a single one of the 300 senior-level marketers who responded to a *Reveries.com*

survey about building brand loyalty disputed Harley's exceptional relationships with its consumers. In fact, most of the respondents confirmed that where brand loyalty is concerned, Harley is a leader of the pack.

Other brands earning widespread plaudits included Apple, Starbucks, Nike, Coca-Cola, Mini Cooper, BMW, Target Stores, Southwest Airlines and Volkswagen.

However, a few respondents suggested that the

kind of *deep-soul connection* enjoyed by Harley is either not possible or even necessary for some brands. For example, as one survey participant wrote: "I don't particularly like American Airlines, but I give them most of my travel so I can enjoy the perks and free travel as an Advantage elite-level customer."

That may be true to a point, but inertia does not equal loyalty. If consumers don't even *like* your brand—or are even just *indifferent* to it—that means you are not

relevant to them. It means that, for all intents and purposes, your brand is a commodity that can be replaced by someone else's faster than you can say Southwest Airlines.

The Biggest Threat. The biggest threat to brands today is not from Wal-Mart, your competitors with deep pockets, nor from spiraling media costs. The biggest threat is consumer indifference to your brands. The greatest challenge is projecting your brand into your consumer's conscious awareness, because with so much marketplace noise and clutter, most consumers have simply stopped listening.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: *Okay, sure, that's easy for Harley and Apple and BMW and Nike. A deep-soul connection is practically a given for them. What about my brands? I'm in the consumer packaged goods business and it's pretty hard to create a deep-soul connection with a tube of toothpaste.*

Creating cultural
value fosters
deep-soul connections
with consumers.
An analysis of a
Reveries.com survey
by **Dori Molitor, CEO,**
WomanWise.

You're also thinking: *Creating a deep-soul connection is going to cost a lot of money, and our management is already squeezing every nickel of innovation out of us in the name of marketing return-on-investment.*

It's true that many marketers are languishing in organizations that have become so obsessed with quantifying everything that they've choked the creative life out of their brands. The *Reveries.com* survey tended to confirm the prevailing atmosphere, with 49 percent of respondents saying that "insufficient budgets" was the greatest obstacle to creating loyalty for their brands.

Take heart: A *deep-soul connection* is not the exclusive purview of ostensibly "sexy" brands like Harley and Nike, nor does it require spending enormous sums of money. It is about transcending those kinds of considerations and connecting with consumers based on a higher purpose than a sterile, financial transaction.

Meaningful Brand Experiences. Dr. David W. Norton wrote an insightful white paper in *Design Management Journal* (Winter, 2003) that did a terrific job outlining the trends that have shaped changes in consumer behavior over the past 20 years.

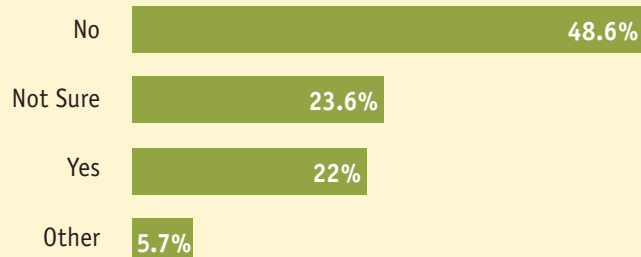
In brief, the 1980s was the era of "conspicuous consumption," when consumers defined themselves by the brands they bought. The 1990s was the era of the "experiential economy" during which consumers defined themselves by the places they went and the things they did.

The current decade is that of *meaningful brand experiences*, where consumers seek not only memorable experiences, but also desire meaning from those experiences. Harley-Davidson's Love Ride certainly qualifies as just that kind of experience. But it's possible for even the most mundane experiences to provide the kind of meaning that consumers now crave.

As evidence, Dr. Norton cites a program called "Box Tops for Education," that General Mills actually launched back in the mid-1990s. You're probably familiar with this program. General Mills simply put vouchers good for 10 cents toward local school programs on their cereal boxtops.

Today, 75 percent of U.S. schools are participating in the program, involving some 20 million households, and General Mills has sent about \$70 million to

Are you satisfied that the research tools you're currently using provide the consumer insights needed to create *deep-soul* consumer loyalty?



SOURCE: *Reveries.com*

schools as a result. Think about it: That amounts to about 7 billion boxtops redeemed toward the program. That means that General Mills now redeems more boxtops than coupons!

