

LIFESTYLE BRANDING: AS MORE COMPANIES EMBRACE IT, CONSUMER OPPOSITION GROWS

BY KACIE LYNN JUNG AND MATTHEW MERLIN

While the trend of lifestyle branding grows, an anti-branding movement led by activist Naomi Klein attacks such branding practices. Matt Merlin and Kacie Jung discuss the trend, its backlash and the implications for corporations and consumers.

A woman zooms by the art museum in her Mercedes SL500, stopping abruptly at the valet stand. As valet opens the door, the woman steps out dressed in Ralph Lauren from head to toe with the horse emblem prominently etched into each article of clothing. Wearing Gucci sunglasses and Prada shoes, she saunters toward the entrance, while her matching Prada handbag swings on her arm. She personifies sleek elegance and sophistication — the lifestyle each of these brands connotes.

Today, lifestyle branding is a buzzword that many corporations use. Yet few marketing textbooks and academic journals provide any definition. Instead, lifestyle branding is defined in a variety of ways outside of academia — in magazines and societal issue books. A corporation defines itself as a lifestyle brand because its products pro-

of clothing, could be considered a lifestyle brand. More recently, however, there has been an extension of lifestyle branding to companies that do not traditionally sell products with high emotional involvement. A self-expressive product, once the prerequisite for establishing a lifestyle brand, is no longer a barrier for any company.

However, while lifestyle branding continues to expand, a vocal group of consumers vehemently rejects the idea of lifestyle branding. Naomi Klein, the famed anti-branding and anti-globalist writer, has led her followers in the crusade against companies that employ lifestyle branding tactics. Ironically, even Klein has begun to show elements of lifestyle branding in her own personal success.

In this article, we will explore why a company would become a lifestyle brand and define the lifestyle brand attributes. Additionally, we will discuss the increasing backlash associated with lifestyle branding and the expected future of this growing movement.

TO ACHIEVE A LIFESTYLE BRAND STATUS, A COMPANY MUST CONVEY A CONSISTENT BRAND PERSONALITY TO ALL STAKEHOLDERS BY IMPLEMENTING IMC STRATEGIES.

mote a certain lifestyle; however, lifestyle branding is more than just promoting a lifestyle. Despite the trendy business lingo, lifestyle branding does have real meaning. While there is no single definition, through our research we have developed our own definition. Lifestyle branding can be defined as a product or service that provides consumers with an emotional attachment to an identifiable lifestyle — the rugged outdoorsman, the posh executive or an urban hipster, for example. The consumer then projects this lifestyle to society by purchasing and using particular brands.

In the past, only a self-expressive product, such as a car or a piece

WHY LIFESTYLE BRANDING?

Companies strive for lifestyle branding because they can reap financial benefits by building and sustaining a strong, emotional and long-term bond with the consumer. High profit margin is just one reason for a company to become a lifestyle brand. Established lifestyle brands can also launch new products at a cheaper cost to the company because the strength of the brand name provides instant endorsement of new products, obviating the need for expensive advertising and promotion costs. A company achieves a quicker return on investment (ROI) because instant endorsement and subsequent purchases will convert directly into cash (Davis, 2000). Word-of-mouth endorsement from loyal brand consumers, employees and others who engage in contact with a brand provides instant credibility for potential customers.

Attributes of Lifestyle Brands

Through our research we found that lifestyle branding achieves suc-

cess by capitalizing on three main attributes: using a product with self-expressive benefits, implementing an integrated marketing communications (IMC) strategy and using range branding.

Self-Expressive Benefits

Pottery Barn, a San Francisco-based home furnishings company, hired business consultant Hilary Billings in the 1990s to reinvent its store concept. Billings believes lifestyle branding "is not just about serving another customer need. It's about reaching a higher level in terms of the kind of connection you make with the customer" (Lieber, 2002). Billings captured the essence of self-expressive benefits.

