

Retrobranding: Selling the Past

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ABSTRACT

Brand revitalization and retrobranding are two distinct concepts. The latter preserves the association between an iconic brand and the past using a discontinued link to a specific historical period with the aim of creating feelings of nostalgia, while ensuring the brand remains authentic. In retrobranding, the past is desirable in itself.

Keywords: *retromarketing, retrobranding, brand revitalization, past, nostalgia*

Introduction

Consumption of the past has become a common experience. Many product categories, including those that usually focus on innovation or creativity, have been affected by the proliferation of so-called retro products, i.e., products that consumers associate with the past. Among these categories, cars (New Beetle, PT Cruiser, Mini, etc.) and popular music (“The Wall” tour by Roger Waters, an ex-member of Pink Floyd, remastered Beatles recordings, etc.) are prominent symbols, although there seems to be no limit to the retro trend (clothing, sports shoes, domestic appliances, food products...). Retromarketing, which I define as the management of a product associated with the past, allows consumers to live or relive a recent, idealized, yet updated past on a daily basis (e.g. Brown 1999, 2001). So, for example, owners of the Volkswagen New Beetle can experience the best of the past (utopia, carefree attitude, etc.) alongside the best of the present (comfort, safety, reliability, etc.) (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003b).

Most retro products that are of interest to researchers and practitioners are cases of retrobranding (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003a, 2003b), a particular case within retromarketing where a brand associated with the past has been relaunched. It should be noted that these concepts have still not been clearly defined. Specifically, retrobranding is often confused with the well-known concept of brand revitalization. For example, an article in *Marketing News* entitled “Believe in Yesterday” has the following subtitle: “Retro marketing is all the rage. Leverage your brand’s history to strengthen your bond with consumers and your position in the marketplace” (Sullivan 2009). Among the examples discussed, two are from the same company: The “Refresh

Everything” campaign launched in January 2009, which presents drinkers of Pepsi-Cola from different generations, and the “Pepsi-Cola Throwback” cola launched in April 2009 with packaging similar to that used by the brand in the 1970s and which contains sugar (rather than corn syrup). In the article, retrobranding is synonymous with using the brand’s history to create links with consumers. The author believes that rekindling favorable brand associations forged in the past and using visual elements linked to a bygone era can provide security and comfort to consumers anxious about the present and the future. However, this type of strategy needs to ensure that the brand doesn’t get stuck in the past or become outdated.

As with other articles in professional journals that deal with retromarketing, retrobranding or retro trends, Sullivan’s article (2009) analyses the relaunch of past products, packaging, advertising, jingles or slogans using well-known concepts of brand revitalization or brand management over time (e.g. Keller 2013). However, the two articles above are examples of two different strategies. When PepsiCo launched their “Refresh Everything” campaign, it based itself on the past to demonstrate contemporary relevance without remaining associated with that past. In other words, the company managed its brand using conventional methods. This is standard marketing practice. Nevertheless, when PepsiCo launched “Pepsi-Cola Throwback”, the company offered a product that was permanently associated with the past, albeit adapted to modern consumer tastes. This was retromarketing.

A greater concern is the current amalgamation of retrobranding and brand revitalization within the scientific literature. Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003b, p. 20) define retro-

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branding as “the revival or relaunch of a product or service brand from a prior historical period, which is usually but not always updated to contemporary standards of performance, functioning or taste.” Unfortunately, this definition does not clearly separate retrobranding from brand revitalization. Although both strategies take a brand from the past and revitalize or relaunch it, there is a fundamental difference between them: brand revitalization brings the brand into the present, while retrobranding conserves the association with the past.

The aim of this article is to differentiate brand revitalization from retrobranding. In the first section I will discuss the basic difference between the two concepts, as introduced above. In the second section I will discuss other differences: historical reference (brand history vs. a specific period in history); link to the past (continuous vs. discontinuous); perceptual challenge (credibility vs. authenticity); typical brands (declining brands vs. iconic brands from the past) and targeted emotion (none vs. nostalgia). Finally, in the third section I will show that the past is desirable in itself, as it is the *raison d'être* of retrobranding.