In some ways that's not surprising, given the decline in coupon redemption rates in general. But think of it this way: Consumers who can't be bothered to clip 50-cent coupons *are* taking the time to collect 10-cent boxtops. Especially interesting is that it would take far less time simply to write a check for \$25 than to clip and save 250 boxtops.

Cultural Value. The Boxtops for Education program is a success because it taps into *cultural values* that are not all that different from those that led Harley-Davidson bikers to get together to raise money for Muscular Dystrophy and other charities.

Cultural value is the intangible benefit derived from a relationship with people, ideas and things that bring a higher purpose or meaning to our lives. It feeds our identities (self-preservation, self-awareness, self-image) or relationships (connections to others, institutions or beliefs) or purpose values (meaning of life, and the validation of one's life and actions).

The Boxtops program connects with cultural values because the boxtops are not about *saving money*; they are about *making a difference* in your child's education. It's that tangible effort of clipping, communicating, collecting and counting that makes a meaningful experience out of what otherwise would be a fairly empty use of time and energy.

We all talk about how consumers today are starved for time, and yet this program proves that under the right circumstances consumers (in this case, mostly women) will indeed spend their precious time if they believe they will feel meaningful value in return.

Both General Mills and Harley-Davidson are building loyalty by appealing to this higher sense of purpose. As fantastic as the Harley example is, the op-

portunity arguably is even greater for packaged-goods products—and just about every other product or service category you could name. That’s because women make 93 percent of all retail purchases.

The point is, it’s mostly women who are driving the demand for cultural value in marketing because women tend to care more about more things. On the whole, they are more concerned about issues like health, education and the environment. The demand for cultural value is naturally in sync with women’s innate being of nurturing and caring. More to the point, as women are moving into greater positions of power in society, they are increasingly asserting their opinions and influencing who gets the sales.

Deep-Soul Insight. It’s highly unlikely that traditional research could have predicted the response General Mills has received with Boxtops for Education. Perhaps that’s one reason the *Reveries.com* survey found that 49 percent of marketers are not satisfied that the research tools they are using provide the consumer insights they need to create a *deep-soul connection*.

Meanwhile, 68 percent of respondents identified “focus groups” as the research tool they used most often, followed by “quantitative studies” at 59 percent. Putting two-and-two together, these findings point to

a significant level of dissatisfaction with focus groups and quantitative data.

Having come to a similar conclusion years ago, my own agency has developed a set of new research tools that are designed to identify what’s truly meaningful to consumers and what truly drives their behavior (see “The Emotional Truth,” the HUB, September/October ‘06).

There does seem to be a cold, deadly fear lurking that maybe the tried-and-true research methodologies really aren’t telling us what we need to know. In fact, consumers can’t necessarily tell us what they want because in many cases they don’t consciously know why they buy what they buy. This is a key reason why marketers need new tools to find the insights that can forge *deep-soul connections*.

Another revealing result of the *Reveries.com* survey was that 53 percent said they relied on “gut instinct” as their research tool-of-choice. Marketers may want to use these rational tools and take these quantitative approaches, but in this anonymous survey they admit that they prefer to rely on their own instincts.

Maybe the resulting lack of true insight explains why so many marketers are content simply to bolt a “cause marketing” overlay onto their programs in hopes it will add the kind of meaning that will promote greater loyalty.

That approach is doomed to failure. It is also a mistake to assume that “cause” is necessarily a synonym for “meaning.” It can be—as it is with Harley’s Love Ride and General Mills’ Boxtops for Education. But developing cultural value—a higher-level purpose—is more accurately about the connections that brands can provide to other people (their relationships) or the ways in which they help consumers lead happier, more purposeful lives.

Not Just Charity. Serta, the mattress company, discovered the subtleties of what their predominantly female customers really wanted when they sought to enter the “luxury” mattress category.

Traditionally, mattress brands have focused on a



Source: *Reveries.com*

“good night’s sleep” as the product benefit. But Serta uncovered a sub-conscious motivation: Women who buy high-end mattresses place a much higher value on the energy and vitality that a restful night brings to the next day than the night of sleep itself.

The emotional connection in this case actually was less the mattress itself—or even the better night’s rest it enabled— than it was the “day-time benefits” of the more vital life it enabled, allowing Serta’s customer to bring out the best in herself as well as her family, friends, co-workers and the community around her.

