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[**Lessons From Armpits**](http://www.killianbranding.com/whitepaper/lessons-from-armpits/)

**Turn your New Products team into a New Brand team.**

After decades of sure-handed brand building, **surely we are sure that Sure® is about *confidence***. They own The Gesture that defines them:

In an early but still relevant TV spot, a series of three vignettes dramatize the problem. A (vulnerable, timid, male) student raises an arm to answer a lecture hall question, then suddenly pulls his arm down again, spasmodically avoiding the humiliation of a pit stain. Two similar vignettes (unconfident arm withdrawal) follow. The solution, Sure deodorant, is then introduced, and we now see confident arm-wavers, brashly putting their armpits on public display. Cue the jingle with the affirmative lyric: “Raise your hand if you’re Sure.” Even the Statue of Liberty is brought into play, to reinforce The Semiotic Gesture, to demonstrate monumental copper-clad confidence.

Sales have been good for decades. A great many perpetually anxious people empathize with the problem and will happily shell out $2.98 to get the solution, a splendid investment since it guarantees social success. The brand is particularly strong with young men (18-25) who are, basically, anxieties with wallets.

It’s a powerful brand, because it’s a powerful Story. The narrative (“remember being humbled by social awkwardness, bunky? Well, use this and you’ll positively glow with self-assurance”) is directed to fundamental emotional needs and has been executed with formulaic consistency from Day 1. Raise your hand if you agree…

**On the other hand, Secret deodorant is an entirely different story.**

*“Strong enough for a man. But made for a woman.”*

Those phrases have been repeated, also for decades, with brilliant consistency. That chant has made the Secret® deodorant brand spectacularly successful, especially with females 12-24, because it reaffirms gender identity to a particularly vulnerable, insecure audience. For a small investment, you get to go from girl to woman and feel good about it. This double set of anxieties (gender identity plus social acceptance) is common enough, and the Story effective enough, to entrench this brand.

**An examination of the packages tell a third story.**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Sure®** | **Secret®** |
| **Price** | $2.98 | $2.98 |
| **Weight** | 1.7 oz. | 1.7 oz. |
| **Ingredients** | Aluminum Zirconium Trichlorohydrex Gly Cyclomethicone Dimethicone Polyethylene Silica Propylene Carbonate | Aluminum Zirconium Trichlorohydrex Gly Cyclomethicone Dimethicone Polyethylene Silica Propylene Carbonate |
| **Patent #s** | 5,069,897 5,000,356 | 5,069,897 5,000,356 |

**So are they the same product? Absolutely.**

Change the external graphics and keep the assembly line running. Economy of scale on a grand scale.

**But… are they the same brand? Absolutely not.**

They don’t do the same thing. Sure builds confidence in social situations. Secret reaffirms femininity.

Rational, logical label-reading purchasers might not buy these brands at all.

**If you were going to create and introduce a new entry into this category, what should you create first – the contents of the package, or the persuasive power of the Brand Narrative?**

No contest. You could, in theory, throw a new label over these same ingredients, and devise a winner, IF you had a compelling Brand Narrative. On the other (unraised) hand, tinkering with the ingredients – “Now with Ingredient XYZ!” – is a losing strategy right out of the gates. Nobody gives a rodent’s patoot (as they say) what’s in the chemistry.

**Which leads us to a “radical” notion that makes logical good sense.**

A topsy-turvy breakthrough.

For example, although what we’re going to suggest is a whiplash 180 degrees away from the way most marketers introduce new products, there is a solid theoretical basis for doing so. In this proposal, we’d like to explore that logical underpinning, look at the steps in implementing the program, and propose a methodology to put it to the test.

**Create narratives for new brand(s), until we find one that leads to strong advertising executions that motivate an audience to trial. Then, and only then, create that product.**

Traditionally, manufacturers go through a time-honored ritual – create a product, test a product, find a market for a product. The advertising is usually late, if not last, in that chain of events. Product content is first, and central.

**In other words, the traditional new-product process makes the Trichlorohydrex Gly far more important than consumer wishes and fears and dreams. As a strategy, it’s the pits.**

It’s time to replace the time-honored new-product process with a *new-brand* process.

It’s a break with an old tradition that says “Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door.” Build a better mousetrap today, and the world will beat a path to the guy next door who does a better job of marketing it. The landscape is littered with the bleached bones of technologically superior mousetraps.

Let’s look at a marketing success: Skyy vodka. Is it a “better mousetrap” – or a better story? Is the content of the bottle responsible for its success, or the content of the Brand Narrative? We think people respond to the Story of the Product, the legend of the Brand, the look of the Package, before they ever taste the reality of it.

In the case of Skyy, then there are three important elements that have contributed to its success: the Contents, the Package, and the Story. Take away the Contents, substitute some other vodka in the bottle – sales probably wouldn’t move 1%. But take away the stylish cobalt package, and you’d really hurt sales. Most important, take away the Story, the shared, widespread, mostly word-of-mouth legend that Skyy filters out “cogeners” to magically eliminate hangover headaches. Remove *that* and you just about kill the brand. It’s something that people want to believe, so it has emotional power.

Vodka, of course, is a category of pure perception: If Absolut tasted like Smirnoff, and vice versa, would either one’s sales numbers be much different? Heck, no. But even in categories with more discernible attributes, where products can be differentiated more easily, Branding trumps Product.

