

# To Create—or Not Create—the Nationally Neutral Brand

In an age of heightened sensitivity to anti-national movements against the U.S., France and other nations of controversy, the risks in managing a nationally affiliated icon brand are foremost in marketers' minds. The question marketers are asking themselves today, is how to create a strong, "nationally neutral" brand. Yet, some are still wondering, do they need to do so?

The evolution of icon brands may prevent national anonymity from taking place in some circumstances. For instance, did Howard Schultz envision Starbucks as an American icon brand that would infiltrate the world with its style of coffee experience? Did Ray Kroc really think his quickly prepared hamburger would pave the way to a fast food trend that would take the world by storm? Probably not. But these brand phenomena happen and they are often not planned.

The troubling paradox is that although a strong national affiliation can pose risk, some brands fare better because of their affiliation when the attributes of that nation add credibility and are strongly linked to the core attributes of the product. The "precision" and "discipline" of the German culture and the translation of that into precision engineering for luxury brands such as BMW and Mercedes represents one example.

On the other hand, many brands have attempted to present themselves as originating from nations that would be beneficial to their offerings. Haagen-Dazs built its mystique around a Scandinavian sounding name. Discovering the company was based in New Jersey was a surprise to many.

Which brands are at greatest risk? The brands at most risk are those that represent values, customs or behaviors particular to a nation. In antagonistic times, these cultural values can become targets of hatred. Cola (Coca Cola) has an American origin, fast food (McDonald's) is an American concept and amusement parks and entertainment (Disney) largely embody American culture, which is why these icon brands are easily targeted for anti-American boycotts. This is further evidenced by non-brand affiliated boycotts as we see some protest against serving French wine. Again, wine is a strong symbol of the French culture. Products and services with nations in their names represent the same challenge for obvious reasons.

Interestingly, the luxury goods sector may be least affected. For example, Louis Vuitton, Cadillac, Ralph Lauren, Hermes and Tiffany are not necessarily connected to a specific national value, custom or behavior. The culture, values and behavior of their target markets become the bond with these brands no matter where their customers live. As a result, they are better able to sustain a strong following throughout the ebb and flow of historical events. There is an emotional need these brands fulfill that extends beyond geographic boundaries.

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