Moving into the Present or Maintaining the Association with the Past

The existing amalgamation of retrobranding and brand revitalization is probably due to the fact that the two concepts have at least two key points in common. The first of these is that the starting point for the two strategies is a brand that is associated with the past by consumers and that needs to be revitalized or relaunched. The second is that repositioning or reinforcing a positioning is at the heart of brand revitalization (Berry 1988; Ewing, Fowlds, and Shepherd 1995), as well as retrobranding. For the latter, a product often needs to be updated to meet modern consumer tastes (Brown 2001; Cattaneo and Guerini 2012), although it remains associated with the past. For example, the modern Mini car has gone from a positioning based on price to a positioning based on manufacturing quality, while maintaining the fun, sporty image held by its ancestor (Simms and Trott 2007). Kiss went from being an explosive, subversive rock band to an essentially family entertainment show (Blackwell and Stephan 2004). Given this, an initial analysis of brand revitalization and retrobranding would suggest that they are similar concepts. However in-depth analysis reveals that this is not the case.

Firstly, and above all else, the basic principles are at least different, if not complete opposites. Brand revitalization brings the brand into the present while retrobranding keeps, or occasionally reinforces, association with the past. By refreshing traditional sources of brand equity and creating new ones (Keller 2013), brand revitalization can transform

perceptions of an outdated brand from the past, into a contemporary brand. Even if the brand's heritage is highlighted, this, along with traditions, serves to link the past, the present and the future (Wiedmann et al. 2011). A brand that needs to be revitalized should, once the process is finished, be perceived as a classic, with timeless attributes such as pleasure (e.g., Coca-Cola), sturdiness (e.g., Levi's), or beauty (e.g., Chanel).

Retrobranding, on the other hand, consists of relaunching a brand from the past while keeping the brand itself along with some of the product's main attributes explicitly associated with a historical era (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003b). For example, the Volkswagen New Beetle launched in 1998 is associated with attributes of the 1960s using the slogan “*Less flower. More power.*” More obviously, the various Beatles recordings and iconographic documents released in the 2000s are also associated with the 1960s, despite the use of modern technology. Thus, while brand revitalization may make use of the past, using brand heritage, retrobranding necessarily uses the past, referencing it explicitly and using it as a key element of positioning. By creating a permanent association with the past, retrobranding and retromarketing are moving away from traditional marketing ideas of product management, which typically offer consumers a continuous stream of “new and improved” products. Retromarketing offers products that are “as good as always” (Brown 2001).

It is possible to roughly define retrobranding as a specific type of brand revitalization, where the brand remains associated with the past. I have previously presented retrobranding as a specific type of retromarketing where a brand from the past is relaunched. Thus retrobranding could be seen as both a specific type of brand revitalization and a specific type of retromarketing, or even as brand revitalization within a retromarketing approach (see Table 1). If the brand is perceived as being current by consumers, and as long as it wants to be seen as such, standard marketing tools are being applied. If the brand is perceived as belonging to the past when it should be in the present, brand revitalization is underway (e.g., Burberry). Retrobranding occurs when the brand is perceived as belonging to the past and when this association with the past is to be kept (e.g., Volkswagen “Beetle”). Finally, retromarketing occurs when a new product is launched with a new brand that wants to be associated with the past (e.g., Chrysler “PT Cruiser”). In this latter case, the idea is not to maintain an association with the past as the new product does not reference any particular product from the past. Rather, an association to a historical period with favorable connotations is being created (the 1920s for the PT Cruiser). The differences between these various concepts are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Differences between Concepts of Brand Revitalization, Retrobranding and Retromarketing

		Desired ⁽²⁾ temporal roots for product or brand	
		Present	Past
Perceived ⁽¹⁾ temporal roots for brand	Present	Standard Marketing	Retromarketing
	Past	Brand Revitalization	Retrobranding

⁽¹⁾ by consumers

⁽²⁾ by brand managers

It should be noted that neither standard marketing nor retrobranding involves “temporal work”: these strategies consist of conserving or reinforcing an association considered favorable with either the present (standard marketing) or the past (retrobranding). In contrast, brand revitalization and retromarketing both require temporal work: modernizing a brand (brand revitalization) or, in reverse, associating a brand or product with the past (retromarketing). A strategic choice to include the past as a central element of the brand’s positioning is required to move from standard marketing or brand revitalization to retromarketing or retrobranding. Although it is possible to view retrobranding as a specific type of brand revitalization, I do not believe that the former should be considered an extension of the latter. The next section will discuss several other elements that differentiate the two strategies (see Table 2).