To understand a lifestyle brand, one must know that there are three different benefits that a consumer derives from a purchased product: functional, emotional and self-expressive (Aaker, 1996). Scott Davis builds upon this classification by placing the benefits in a hierarchy pyramid. He believes the "most meaningful and most difficult to imitate, but hardest to deliver," is the apex or "brand pinnacle" of the pyramid (Davis, 2000). Using the three benefits and Davis' hierarchy, we will examine the benefits of Ralph Lauren (See Figure A).

In order to reach brand pinnacle in the marketplace, companies using lifestyle branding employ self-expressive benefits. These benefits, the highest level in the hierarchy, tend to carry societal implications since a purchaser is looking to define herself in others' eyes.

A self-expressive benefit becomes apparent in a social setting through the use of "second-skin" products such as clothes, cars, cosmetics and drinks (Belk, 1998). Whether a woman is wearing an outfit or driving an automobile, these products affect her image since other people subconsciously evaluate her by the brand of car she drives and the clothes she wears. A household product, such as a dish or bed sheet, is traditionally not a highly involved product because it is not seen in public. Thus, certain high-involvement products are

much easier to encompass in a lifestyle brand than others.

Regardless of the level of involvement, today companies that want to achieve lifestyle branding must make their brand stand for something, showing its consumers that its products have self-expressive benefits.

IMC

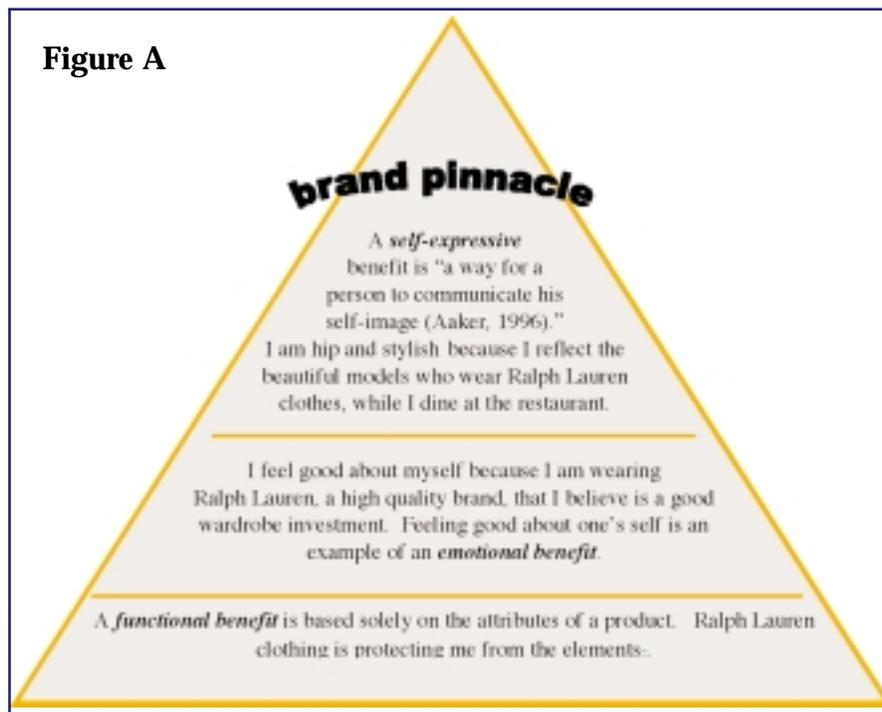
To achieve a lifestyle brand status, a company must convey a consistent brand personality to all stakeholders by implementing IMC strategies. Inconsistent messaging to customers dilutes brand image

and prevents a brand from reaching its brand pinnacle. Companies must strategically integrate every point of contact with important customers and stakeholders to build profitable relationships (Gronstedt, 2000). Companies that do not embrace IMC methodology will have a difficult time projecting their corporate image and will not build a lifestyle brand.

