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Chameleon Branding

Marrying Qualitative and Quantitative
Techniques in a New Media World



CHAMELEON BRANDING

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To survive, a brand must be able to positively answer the following questions: Is our brand able to adapt efficiently to the constant evolution of the market?

Does our brand have the necessary adaptability to keep pace with change in our market environment? In a word, is our brand a good survivor?

Nature is rich in examples of adaptive strategies for survival. A strategy itself is not good or bad. The environment determines how fitting a strategy is. The strategy that works at a certain moment may become useless when the environment changes. So, how do we plan in advance any branding strategy within a fast-changing market environment? To answer this question, it will be helpful to first take a quick look at some adaptive strategies found in nature.

The Bacterium Strategy

In the beginning, the Earth was without form and void, and bacteria were its only inhabitants. Bacteria are the oldest, simplest and most abundant form of life on Earth. They have survived on this planet for over 3.5 billion years. What is the secret

of their success? A very simple and effective strategy: opportunism.

Actually, bacteria do not evolve much. They remain quite simple beings that cannot adapt well to a changing environment. When circumstances become favorable, however, bacteria take the

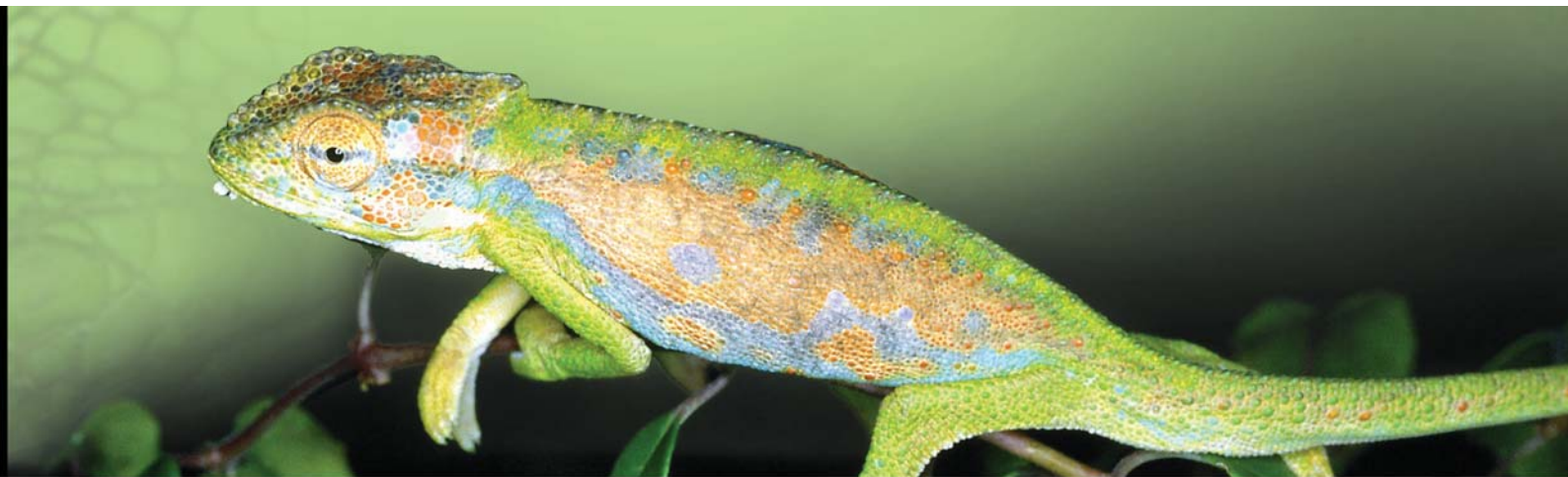
best advantage of them. With only some heat and humidity, bacteria grow quickly and exponentially. When those conditions are over, the bacteria population diminishes dramatically.

Some brands seem to work in a similar way. They sprout up when circumstances are favorable, but they are the first ones to sink when circumstances change. Private-label brands are a good example. See how fast they grow and how successful they get. Wal-Mart has a 40 percent private-label representation in its stores. Private-label brands take advantage of any successful concept in the market, and with low

promotional costs, the retailer's credentials and a cheaper price, they grab a substantial market share. Some would call it parasitism, but we prefer to call it opportunism. Easy and successful.