Other Differences Between Brand Revitalization and Retrobranding

As discussed above, the first difference between brand revitalization and retrobranding is that the former aims to modernize brands while the latter aims to keep the brand’s association with the past. The second difference is the historical reference used: brand history or history in general. During brand revitalization, a brand’s history may or may not be referenced to show that the brand is relevant in the present day. While all long-standing brands can make use of their brand

heritage, only a few actually do use it as a central tenet of their positioning (Urde, Greyser, and Balmer 2007). However, all brands engaged in retrobranding align themselves with a specific historical period in order to provide added value. For example, the New Beetle or Mini, as well as many major rock bands, associate their brands with the idealism and socio-cultural effervescence of the 1960s and 1970s and benefit from this association. In this way, history itself becomes a more important source of market value (Peñaloza 2000) than any brand history. Whereas brand revitalization makes the past relevant to today and tomorrow (Urde, Greyser, and Balmer 2007), retrobranding does not need to as the past is relevant in itself.

The third difference relates to the link to the past. A brand undergoing revitalization needs to have a continuous link to its past. In fact, many revitalized brands maintain a market presence (Wansink and Huffman 2001); even if their communication activity has slowed, product distribution has not stopped. Therefore, although the product may have been relegated to a detrimental place within the retail world, it does not necessarily require a reintroduction to the market as such (Huffman and Kahn 1998). Furthermore, if there has been a period of market absence, this will not be highlighted. Continuity is one of the most important aspects of a brand’s heritage (Wiedmann et al. 2011). In contrast, retrobranding benefits from interruptions as the brand or product is partially frozen in the past. Any temporary absence from the market is desirable and even necessary, as it reinforces the brand’s association with a bygone era. Moreover, an absence can create expectations among fans (e.g., *Star Wars*, *Mini*, *ABBA*). Retro brands do not offer the stability or continuity of classic brands, but rather a desired return to the past.

The fourth difference between brand revitalization and retrobranding is what I call the perceptual challenge. By offering updated products from the past, retrobranding mixes the past with the present and is unavoidably characterized by the paradox. Although this paradox is desirable in retrobranding (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003b), it could affect the

Table 2. Comparing Brand Revitalization and Retrobranding

	Brand Revitalization	Retrobranding
Principle	Bringing a brand into the present	Preserving a brand’s association with the past
Historical reference	Brand history	A specific period in history
Link to the past	Continuous	Discontinuous
Perceptual challenge	Credibility	Authenticity
Typical brands	Declining brands	Iconic brands from the past
Targeted emotion	None	Nostalgia
Examples	Burberry, Lacoste, Mountain Dew, Old Spice	Volkswagen Beetle, <i>Star Wars</i> , Quisp, The Beatles

brand's perceived authenticity (Rose and Wood 2005), a particularly sought-after quality for consumers (Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Rose and Wood 2005). The original anachronism paradox is both a strength and a weakness for retrobranding. In contrast, if it is there at all, the issue of authenticity is only peripheral to brand revitalization. The perceptual challenge here is that of credibility. The revitalized brand is trying to be relevant in the present, often for new market segments. Before their revitalization, there were doubts about whether the Old Spice or Mountain Dew brands could be seen as cool, or Burberry and Lacoste as trendy by young people (see Keller 2013). It is therefore not surprising that credibility is the second most important tenet of brand heritage (Wiedmann et al. 2011).

The fifth difference is that the typical brands for each of the two strategies are different. Typical brands for revitalization are usually in or at risk of decline (Keller 2013; Light and Kiddon 2009; Thomas and Kohli 2009), while typical brands for retrobranding are iconic brands from a period in the past (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry Jr. 2003b). For the latter, although the brand may have suffered some decline, this would have occurred long ago and would no longer be a significant issue. More importantly, decline is not the impetus for retrobranding. Brands involved are usually dormant or semi-dormant (before their relaunch), for example *Star Wars*, Volkswagen Beetle (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003b), or Quisp cereal (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003a). As a result, success factors for brand revitalization are significantly different to those for retrobranding. Based on the relaunch of 84 brands, Wansink (1997) and Wansink and Huffman (2001) defined five characteristics for successfully revitalized brands. For their part, Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003a, 2003b) have suggested six characteristics that a brand should have before it is suitable for retrobranding (see appendix).

There is only one clear link between the two characteristic groups: the "long-held heritage" of brand revitalization corresponds to the "evocativeness" of retrobranding. Links between the other elements are more or less direct. Although the "under-advertised and under-promoted" element of brand revitalization is compatible with that of "dormancy" in retrobranding, the element of "wide distribution" is opposed by the same element of "dormancy". In addition, brands suitable for retrobranding have two key characteristics of their own: "iconicity" and "utopianism". It does seem that classic cases of retrobranding clearly meet at least one of these two characteristics (e.g. New Beetle, *Star Wars*, Quisp cereal [see Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003a, 2003b]), while classic cases of revitalization (e.g., Burberry, Lacoste or Mountain Dew (see Keller 2013)) do not. In fact, many cases of retrobranding target the 1960s and 1970s: two decades renowned for being iconic and utopian in themselves.