With this insight, the mattress itself was re-named Perfect Day (originally it was to be called Perfect Night) and the supporting marketing efforts focused on helping women be the best they can be, physically and emotionally. Serta also held marketing-to-women workshops for literally hundreds of mattress retailers to ensure that the buying experience fully supported the brand positioning and was suitably female-friendly.

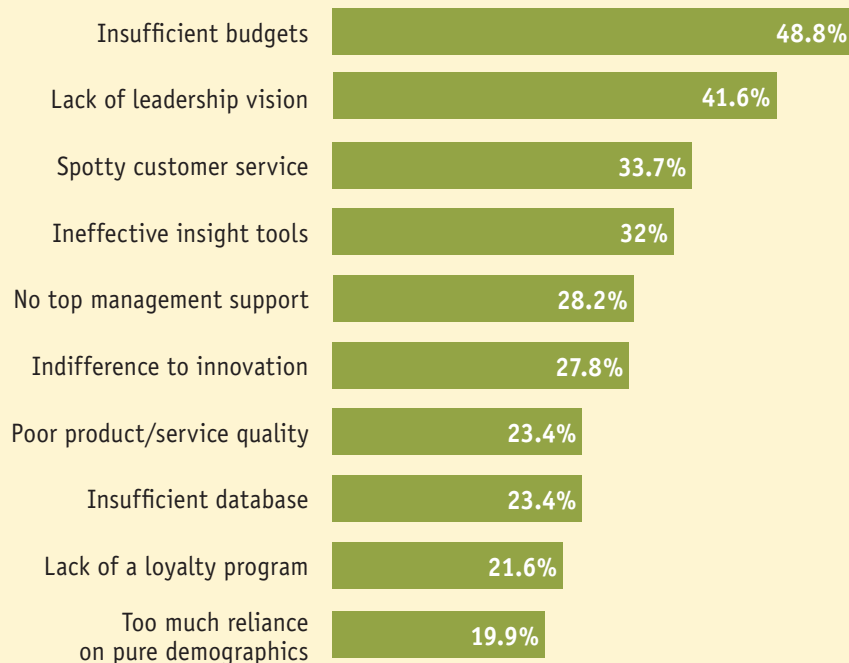
Trader Joe’s, the food-store chain, provides yet another example of how a *deep-soul connection* can be nurtured based on something other than a charity or “cause,” per se. Once again, we are talking about a category— food stores— that is not exactly known for its intrinsic appeal. Most grocery shoppers will tell you that their main objective is to get in and out of the store as quickly as possible.

Trader Joe’s has taken that assumption about shopping and turned it on its head. The chain actually has been around since the 1960s, having started out as a garden-variety convenience store. When business started falling off, its founder, Joe Coulombe, got the bright idea to appeal to a different kind of shopper on a different kind of level. As he told *The New York Times*: “We decided ... to appeal to people who are well-educated, well-traveled and underpaid.”

The result is a food store that is unlike any other, and that appeals to shoppers on an entirely different— an entirely higher— level. The Trader Joe’s connection is all about creating a shopping experience that feeds an “urban explorer’s” appetite for worldly adventure.

“The stores are small, they don’t rely on national brands, you can’t do price comparisons, and they definitely don’t offer one stop-shopping,” observes Steve Dowdell of *Progressive Grocer* magazine. “But

Which of the following represent the greatest obstacles to creating loyalty for your brands? (pick all that apply)



SOURCE: Reveries.com

every product has a story.” Their emphasis is on all-natural products with an exotic streak. Cuban Mojito simmer sauce, anyone? It’s packaged in a stylish mason jar, it’s chemical-free and it tastes freshly made. The price: \$1.99. Try to find *that*— at any price— at your local Piggly-Wiggly.

“This sounds crazy,” says one shopper, “but you feel like this company likes food more than they like money...” The comment is of a piece with one made by a Harley loyalist who told the *Associated Press*: “I don’t even know if Harley-Davidson understands what they’ve created.”

Of course they do. By feeding cultural values, Harley-Davidson—and every other marketer— can enrich the lives of each and every one of their consumers, which in turn enriches the community, society, and the world at-large. That’s what drives Harley-style, deep-soul loyalty. It’s also what drives sales, profits and stock prices on Wall Street.

At the moment, Harley is way, way, up—high above its competitive playing field. That’s exactly where every brand, especially your brand, should be. ■



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