Other brands use a similar strategy when they decide to flood mainstream media with their





campaigns “just to be very well known,” which of course is good but not enough. If they do not develop an emotional connection of value with consumers, they are forgotten as quickly as they grow up. Again, this is the bacterium strategy at work: aggressive and successful for a while, but too simple to succeed and develop in an increasingly complex environment.

Brands following this strategy are just weather-vanes shifting in the wind, as e-companies were before the “dot-com bubble” burst in 2000. Individual brands using this kind of strategy die as easily as they grow. It is clearly not a good choice on which to base a steady branding strategy. Nevertheless, the short-term gains are so attractive that it is not so rare to see this old way of thinking still alive and prevailing in boardrooms and even in marketing departments.

The Turtle Strategy

Whereas bacteria are overexposed to the environment, turtles construct strong shells that protect them from the environment.

Branding has traditionally used turtle strategies. After all, it is essential to segment, to categorize, to define, to set the limits and to armor the positioning of our brand from any external danger. We need to put order in the chaos. Only then do we feel confident. But does this strategy always fit? Not always, especially since the shell that protects us can also restrict our growth. We restrict our brands when we do not dare to go beyond the positioning in which we are strong (or in which we just feel confident). We restrict our brands when we are overcautious.

Turtle strategy is all about fear. There is nothing wrong with fear, since it is one of the most successful survival strategies that protect us from danger. Fear, however, is not always proportional to danger. When we walk in the dark or in an unknown environment, we fear

a possible danger that probably does not even exist. So, fear also has to do with ignorance and lack of knowledge about the environment. Fear can contribute to our survival, but it can also make us miss many opportunities.

The more static the environment is, the better a turtle strategy works. Walls in the Middle Ages were quite effective, since there were not many ways to break through that protection. Nowadays, though, no system remains uncracked for very long, and no shell works to ward off all dangers.

Personalization is another key. Instead of giving a clear and consistent reason for consumers to buy your brand (a turtle strategy), you can help each consumer discover his own subjective reason to do so (a chameleon strategy).

The information society of the beginning of the third millennium is a very dynamic environment. Plasticity is more adaptive than stiffness. A shell does not allow adaptability, does not reshape, does not allow maneuverability. It is heavy, and it isolates. When some brands today still base so much of their strategies on armors, they pay too high a price. These strategies offer managers only an illusion of control within an increasingly diverse and uncontrollable environment.

Also, some product categories are real shells. Diet products, for example, are a strongly defined category. That means that when a product is identified by consumers as a diet one, the attributed

Brands can no longer keep one-dimensional positionings that make them so predictable that they become boring and unadaptive. Brands must become multidimensional, as their consumers are.

meanings of the category fall strongly on that product for good or bad, leaving the branding and marketing mix in the background. In this situation, there's no margin for much maneuverability.

The Chameleon Strategy

The chameleon is an evolutionary success. First of all, it is a great observer. Its eyes can rotate and focus separately 360 degrees, allowing the chameleon to be very aware of its environment

and highly precise in its movements. Secondly, it changes and adapts rapidly in response to its environment. The chameleon is an effective hunter without pursuit, and it confuses its predators with its cryptic shapes and colorations. The superiority of chameleons is particularly relevant in a dynamic and ever-changing environment.

Traditional branding assumes that a brand needs to keep a singular focus. However, in a fast-changing market environment, a brand can survive only by using the chameleon strategy and becoming multifaceted. Markets are clearly becoming more and more diverse and fragmented, not only in the individual targeting, but also further in the path to the occasion.

Diversification of the Market

No water passes twice over the same stone in the same river, as erosion and other circumstances will change the entire scenario. Change is the only constant, stated the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. When referring to the actual predisposition of the market, Heraclitus seems to be very topical. The market is increasingly

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dynamic, with continually more competition, more brands and more solutions that reach more and more people. Targets are becoming more diverse, more complex and more difficult to define and understand. Here again, the comfort of mass communication — and its huge historical success in helping to develop a consumption society — created a conditioned way of thinking in the boardroom, permanently focusing on the critical mass of the target and ignoring the simple principle that while communication is addressed to groups, it is processed by individuals.

