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Everything Old Is New Again

Staging Successful Retro Revivals

The **Yellow** Papers Series

America has no “now”.... Our culture is composed of sequels, reruns, remakes, revivals, reissues, re-releases, recreations, re-enactments, adaptations...and nostalgia record collections.

– George Carlin, *Brain Droppings*, 1998

The Retro Revolution

We are in the midst of a Retro Revolution. Twister, Hungry Hungry Hippos, and Candyland are flying off shelves. Forgotten characters – G.I. Joe, The Terminator, Captain Kirk – have taken over the box office. And once-gone fashion brands – L.A. Gear, Lacoste, Z. Cavaricci – are being stocked again in retail stores. Add to these the re-emergence of muscle cars, old-school arcade games, retro candies – the list goes on.

Retro brands are everywhere. But what exactly constitutes a “retro” brand? We define it as a brand or product that had a successful past, only to be filed away in history books and consumers’ memories until it is resuscitated. More retro brands exist today than yesterday, and there will be even more tomorrow. As an older generation fondly holds onto past brand associations and a new generation seeks to adopt old things as new, more brands attempt reinvention and *everything old becomes new again*. But as brands

re-emerge, certain measures must be taken to find new life and sustainability for them. Because for each brand that succeeds, another goes back to the history vaults. So how can a forgotten brand stage a successful revival?

Successful revivals involve more effort and planning than marketers realize. Today’s world is complex and uncertain. In the midst of what economists are calling the “Great Recession,” the country is struggling with financial troubles – housing foreclosures, rising food prices, high unemployment – consumer confidence is low and there doesn’t seem to be an end in sight. Because of these factors many marketers are bringing back the brands of yesterday with the hope that they will tap into peoples’ desire for simpler, happier, less stressful times. They believe their brands can provide safety, comfort, pleasure, or joy – a tonic in today’s uncertain world.¹ Whether dusting off an old slogan or bringing a brand name out of dormancy, the hope is

that if it worked once, it can work again.

Unfortunately, this simplistic strategy is not enough. Brands that rely purely on their glory days risk finding themselves overlooked by a new generation that must be brought into the fold. Admittedly Boomers and Xers tend to feel an affinity for brands they once used. But what is the attraction for a new generation of consumers who have no history with these brands? What makes a new generation want to adopt old things? For Millennials, the draw is inspiration. The past offers a cupboard of mix-and-match elements to form new experiences.² In other words, consumers don’t have to be old to connect with old-school. Recognizing the duality of audiences is crucial for a retro brand to sustain a comeback.

The question remains: What does it take for a forgotten brand to resurge within popular culture and achieve fresh meaning and lasting appeal with consumers?

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Staging a Retro Brand Revival: Measures of Success

There are four key elements that make for a successful retro brand revival. While the brands addressed in the rest of this piece satisfy all four criteria, we'll use one brand example to highlight each measure. And while the measures presented here are intended for retro brands, they are also applicable to established brands looking to stay fresh and relevant, and avoid dormancy.

1

Success Measure One: Allow for Rediscovery

A successful retro brand revival allows for a true sense of discovery and rediscovery across age groups. It has multigenerational appeal – and each generation has its own connection to the brand. What's become pure nostalgia for one generation can be new, different, and genuine for another. Let's look at a brand that's excelled at rediscovery.

What's old has street cred that a faddish upstart can't replicate.

Pabst Blue Ribbon. A beer that's been around since 1844, Pabst Blue Ribbon (PBR) experienced an unlikely comeback. Brewed with "the finest hops and grains" for a distinctive watery taste, PBR saw its heyday in the 1960s and '70s as an inexpensive, light beer. But the brand faded away as imports, premium domestics, and a new breed of light beer reinvented the market. By 2001 sales fell to less than one million barrels – one tenth its peak in 1975.³



Then in the early 2000s the brand experienced a renaissance as a whole new generation "found" and adopted PBR. Fueled by indie rockers, mountain bikers, and artists, PBR made a comeback in the West as the anti-import, workingman's beer. Sales of PBR rose 15% in the next year. Share of market continued to increase, from just 4.2% to 8% over a five-year period.⁴