Consider shampoos. Or snacks. Or even cars, for that matter. Cars, like beer, are clearly badge products but as we creep through the congested streets in lockstep, is there any important *functional* difference between your Saab, my Ford, his Pontiac, her Toyota? We’re all riding in relative comfort at 13.8 m.p.h., listening to the same radio stations, sharing the same impatience. Huge brand differentiations exist in all our minds, but functionally? An observer from Mars would think our commuter pods indistinguishable.

This is not to say that content is unimportant: product performance is, and always will be, crucial to *repurchase* and therefore crucial to long-term success. But when it comes to inducing trial, actual product performance takes a back seat to expectations. **Perceived promise is far more important than actual performance to put a brand into high-growth mode.**

The failure-plagued traditional new-product process, in short, tends to work first on the easier part and puts last the more difficult job, getting people to say “Wow, that sounds like something I’d like to try.”

We propose losing that model, for reasons of both efficacy and cost-effectiveness. Today, at the end of the process, if we fail to create the brand narrative that induces trial, all the money previously invested in R&D goes down the drain. But if we can “launch” a brand in this new methodology, creating a story that makes people eager to try, we’ve got a good shot at filling that need, and therefore a much-improved chance at success.

One of the unbending rules of the current process is to present product concepts in a uniform/neutral setting, so that respondents will not be influenced by “executional” issues. Although a concept statement is permitted to describe an emotion, for example, it is deliberately not expressed in emotional language. No “adspeak.”

We say we want a level playing field to sort out concepts, so every effort is made to be executionally neutral. Unpersuasive. Clinical.

Grab your torches, citizens, we’re going to storm the fortress! **Let’s turn this upside down.** Early in the process, once we have defined categorical targets of opportunity, let’s find the *most* persuasive, *most* emotional language we can find. We want to evoke empathetic reactions, not rational responses. Heart, not head. Right brain, not left brain. Ads, not concept statements.

There was a symbolically rich Australian TV spot for Jim Beam bourbon: With a minimum of words and a wagonload of symbolism, a rugged, worldly frontiersman strides up to a bar in a saloon set in either the Outback or the Wild West. Whatever. He orders Jim Beam, tastes it, then pours it contemptuously onto the ground, announcing it’s not Jim Beam. He then strides out, to the admiring glances of the thunderstruck spectators. (He knows! He’s authentic! You can’t fool a Real Man!) It strikes a powerful and memorable chord because people at the age of brand-loyalty formation are searching for authenticity, trying to invent themselves, to present themselves to the world in a way they hope will be perceived as authentic. These emotions are powerful, and universal. The Marlboro – oops, Beam – man is the confident embodiment of cowboy authenticity. He has everything to do with the Brand, but nothing to do with the Product. The definable characteristics of the product – its proof, color, flavor, smoothness, viscosity, aging, category name, barrels, ingredients, bar call, label — are spectacularly irrelevant compared with the compelling Brand Narrative. We empathize with the heroic figure who commands respect from his admiring onlookers because of the force of his scornful dismissal of the unauthentic. (Yeah, that’s me! Cool, confident, with a Badge product to prove it.)

**Traditionally, we try to create new products so great that we could create great ads about them. Forget it. Let’s create new ads so great that we’re forced to invent the products they’re about.**

To make that happen, we’ll need to dynamite an entrenched layer of researchers who will fight this tooth and nail. Replacing oldthinking with newthinking can be painful.

We suggest a methodology and a timetable as follows:

**STAGE 1:** Hire Killian & Company as your New-Brand Development consultants. We can work with you every step of the way to make the process as productive and efficient as possible. We’d begin with a dialog, reviewing your new-products efforts of the past few years, examining strengths and weaknesses, and fixing on core competencies.

**STAGE 2:** Determine categories and markets of opportunity. We want to stay in a category, or categories, close to our core competencies, preferably in areas with reasonable volume potential. The targets of opportunity could be categories or markets.

**STAGE 3:** Loose the hounds. Creative teams, operating within the loose confines of the portfolio of categories but unrestricted by the need for consistency, work to create a brand that excites a market to trial. Campaigns of print ads, or outdoor, or TV, or radio, or Internet banners, or skywriting, or matchbook covers – whatever seems most effective creatively – compete to get to the next level. Product or package design concepts, when they are integral to the Brand Narrative, would be developed simultaneously.

**STAGE 4:** Qualitative. Expose campaign concepts to targeted groups: Is this something they’d try? Is this a brand for them, or the notorious Someone Else? What are their expectations? What are their price expectations? Does the name register? Timetable:

**STAGE 5:** Fine-tune ads or packages or names or whatever, using feedback from groups.

**STAGE 6:** Qualitative. Take revised campaigns back to groups.

**STAGE 7:** The envelope, please. Select winner(s) and begin R&D to create product content, refine name, refine packaging.. in short, loop back to where most people begin, except we can feel sure (raise your hand!) that there’s a market actually waiting for it to arrive.

We’ve seen lots of companies over the decades throw capital (and human capital and brainpower and the kitchen sink) at big new-product efforts, only to walk away in the end because the *products* never became *brands*.