The sixth and final difference is targeted emotion. Brand revitalization does not target any particular emotion in consumers while retrobranding clearly aims to create nostalgia. By definition, evoking the past is likely to provoke feelings of nostalgia. This is particularly true of references to the 1960s and 1970s, even for young people, as it is not necessary to have lived through an era to feel nostalgia for it (Holbrook and Schindler 1991). It has now been clearly established that provoking feelings of nostalgia has positive effects on consumer responses (e.g. Muehling and Pascal 2011; Schindler and Holbrook 2003). Nostalgia is therefore not a side effect of retrobranding; it is a targeted emotion. In contrast, nostalgia serves no purpose in brand revitalization and can even be harmful. Nostalgia is defined as "a complex emotion that involves past-oriented cognition and a mixed-affective signature.... One often views the memory through rose-tinted glasses, misses that time or person, longs for it, and may even wish to return to the past" (Hepper et al. 2012). It would therefore be counter-productive to provoke an emotion that values the past when the aim is to free the brand from that past.

The Past: Desirable in Itself

The idea behind retrobranding and retromarketing is that the association between a product or brand and the past is beneficial. This implies that the past is desirable in itself. The association with a recent and idealized past is permanent, in contrast to simply using the past in an advertising campaign, and fairly explicit, using one or more product attributes. Some historical eras have a specific attraction: particularly the 1960s and 1970s as these were the years during which baby boomers were young and the two decades are associated with a lost idealism. Regardless of any specific period, the past in general has characteristics that make it desirable for consumers and marketing managers. I have identified five characteristics: the past is different, familiar, inaccessible, a source of meaning and freely interpretable. These will be discussed in the following section.

Firstly, the past is different to the present. This is expressed eloquently in the famous first sentence of L.P. Hartley's novel (1953), *The Go-Between*: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." The past offers a striking contrast to the present and can be desired, such as a need for otherness (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003) that is sometimes linked to dissatisfaction with the present (Lowenthal 1985). The journey towards this otherness can be provided by institutions such as historical sites, which "succeed because of their inherent mystery, the fact that objects are inscrutable yet strangely compelling" (Brown, Hirschman, and Maclaran 2000). Alternatively, consumers can organize their own journey through time, for example by recreating events around the 19th century fur trade in America's Rocky

Mountains (Belk and Costa 1998). The explosion of retro products that has occurred since the 1990s allows consumers to live this journey on a daily basis: the past is available on the mass market. It is, however, possible to travel and to escape towards the future as well as the past (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003). So, why is the past more desirable than the future?

Secondly, while different, the past remains familiar. For example, “diners” are the ultimate retro retail business and are so familiar to Americans they have become a popular cultural symbol (Hirschman 2006). Thus, from an identity and existential perspective, the past is more useful than the future for individuals. Managing the relationship with their own past through possessions allows consumers to manage their identity (Belk 1991). Nostalgia, as an emotion provoked by the past, allows consumers to reduce existential fears (e.g., Routledge et al. 2011) and brands associated with the past improve consumers’ mood (Orth and Gal 2012). In contrast, the future is increasingly distressing in a world surrounded by unprecedented demographic and ecological problems. Therefore the paradox of the past is that it is both different and familiar, which makes it particularly appealing.

Thirdly, the past is, by definition, inaccessible. It should be noted that distance and inaccessibility increase consumer desire (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003). Retro products make the inaccessible seem accessible, although only as a simulation. This inaccessibility has become increasingly obvious as more retro products have become available. For example, once the excitement of rediscovery has worn off, the experience of playing retro video games quickly become disappointing (Molesworth 2009). Someone attending a Rolling Stones concert or driving a Volkswagen New Beetle in the 2000s, having previously experienced these during the 1970s, could become brutally aware that the past can never be truly recreated. Nevertheless, the success of retro products shows that this is not a deal breaker. The accessibility of an inaccessible past can construct an invigorating paradox, similar to the paradoxical tension between past and present as highlighted by Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003b).

Fourthly, the past is a source of meaning. History itself has become a source of market value as it provides a rich reservoir of meaning (Peñaloza 2000). Any marketing manager can associate a product or brand with a period in history, a public good full of ideas and values. From this perspective, retrobranding sponsors the past. History plays the same role as charities, cultural or sporting events or celebrities in the sponsored role, but is free to use. Moreover, while some periods from the past are sacrosanct (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989), this has not stopped the past from becoming a commodity (Goulding 2000). For example, since the mid-

1990s, while popular music from the 1960s and 1970s has been outrageously exploited in the West, South Africa has seen the return of highly meaningful anti-apartheid music (Drewett 2008).