What made PBR so successful was, in part, rediscovery. Sure, PBR appeals to Boomers who enjoyed the beer in its heyday and now drink it to reconnect with their youthful past. But it also appeals to a whole new generation of Millennials and Xers who like PBR for its retro appeal. This group's interest in retro reflects the interest in nostalgia – what's old, authentic, inspiring – mixed with a quest for "cool." What's old has street cred that a faddish upstart can't replicate. For many, PBR wasn't the microbrew their fathers drank. It was an authentic, no-nonsense, no-frills beer – an anti-beer adoptable as "their beer." And to keep to its low-profile, underdog image, PBR eschewed traditional advertising in favor of word-of-mouth buzz and sponsorships of local events: art gallery openings, skateboard movie screenings, indie band performances.⁵ Part of its strategy was to appear to do as little as possible so consumers could organically lead the brand resurgence. In short, PBR saw a whole new generation of beer drinkers embrace their beer and discover it for themselves. PBR became the beer taste of a new generation.

For every success, a failure: Hai-Karate Aftershave. A budget aftershave in the late 1960s, Hai Karate became famous because of its TV advertising and packaging: its catch phrase was "Be careful how you use it." Each bottle came with a self-defense booklet to help wearers fend off smitten women. After fading away in the '80s, the brand staged a comeback. Despite its status as a '70s icon, Hai-Karate failed to connect with a new teen audience who, finding it neither cool nor inspiring, dismissed it as old-fashioned with an unbearable scent. It didn't align with their values or their tastes.

Other brands find success:

Once considered a relic from Dad's era, Old Spice received a lifeline from a new generation through its use of kitschy, tongue-in-cheek advertising, grassroots marketing, and tie-ins with popular video games. Teens are now plucking this product from their grocer's shelf.

2 Success Measure Two: Connect with Timeless Consumer Values

For a retro brand to successfully connect with consumers, it needs to align with timeless values relevant to all generations.⁶ Such values include: authenticity – the quest for what's real and true; simplicity – the desire for a less complicated time and lifestyle; identity – the desire to embody your personal style and philosophy; membership – the desire to feel connected to others with common interests and values; independence – the desire for freedom, choice, and empowerment; fun – the need for adrenaline-producing experiences. While a brand doesn't have to satisfy all values, the strongest ones, like Chucks, do.

Converse Chuck Taylor All-Stars.

Chucks were invented in 1917, and named after Charles "Chuck" Taylor, a basketball player, coach, and salesman who traveled the country evangelizing the game and selling the shoes. The 1920s through 1970s were Chucks' glory days. But the 1970s brought new competition from Nike, Reebok, and Adidas, and Converse ceded territory as a performance shoe. After losing their footing in basketball, the brand floundered. And despite its strong ties to the counterculture movement – it was the shoe of choice for bands like Nirvana, The Pixies, The Ramones – Chucks never fully capitalized on the phenomenon. Converse declared bankruptcy in 2001.

Then the tide turned. The company, under new leadership, concentrated on rebuilding its brand name and focusing on what made Chucks so successful: simplicity and authenticity. Converse re-established timeless bestsellers with updates. They designed new streetwise models that retained the original style. They brought the brand's focus back to basketball with NBA endorser and superstar-to-be Dwyane Wade.⁷ They also started to embrace the counterculture movements that had been embracing them. The result? Converse and Chucks came back as sales tripled

over the first three years after Converse's reorganization.⁸ Today Converse continues to cultivate its edgy rebel status by partnering with up-and-coming designers and bleeding-edge hip-hoppers and rockers. Sales continue to increase each year.

Part of what made Chucks so successful is they connect with timeless values. Putting on a Chuck, young people feel a sense of authenticity; they are part of something real because the shoe is old-school cool. Chucks also convey a message of freedom: freedom from the work world and freedom of expression. Chucks' design hasn't changed much since 1917, symbolizing simplicity of design and straightforward comfort. Chucks tap into membership: wearing a pair makes you part of a group. Perhaps most importantly, Chucks foster a sense of personal identity: there are many different colors and styles to choose from to express yourself. If you want to make a political statement, try Democracy Chucks; if you love music, try hip-hop producer Pharrell Williams Chucks; you can even go online at punkyourchucks.com to customize a shoe for your individual style. The variety and carefree image of Chucks make them fun to wear. Chucks tap into timeless values: They are the soles of a century.