Diversification comes as a natural evolution of modern times. Society is increasingly crossbreeding, and not only because of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. The development of technologies has revolutionized consumer access to information and has allowed the rapid spread of all kinds of different ideas. People can embrace several tailor-made realities and easily jump from one reality to another. Not only in Western society, young people across the globe enjoy changing and mixing fashions in a very personal way. Consumers are chameleonizing. Why? Because with more possibilities within our reach, we humans get more chances to develop our complex and polymorphic personalities.

Identity, understood as keeping a shared set of values with pureness, is not possible anymore in such a diverse environment, unless we use the turtle strategy to isolate ourselves from the outside. Identity is now much more idiosyncratic, much more individualistic: *“I take my own way without interfering in other people’s ways.”* Even to be freak, geek or nerd has positive connotations in certain contexts. This is the ideal breeding ground for market fragmentation.

Cohesion seems to be a need profoundly rooted in human nature. Evolutionists say it was born in the Stone Age on the African savannah, when humans lived in clans of around one hundred individuals, surrounded by other similar clans and fighting for scarce resources. In this context, belonging and cohesion were keys to survival. We seem to be a Stone Age production trying to deal with the complexity of the Information Age.

Things seem to have evolved not only in our environment. Members of the “Y Generation” tend to reject mainstreams as the old way of creating cohesion. They dislike labels, probably because labels start to be useless. In the past, segregation categories were strongly defined. Consider, for instance, the most basic example of gender roles. To be a man or to be a woman delimited, in a very precise way, the universe of values and behaviors that fit within those roles (and also the ones that did not fit, of course).

Everybody knew what was expected from a man. Nowadays, the label “man” does not help much to classify and understand a reality that is richer than ever expected. New labels come in support of the old ones, trying to complement their meaning. So, today, we speak about men who are metrosexual or übersexual. However, the dissolution of gender roles makes generalization difficult.

Instead, personalization becomes essential. Advances in the field of technology allow improved personalization, and brands such as eBay are taking good advantage of it. Other brands, such as Abercrombie & Fitch, try to avoid overexposure for a similar reason: they know that if they become a mainstream brand, they will lose credibility when addressing individual consumers. Of course, generalist brands will not disappear overnight. Still, more and more consumers expect brands to speak to them in their own idiosyncrasy.

The Red Queen

The market will only get more dynamic in the near future. In this respect, we can apply a fundamental evolutionary law: the more dynamic the environment becomes, the faster we need to evolve for survival and the more diversity we need to re-create. “It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place,” says the Red Queen on the chessboard in Lewis Carroll’s classic *Through the Looking-Glass*. The ‘Red Queen Theory’ is used by evolutionary scientists to explain the need for constant adaptation to an ever-changing environment for, at least, staying in the same place, not to mention the leadership challenge or setting the rules of the game. Leadership takes an extra leapfrog.

Evolve or die. But how to evolve? How to move? Where to go? We have seen that targets are more complex than ever before and the market gets only more and more diverse. Looking at the full picture, however, although things were easier before, chances are stronger now. We need only to understand the new context. It takes all the running we can do when we search for well-defined structures in a market that is only getting blurred. This is not the moment to set limits but, instead, to play with them. It is not the moment for aggressive quantitative strategies (as bacteria) nor for armoring our brands (as turtles). It is the moment for constantly reshaping our brands to match the desires of many different individual consumers in varying circumstances. More and more, our brands will need to become “chameleon-like,” alert to changes and excited by challenges.

Building a chameleon brand, however, is not easy. It is not a question of extending our existing portfolio with new products oriented



to new consumers. It is not even a matter of simply creating new brand experiences. We need to go much further and to build a multidimensional positioning.

Multidimensional Positioning

We human beings have a dynamic and multidimensional personality, full of paradoxes and contradictions. We may eventually prefer static and one-dimensional realities that offer the illusion of security and control. But, as we have seen, brands can no longer keep one-dimensional positionings that make them so predictable that they become boring and unadaptive. Brands must become multidimensional, as their consumers are. Brands need to show different aspects of their personality in different contexts, as their consumers do. That is what chameleon branding is all about.