Finally, the past can be freely interpreted. It can be idealized or stereotyped in a postmodern world where history, origin and context have been abandoned (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), and where creativity consists of recombining historical elements (Brown 1995). Cinema, for example, is made up of traditional genres that allow consumers to travel through time: historical and biographical films, as well as westerns, mysteries or epic dramas in which the plot is usually fiction but where the action takes place in the past. However, “nostalgia films” (Jameson 1991) such as *American Graffiti* or *Grease* only aim to represent a certain idea of the past, and are cultural stereotypes rather than historical fact. In advertising, for example, the stereotypical manly man who drinks spirits, smokes cigars and corresponds to the masculine model of rebellion (Holt and Thompson 2004) is used to promote spirit brands such as Canadian Club Whisky. In this situation, past behaviors are reinterpreted as “cool” although today they could be considered irresponsible and immature.

Conclusion

Using the past to revitalize or relaunch a brand is not synonymous with retrobranding. Two strategies can be defined. The first consists of bringing a currently declining brand into the present, possibly using a continuous link with the brand’s history, while ensuring it remains credible. This is the traditional concept of brand revitalization. The second consists of preserving the association of an iconic brand with the past, using a discontinued link to a specific historical period, with the aim of creating feelings of nostalgia, while ensuring the brand remains authentic. This is the relatively new concept of retrobranding. Since markets evolve quickly, most brands will have been, or will have to be, traditionally revitalized. In other words, they will have to be made relevant to today. This is a timeless managerial process that is universal and applicable to all brands. By contrast, retrobranding is only applicable to certain brands and is based on a current social trend, in this case an interest in the recent past. However, regardless of the historical reference period, the past is desirable in itself as it is different from the present while remaining familiar. It is inaccessible and a source of meaning but still freely interpretable.

What is striking for those who observe marketing practices (e.g., Sullivan 2009), is probably the lack of inhibition in using the past shown by marketing managers. The “retro revolution” that has occurred since the 1990s contradicts the progressive logic that has underpinned marketing practices for decades (Brown 2001). This should not, however, be

construed as a sign of desperation or lack of creativity (Brown 1999). Retromarketing and retrobranding are being used to meet the needs of consumers. They are good marketing practice. Despite this, and despite all that has been written on the subject (e.g. Brown 1999; Brown 2001; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003b; Brown and Sherry 2003), these concepts have not yet found their place among the traditional marketing strategies. Specifically, retrobranding is not yet considered to be an independent concept, separate from

brand revitalization. For example, Keller (2013), in developing his chapter on the management of brands over time, mentions brand reinforcement, brand revitalization and adjusting brand portfolios. Only one mention of retrobranding is made, and this is presented as a synonym of “retro-advertising” (p. 454) and is only applied to the use of the past in the creation of advertising materials. It can only be hoped that retrobranding will soon find its true place among common marketing concepts.

Appendix. Characteristics of Successfully Revitalized Brands and Characteristics of Brands That Qualify for Retrobranding

Characteristics of Successfully Revitalized Brands

Characteristic	Explanation
Moderate to premium-priced	The brand has never been heavily discounted.
Under-advertised and under-promoted	The brand is perceived as a “quiet” brand, but latent loyalty exists.
Wide distribution	The brand has always been able to maintain some shelf presence, so it does not have to fight with stores to be reintroduced.
Long-held heritage	There are vivid memories associated with the brand within at least a small core market segment.
A distinct point-of-differentiation	The branded product has unique points of differentiation that set it apart from the competition.

Source: Wansink (1997), Wansink and Huffman (2001).

Characteristics of Brands That Qualify for Retrobranding

Characteristic	Explanation
Dormancy	Although it may lie dormant in the collective memory, the brand must still exist as a brand story. However, it should be relatively undisturbed by recent marketing attention.
Iconicity	The brand must have a vital essence; it has to have existed as an important icon during a specific developmental stage for a particular generation or cohort.
Evocativeness	The brand must be capable of evoking vivid yet relevant associations for specific consumers.
Utopianism	The brand must be capable of conjuring a utopian vision: engendering a longing for an idealized past or community.
Solidarity	The brand must inspire solidarity and a sense of belonging to a community.
Perfectibility	The brand should be amenable to both technological and symbolic updates so as to ensure its perpetual relevance to consumers, who constantly revise their own identities.

Source: Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003a, 2003b).

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