Some companies, such as Saturn, part of the General Motors Corporation, consider everyone who comes in contact with the brand

— starting with the employees who make the car — an important public. Saturn employees are highly involved in the decision-making processes, giving them a vested interest in the company and building an emotional attachment to Saturn. While consumers do not usually have direct contact with the assemblers of an automobile, emotional goodwill is passed on throughout the company and reaches the customer indirectly at its retail/service. Through every Saturn touch point, its commitment to employee and customer care is reinforced, as it is the main premise of the Saturn brand.

Other companies, such as Abercrombie and Fitch (A&F), highly regulate the appearance of their stores, advertising and even the physical appearance of store employees. But they do not push brand personality all the way down to the supply chain. The people who sew its clothing do not have an emotional commitment to the A&F



lifestyle. However, every customer, who enters an A&F store can feel the A&F style from the store layout to the cashier.

While A&F's IMC practices are not as all encompassing as Saturn's, it is our opinion that both companies exhibit strong corporate will to integrate the perception of their brands through customer touch points.

The companies that do not integrate communications will be unable to achieve lifestyle brand success. Acura, for example, does not have the requisite qualities of a lifestyle brand: consistent messaging, recognizable emotion association and utilization of consumer touch points (Frogwerk.com, 2002). Without consistent messaging, it is difficult to link any type of lifestyle to the brand.

Range Brands

The third attribute that defines a lifestyle brand is range branding. A range brand is a brand name that extends across many product categories (Aaker, 1996), such as Ralph Lauren, which sells clothing, perfume, sheets and furniture. Starbucks is another company that uses range branding well. As the Starbucks identity developed, it encountered numerous brand extension possibilities. Howard Schulz, the Starbucks CEO, said the company could, "put its name on toothpaste and it would sell, but we would never do anything to dilute the integrity of the brand (Koehn, 2001)." A range brand has one carefully crafted brand identity that appeals to one psychographic group, unlike a brand extension, which can appeal to more than one psychographic group. Many poorly planned brands attempt to leverage the power of the current brand image without considering the long-term implications of the personality of the brand. If Starbucks had produced toothpaste, it could have cheapened the entire Starbucks brand image. Thus, a successful range branding is more difficult to enact than a mere brand extension.

CREATED VS. EVOLVING LIFESTYLE BRANDS

Companies like Starbucks, where management paid meticulous attention to its image at inception, are born as a lifestyle brand. Other companies, like Pottery Barn, evolve into lifestyle brands by gradually capitalizing on a product's self-expressive benefits, implementing an integrated marketing strategy and using the range branding strategy.

Lifestyle brands that evolve over time slowly build their image until the owner realizes the high asset value of the brand. The owner then coddles the brand identity and increases the brand's image, elevating it to a higher emotional level. L.L. Bean, the Freeport, Maine-based retailer and maker of outdoor products, has evolved its brand since the company's inception in 1911 as a hunting shoe manufacturer. Over the years, L.L. Bean has extended its product line to include tents and bags, and later clothing, footwear and travel equip-

ment. When the founder's grandson took control of the company in the 1960s, he realized the tremendous brand equity of the L.L. Bean name. He subsequently added an outdoor discovery school, a new flagship store with an in-ground trout pool and 24-hour service. L.L. Bean's liberal return policy, the "L.L. Bean Guarantee," distinguishes L.L. Bean from its competitors since consumers know that L.L. Bean will always fix or replace its products and even accept returns after usage, at no cost to the consumer. These benefits, along with its outdoor image, make up the contemporary L.L. Bean lifestyle brand (L.L. Bean, 2002).

Other lifestyle brands are instinctively born from scratch. In 1967, when Ralph Lauren introduced his first Polo product — a tie — he intended to "merge classic American style with the refinement, tailoring and sensibility of European fashion (The History of Polo Ralph Lauren, 2002)." He never deviated from that goal, even as he later ventured into women's clothing, fragrance, bedding and paint, crafting the full Polo line through range branding. All of Lauren's products, including his paint, exhibit the same personality. Whether shopping at Macy's, a Ralph Lauren store or looking at Polo advertisements, consumers have one image of Ralph Lauren — the Classic American brand. Lauren states, "I never imagined Polo would become what it is — I just followed my instincts." His instincts were consistent with range branding and IMC practices.