A chameleon brand offers a rich, multifaceted experience. To be multifaceted, though, does not mean to be schizophrenic. To remain meaningful, the internal structure of a chameleon brand must be strong and consistent. As with any other brand, it must have a well-defined central positioning

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with a strong core essence. The difference is that the chameleon brand is not restricted by its central positioning. On the contrary, the central positioning works as a launchpad to broaden the resonance of the chameleon brand to many other territories. Certainly, there is a prime territory where the brand is in its element, but the chameleon brand is capable of expanding and adapting to other territories without fears and complexes. In this sense, no evolution is unnatural for a chameleon brand, as long as it does not openly betray its core values.

How can we make a brand multidimensional? Of course, there is not one formula to become multidimensional. It would be a *contradictio in terminis*. We can, however, give some general guidance on how to build a chameleon brand.

First, it is essential to take care in the way we express our meanings. Instead of using explicit messages, a multidimensional positioning needs the usage of implicit messages. Explicit messages are carefully worded. A robot can understand them. They mean what they say, and there is no place for double-edged meanings. They are transparent and predictable. They appeal directly to reason. On the other hand, implicit messages are more emotional, complex, mystic, cryptic,

The time of one-dimensional consumers (if they ever existed) has long passed. More and more consumers expect brands to speak to them in their own idiosyncrasies and according to circumstances. Now is the moment for constantly reshaping our brands to match the desires of many different individual consumers and consumer needs.

double-edged and ambiguous (think of the difficulty for a robot to understand sarcasm). They can be interpreted in different ways by different consumers. They are intended to be

personalized by each consumer. And they are more credible since they are less direct and less coercive (they are perceived as respecting people's intelligence). They are not addressed to a well-defined group of people, but they can potentially reach a multitude of different people.

Personalization is another key. Instead of giving a clear and consistent reason for consumers to buy your brand (a turtle strategy), you can help each consumer discover his own subjective reason to do so (a chameleon strategy). ES•, a Spanish underwear brand, wonders in its marketing communications if its products are underwear or swimming trunks. It does not give an answer. The question remains open for a free interpretation. With this communication, ES• plays with the limits of the category and encourages consumers to set their own limits. Here, consumers get the leading role.


The marketing mix of elements should also allow a multidimensional positioning. To do so, we need to play with very different executions. Why should the different elements of a marketing mix make up a consistent and aligned system? Red Bull uses childish cartoons on its communications, although it is clearly not targeting children and the image of the product is far from being naïve. It is the image of a powerful and even potentially dangerous drink that makes this product very suitable as a party potion. At the same time, though, Red Bull sponsors all kinds of (non-mainstream) sports and cultural events. Such apparent incongruities! With this strategy, however, Red Bull broadens its relevance in many different contexts, while it creates a unique idiosyncratic image. After all, the image of the brand is very consistent in the consumer's mind. Red Bull is an excellent example of chameleon branding, reshaping in different contexts in a cryptic way.

MTV is another example of chameleon branding. MTV has reinvented itself many times over the years, always pretending to be much more than just a youth music channel. "We don't play music" was a recent slogan of the brand. The logo of MTV is always used as an example of versatility since it changes according to the expressive needs of the brand in each context. It is a chameleon logo that mutates while it keeps its core essence.

Leadership, Changing the Rules

After all, chameleon branding is about daring. If the chessboard gets fully blurred, the rules of the game do not work anymore. Uncertainty takes control, and we do not dare to make a move. No rules, no securities. We get lost, and we can do like the Red Queen, who kept on running on

the chessboard while going nowhere. Or, even worse, we become the turtle getting away from the world, withdrawing into our stiff and heavy shell in search of fake securities. Alternatively, we can reinvent the rules of the game in our favor to take the best advantage of a situation that is as undefined as it is full of new opportunities.

In this new environment, leadership (understood as the capacity to set new rules) will be a must for brands that strive to succeed. The creation of meaning — relevance to some humans in some specific context — is the simplest way to set a sustainable competitive advantage and the main role for brands. In the long term, life will be very difficult for any brand that is not aspiring to set new rules and lead its market, however widely or narrowly its market was defined. What Martin Van Herk once called the *neoteric* function of brands — the creation of social values through the reorganization of values and belief systems — is fast becoming a reality. 

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