Today Converse continues to cultivate its edgy rebel status by partnering with up-and-coming designers and bleeding-edge hip-hoppers and rockers.



For every success, a failure: Centipede 3D. The 1982 arcade game Centipede was an instant classic. Then in 1999 came Centipede 3D, intended to be a fresh, new gaming experience. But going 3D didn't add to the fun; in fact, it made the game tedious with a play style that drove away fans of the original game. Centipede 3D failed to connect with consumers young and old because it wasn't authentic, it wasn't simple, and quite frankly, it wasn't fun.

Other brands find success: Frye, Red Wing, Filson – take your pick – are some of the heritage fashion brands currently attracting a new generation of consumers by capitalizing on authenticity, simplicity, and membership, the values so important to Millennials today. These brands are currently flying off retailers' shelves.

3

Success Measure Three: Stay True but Contemporize

A brand that stages a comeback without making any changes to the product is simply an old brand with old tricks. The retro brand that succeeds comes back updated – improved – to today's standards.⁹ Classic appeal, contemporary features: old brand, new tricks.

Volkswagen New Beetle. The old VW Beetle was the stuff of legend. In 1968, its peak year, VW sold 423,008 Beetles in the U.S. – 5% of the US car market. The Beetle was cheap to own and fun to drive. DDB's unconventional advertising portrayed the Beetle as a brand of the people, using self-deprecating humor and candor ("Ugly is only skin deep," "Mountain Goat"). But with competition from smaller, higher-powered cars, the Beetle started to fade. By 1976, sales slid to 27,009 units. In 1978 it was dropped from production in the U.S.¹⁰



Because worldwide the brand continued to sell, devoted engineers developed a new prototype in a last-ditch effort to bring the brand back to America. This postmodern New Beetle took the country by storm. The same enthusiasm that surrounded the old surrounded the new. Advertising cast a wide net, identifying "optimists" as the target, tapping both Boomers and Xers. The results were astounding: The New Beetle sold 83,434 units in the following year.¹¹

While the New Beetle allowed for rediscovery and tapped into many consumer values, the linchpin of its success was staying true to the heart of the Beetle brand while contemporizing for today's buyer. The New Beetle's design evoked feelings of nostalgia, freedom, and fun. Its spirit was friendly, honest, and optimistic.¹² But there was nothing of the old Beetle under the hood. It featured more power – a 115 hp engine that could hit 120 mph – and modern amenities like air bags, an adjustable steering column, air conditioning, a six-speaker stereo system, and power outlets for cell phones. It was a classic package with modern conveniences. A turbo-charged version, the VW 1.8T, was also launched as a sporty and sleek Bug.¹³ A decade later the New Beetle is still running strong. The New Beetle is an old friend with some very new tricks.

For every success, a failure: Ford Thunderbird. The 2002 Retro Bird was meant to be a reinvention of the 1955 classic. While it shared aesthetic qualities with the original, it also had modern features to satisfy current drivers. But in the updating process, designers made the car overly posh (the interior and engine were similar to a Lincoln's), and the brand faced complaints that it drove more like a "luxury land yacht" than the sports coupe it evolved from.¹⁴ The Thunderbird failed by modernizing too much, catering to the comfort choices of an older segment at the expense of the desires of younger power-hungry drivers. As a result, the Bird was buried.

Other brands find success: Dig Dug, Galaga, Pac Man, Pole Position

– all of these arcade games are making a comeback. Thanks to Namco, an arcade manufacturer around since the '70s, such games have been "remixed" and repackaged for the iPhone. Featuring updated graphics and audio, touch-screen gaming mechanics superior to the originals, and new content such as boss battles, they're a new take on classic fun and are currently enjoying success.

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4 Success Measure Four: Build a Community

As they say in the movies, "If you build it, they will come." So how do you go about building a community? Communities initially gather around social constructs or interests, but people stay for the relationships they've built. Powerful retro brands have provided their fans something of value to rally around. Their communities are swarms that advocate the brand and help propel its success. As Chuck Brymer relates in his book, *The Nature of Marketing*, "...our job is to continually reach out to our brand's most passionate advocates in these communities, who spread the word from peer to peer and multiply their efforts exponentially."¹⁵ Modern technology often aids the successful revival of a retro brand.