While Lauren used his intuition, Saturn bore its lifestyle brand by using consumer input to develop a brand based on customers' emotional commitment to the product. The Saturn personality is about values and culture, not the car (Aaker, 1996). Brand critic Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo*, said, "GM launched a car built not out of steel and rubber but out of New Age spirituality and seventies feminism" (Klein, 1999). In other words, the emotional benefits of owning a Saturn outweigh the car's physical attributes. Saturn's approach to lifestyle branding differs from L.L. Bean's or Ralph Lauren's. Saturn developed its lifestyle brand exclusively through research, not by trial

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and error in a business cycle, as many brands have in the past. Saturn successfully implemented a culture based on a business plan. That culture is so powerful and successful that the J.D. Power and Associates customer service index recently rated Saturn higher than Lexus.

Lifestyle Branding Backlash

The current aggressiveness of lifestyle branding has turned some consumers completely away from the products. "There are certain corporations which market themselves so aggressively that they build up a reservoir of resentment among thinking people," said Jaggi Singh, an anti-corporate activist (Klein, 1999).

Such examples of aggressiveness are:

- An invasion of private space by excessive advertising
- A loss of personal privacy and anonymity by extensive database usage
- A loss of the sense of place by national food and retail outlets that look and feel identical throughout the country and even the world

Corporations continually spend more money on advertising to market themselves as a lifestyle brand. A corporation purchases numerous billboards, commercials and magazine ads to pronounce its lifestyle brand image, believing it is securing a higher ROI. Although this strategy appears financially sound, companies are now discovering that a limit exists to how much 'push' some consumers will endure before lashing back.

These disgruntled consumers view corporate branding and advertisements as a kind of "cultural fascism," a nuisance that destroys culture and replaces it with mass-produced corporate logos and slogans (Klein, 1999). In essence, consumers are worried about the disappearance of city space without corporate influence. These consumers feel their neighborhoods are cluttered and closed in by the numerous billboards constantly staring down at them.

Klein believes corporate lifestyle branding enables corporations to brainwash their consumers by "implant[ing] false desires in the consuming public — making us buy things that are bad for us, pollute the planet or impoverish our souls" (Klein, 1999). Nike, for example, has promoted itself so successfully to disadvantaged children by presenting exaggerated representations of the "good life," that the Nike swoosh has instigated violence in some parts of the world. Children stab each other to get that new pair of Nikes (Klein, 1999). Klein argues that people — not brands — should be responsible for defining themselves.

As previously mentioned, the overall objective of lifestyle branding is to position the brand at the pinnacle, where it represents part of the consumer's self. Klein rejects this thinking because objects often go beyond just representing oneself to actually becoming a part of the self (Aaker, 1996). The brand is no longer an image that consumers want to buy; instead, it is an image that consumers believe they personally exude. Klein claims that this influence is dangerous because consumers often fall prey to what a brand image tells them to be, instead of making their own decision of who they really want to be.

Abercrombie & Fitch (A&F) is one such brand that Klein

CULTURAL JAMMING

The glut of advertising and the consumers who detest it has resulted in a movement called "cultural jamming," the practice of parodying an advertisement and "hijacking" a billboard — literally painting over it and changing its meaning — in order to drastically alter its messages (Klein, 1999). Cultural jammers aim to inform consumers about the reality of corporations' intentions and effects, not just the messages that corporate advertisements can display. Joe Camel, R.J. Reynolds' fictional character created in 1974 to promote Camel cigarettes, fell victim to cultural jammers. In 1996, a psychology professor at Wesleyan University, parodied Joe Camel by changing his name to Joe Chemo and hooking him up to an I.V. Since 1996, Joe Chemo has been mentioned by the Associated Press, Time, Newsweek, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Los Angeles Times, Business Week, AdWeek, ABC, NBC and PBS (Plous, 2001).

would consider a perpetrator of brainwashing its customers. For many youth, the A&F brand is not just self-expressive, it has become a part of the self. People actually define themselves through the brand image, as in, "I'm an Abercrombie girl." A college magazine said, "You want to look the same as the toned and tanned summer blonde in the ads, or the Abercrombie cashier for that matter — their clean good looks replicate that of the models. The advertising, staff and mood of the store work in unison to deliver a multi-sensed feeling of sweet Americana" (Stalder, 2002). A&F rightfully claims it is a lifestyle brand because consumers do not simply buy A&F; they are A&F. After purchasing the apparel products, customers believe themselves to be a part of the A&F family, the highest compliment any corporation can receive.

Klein Branding Herself

Ironically, we believe that Naomi Klein exhibits behavior similar to the companies discussed in this article that have successfully achieved lifestyle branding. Klein has expressed her views in various forms, including columns in large-circulation newspapers, alternative magazines, her book *No Logo* and on a web site related to *No Logo*. She has trademarked her "No Logo logo" and it appears in articles Klein writes in magazines such as *In These Times* (Klein, 2002). Her web site's mission extends beyond the reach of *No Logo*, into the world of international politics and organized protest. The *Times of London* described Klein as "probably the most influential person under the age of 35 in the world" (Brayfield, 2000).

Naomi Klein's followers are youthful, college-aged students and people in their 20s and 30s. Klein, a Canadian citizen, and her work are immensely popular in Europe and Canada. The majority of the U.S. public does not share Klein's extreme passion. However, she does

have a strong loyal following from a select niche group from across the globe that has made their presence known. They were the thousands of protestors who shocked the world when they descended upon Seattle at the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting, looting the city. The WTO held its last meeting in Qatar, a country with few democratic freedoms, because the organization feared these

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protestors would riot again (H. Cooper, 2001). Klein captured the audience outside of the National Democratic Convention of 2000 in Los Angeles when she spoke to the thousands of people protesting anti-corporate messages. Marc Cooper, a contributing editor for the *Nation* magazine writes, "if you peek into their [the followers] backpacks, it's unlikely you'll find Mao or Guevara or even Marx. More likely you will find Klein — Naomi Klein" (M. Cooper, 2001).

Klein's followers believe, and the *Economist* confirms, that No Logo has become a bible of the anti-globalization movement (The Case for Brands, 2001). Ironically, Klein exhibits many attributes of that which she rails against — a lifestyle brand. For example, the movement she personifies is self-expressive. For fear of criticism, Klein's followers must not wear any branded clothing or clothing considered socially irresponsible to any meetings or protests. Doing so would be a social faux pas worse than going to a black-tie affair in shorts. Klein also follows the following IMC principles:

- Her messages are consistent throughout her writing
- Her "No Logo logo" is used to brand her writings
- Her web site provides two-way communication between Klein and her followers and allows her followers to communicate with each other

In our opinion, Klein's personal success is currently based on the very principles she vehemently criticizes.

Lifestyle Branding Trends

In the past few years, many brands that do not have core, self-expressive products, such as candles and furniture, have successfully evolved into lifestyle brands. Pottery Barn has turned its furniture and housewares into lifestyle brands by becoming synonymous with a

lifestyle, whether that of an established suburbanite or of a thrifty, hip urbanite. The Yankee Candle Corporation pioneered fashion in country jar candles to urbanites searching for homey feelings in stark apartments (Reidy, 2002).

Kohler, a Wisconsin-based maker of bathroom and kitchen fixtures would like to become a lifestyle brand, according to a recent press release (Kohler, 2002). Kohler's products are a stark contrast to self-expressive perfume and convertibles. Like Yankee Candle, Kohler is attempting to carry an emotional benefit into a lifestyle brand.