The web has allowed an international community to get involved, stage friendly competition, and share ideas with one another.

Rubik's Cube. The Cube, launched in 1980, was an instant success. At the height of its popularity, the world was crazy for the Cube. One hundred million Cubes sold between 1980 and 1982.¹⁶ In 1981 Patrick Bossert, a twelve-year-old schoolboy, wrote a solution book called *You Can Do the Cube*, which sold 1.5 million copies.¹⁷ The first Rubik's Cube International World Championship was held on June 5, 1982 (it was won in 22 seconds). Then in the late '80s the brand fell out of fashion and went out of production.

In the early 2000s Winning Moves Games brought the infuriating little puzzle back, relaunching the original product, creating new technologically enhanced versions, revamping its site, and allowing people to easily get involved in game play. The re-emergence of the cube, coupled with word of mouth, spurred a new generation to discover and adopt it. As a result, the cube experienced a renaissance. Worldwide sales increased more than 1,000%.¹⁸ Speed cubing became more popular than ever. Participation in the Cube

World Championship doubled and competitions spread like wildfire. The World Cube Association, which signed up just 89 members in 2003, added 2,200 in 2008.¹⁹



And the Cube again invaded modern pop culture, making its most recent appearances in *The Pursuit of Happyness* and the indie hit *Let the Right One In*. As of 2009 nearly 350 million Cubes have sold.²⁰

The biggest reason for the Cube's success can be attributed to the community it encouraged – and the Internet is largely responsible for this resurrection. Hasbro helped fuel the frenzy by providing Rubik's fans with a wealth of resources online. Their web site encourages people to

participate in speed-cubing by providing a forum for fans to talk to one another, an academy to learn basics from the pros, and links to get involved in the cultural phenomenon. Youcandothecube.com was launched in 2009, aimed at schools and youth groups to encourage participation. The online community has been a place where both long-time and new speed cubers discuss times and maneuvers; they also upload videos of their "solves" for others to see. The web has allowed an international community to get involved, stage friendly competition, and share ideas with one another. If you visit YouTube, nearly 47,000 self-made Rubik's Cube videos will pop up. In another act of community building, Rubik's World launched on the Nintendo DS and Wii. The DS version allows players to connect to a community of Rubik's Puzzle World enthusiasts through the platform's wireless connection. The Wii version accommodates up to four players and features an online message board. With millions of involved fans, Rubik's Cube may have solved the community puzzle.

For every success, a failure: Napster. Napster created a 20-million-person community by making music sharing accessible to the masses.²¹ After being sued by copyright owners in the music industry, Napster met its demise. Its name and rights have since been bought and reinvented. But in trying to resurrect a community of advocates, the brand is offering nothing to rally around – the newest incarnation is a pay service meant to compete with iTunes. Before, Napster was “sticking it to The Man” now they are “The Man,” and consumers have caught on.

Other brands find success: Transformers. With Michael Bay’s films catering to today’s action-minded consumers, Hasbro contemporizing its toys and developing an animated series, and online efforts for each audience, the Transformers franchise has been re-imagined and has created a community of advocates across generations. Online an increasing number of Transformers toy fan forums exist. Fan interest has surged so much that next year Hasbro will launch a TV network and website dedicated to all of its resurgent brands, further strengthening their drive to satisfy fan communities.

The Future Is History

No brand strategy ever incorporates the potential of eventually becoming a retro brand. But if a brand or product is stuck in a position of dormancy, the measures of success outlined in this paper can help return its luster.

And while these measures were created with retro brands in mind, we recognize that the lessons are also applicable to all marketers who are striving to keep an established brand fresh and relevant so it doesn’t fall out of favor. DDB’s nearly century-old brands such as State Farm, Morton, and Wrigley have benefited from these lessons. When managing an established brand, crucial strategies include: attracting a new generation of customers to a brand; connecting with timeless consumer values to stay relevant; staying true to the heart of the brand but evolving as needed to meet today’s needs; and providing a compelling proposition so a community of advocates will help propel the brand’s success.

So whether its an old brand striving for saliency or a retro brand in need of rejuvenation, the line between revival and relic is a fine one. These four measures may well tip the balance.



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