As company leaders look to the future, they must determine how lifestyle branding attributes match their desire for steady growth and loyal customers. Some young people are skeptical and are looking past brand imagery and are going so far as to turn against many of the techniques that have allowed lifestyle brands to emerge. Conversely, the majority of the younger population seems to embrace lifestyle branding. More so, they are lowering the barrier of entry for lifestyle brands. Kohler would have had a difficult time alluring consumers a few years ago, if it had attempted to become a lifestyle brand, since lifestyle brands were predominantly "second skin" products such as clothes (Kohler, 2002).

The number of companies striving to become lifestyle brands is increasing. The Timberland Company, a New Hampshire-based maker of outdoor footwear and apparel recently stated its goal of, "building Timberland into a leading global lifestyle brand," in an annual report (Timberland, 2001). Additional companies taking strides to embrace lifestyle branding are Klaussner Furniture (Klaussner, 2000), Sam Adams Beer (Hein, 1997), Gant USA (Hoffman, 2000), Bacardi (Bacardi, 2001) and Subaru (Subaru, 2001).

As lifestyle branding increases in popularity, we realize that certain psychographic lifestyles have a strong attraction to these brands. Hilary Billings, the Pottery Barn consultant, believes that lifestyle branding is primarily for "upwardly mobile people" or Yuppies. Marketers often target Yuppies because of their expensive and extravagant spending habits. More recently, Bobos have emerged as big spenders of lifestyle branded products. Bobos, a term coined by writer David Brooks (Brooks, 2000), describes a younger generation of consumers who reject Yuppie extravagance, but who will pay significant amounts of cash for products that enhance one's authentic personality (DeLong, 2002). They will buy products that reflect their own lifestyle, instead of purchasing products with aspirations to be someone they are not. Many demographic and psychographic groups do not have grand sums of spare cash, as do the Yuppies and Bobos. However, with the plethora of lifestyle brands available for work or leisure, from John Deere to Wrangler, anyone can purchase lifestyle branded products.

While virtually any person in the United States can afford to

buy some form of a lifestyle brand, that small, but vocal group of anti-globalist protestors is angrily voicing their opinion. Photographs from anti-global protests show people with signs denouncing self-expressive lifestyle branding companies, such as The Gap, Nike and other well-known clothing companies whose clothes fill American closets. Will upcoming protests soon include signs denouncing emotionally based lifestyle branding companies, as those products grow in emotional connection? Pretty soon protestors could carry such signs denouncing Pottery Barn, Kohler and Yankee Candle.

While that answer is yet to be determined, we believe that lifestyle branding is a legitimate movement that is steadily growing. It is not just new jargon heard around the water cooler. While the term is used loosely, only the companies that implement lifestyle branding with careful thought and consideration for the brand and the customer will reap the true benefits of this trend.

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KACIE LYNN JUNG is a master's candidate in Medill's Integrated Marketing Communications program, specializing in public relations. Prior to returning to the world of academia, Kacie was in product marketing at Siemens Information Communication Mobile and was an English teacher in Dalian, China. She recently completed a professional residency at The Home Depot, where she created and sustained international communications and helped brand the corporation in China and Mexico. Kacie has been published in her undergraduate college newspaper, a local San Diego magazine and a nationally acclaimed poetry book. She can be reached at k-jung@northwestern.edu.

MATT MERLIN is currently a graduate student in Medill's Integrated Marketing Communications program. He recently completed a professional residency at the DuPont Corporation in Wilmington, Del, where he conducted an employee communications audit. Matt benchmarked his findings with insights from other communications professionals in Fortune 100 companies. His interest in branding stemmed from an in-class consulting project conducted in the winter quarter of 2002. Prior to entering Northwestern, Matt worked at a marketing research company and at Fleet Bank, both in Boston. He can be reached at m-merlin@northwestern.edu.