

Branding faith

Nike. Apple. Coach. Why do these words make us think of sneakers, computers, and pocketbooks instead of goddesses, fruit, and ancient modes of transportation? In a fast-paced capitalist culture where we are constantly bombarded with commercial messages, product companies need to be able to communicate quickly and efficiently. Taglines, logos, and identifiable icons become shorthand for everything from cars to commodities. This, in short, is branding. To better understand why advertisers use branding, let's first look at advertising and marketing more broadly.

The evolution of advertising and marketing

Advertising has been used to sell products since at least as early as the invention of the printing press. Advertising in the 1400s primarily sold the most popular book of the time—the Bible. In this nascent stage, a straightforward sales pitch was the advertising norm. Copy would have been something along the lines of, “We have Bibles. This is where you can buy them, and this is how much they cost.” These direct sales messages continued for hundreds of years, up until the Industrial Revolution.

With the advent of the Industrial Age, products began to be produced in mass quantities. For product producers, the concern became how to sell large quantities of products to people who may not have needed or wanted them. The twentieth century also saw developments in psychology from Pavlov and Freud, and later Skinner and Maslow. Thus technology and psychology changed the focus of advertising from product attributes (physical characteristics) to user benefits (what the customer gets). Soap was no longer about the ingredients it contained, but rather about how wonderful you would smell and therefore how much more effectively you would be able to attract a mate. Cars weren't about getting from one place to another, but about how masculine someone could be. The need to sell through psychology became normative as mass-produced, undifferentiated commodity products proliferated.

Therefore, to get consumers to buy mostly unnecessary products, advertisers became experts in psychology—at first through the use of surveys and other quantitative methods, and later through more sophisticated qualitative methodologies, such as focus groups and personal interviews. Today we are seeing a decided shift in the level of sophistication as marketers increasingly move away from targeting based on demographics—statistical data about consumers—to targeting based on psychographics. Psychographics is research that breaks up consumers into groups based on their motivations and attitudes rather than their age and income. “A *psychographic* segmentation covers the hopes, needs, fears, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes which shape the actions and choices a person makes” according to Carol Morgan and Doran Levy (2002, p. 30). An example they use to demonstrate this idea is that “The purchase of a high chair for a grandchild is driven by demographics, but the purchase of one made of wood versus one constructed of steel may be based on attitudes or psychographics” (pp. 5–6). Understanding how old someone is or how much money they have will not get at this deeper understanding of consumer desires.

Looked at another way, most of us know at least one example of what marketers call the “early adopter.” He’s the guy (and it usually is a guy) who had the cell phone, the Palm Pilot, and the iPod before anyone else. He needs to have the latest, newest thing first because it feeds his sense of being “in the know.” This early adopter could be a teenage computer geek, a 50-year-old corporate CEO, or a newly minted 30-year-old MBA. Thus marketers have to target products through motivation rather than through demographic statistics.

But, you might ask, what about the iPod ads? They all showed young people dancing to current day music. How does that target all of these groups? Brilliantly, I’d say. First, the dancers were all silhouetted so that people could project themselves into the commercials. Second, younger people (teens) aspire to be older, while older early adopters (our hypothetical 50-year-old CEO) aspire to be younger, so this ad works for all three age groups because while you can’t specifically see the dancers, you could guess them to be in their late twenties or early thirties. Finally, the music is just hip enough to tell some people, “This product is not for you,” giving the product, at least initially, some exclusivity and cache. (Of course, that can’t last for long once a company starts introducing less expensive versions of the product, because by that time the early adopter has introduced everyone else to the product and has moved on to the “next big thing.”)

Michael Schudson (1984) suggests two reasons for marketing’s shift to psychographics. First, women are the primary target for the majority of consumer products, and they are more emotional than men. Therefore women are “inherently” predisposed to emotional appeals. Second, as an overwhelming number of products were created, getting attention rivaled providing information. Standing out “in the clutter” became the marketer’s

battle cry. The best way to stand out was to have a thorough understanding of your consumers so that they could immediately connect to your message.

The goal of an immediate bond became increasingly difficult as the media environment (particularly television) grew to be more complex, wherein demographic groups were sliced into smaller and smaller audiences for marketing purposes. In the 1950s, when television was first widely introduced into American households, television audiences were one mass group. This went along with the method of goods production (mass) and the distribution of the advertising messages (mass media). Undifferentiated audiences continued as the norm through the 1960s but things began to change in the 1970s, when Nielsen started calculating ratings based on demographic groups. By the 1980s, separating audiences into defined market segments based on demographic information was customary because of the widespread introduction of cable television.

While the technology of cable television was available as early as the late 1950s, it was not widely distributed until the 1980s. It was also at this time that programming networks created just for cable were first introduced. CNN, MTV, Lifetime, ESPN, and many other well-known cable brands were all established during this time period, and with them we had the beginnings of what Joseph Turow (1997) calls "Breaking Up America." Not only did these networks provide new programming, they also created specialized places where the "right people," meaning demographic groups most valued by advertisers, would congregate. And to paraphrase Schudson, marketers, unlike God, do not talk to or listen to all people equally.

As technology has become more sophisticated, the ability to break up the audience into smaller and smaller segments has increased. However, narrowly defined and fragmented audiences make it much more difficult to sell mass-produced products. Instead of airing a single commercial on a broadcast network and reaching millions of people, dozens of commercials need to be aired to reach the same size audience. Moreover, just because the number of media options has increased does not mean people's time or ability to consume more information has increased with it. In 1985, Carrie Heeter wrote, "There is controversy as to whether the limitations of the short-term memory capacity is 5-9 portions of information or 3-5, but [there is] agreement that the capacity is limited" (p. 131). Translating this to television, even in today's 150+-channel universe, we routinely watch seven channels and are aware of programming on perhaps four or five more. Our brains simply do not allow for retaining more information than this.

Heeter wrote more than 20 years ago, long before today's explosion in media outlets. Randolph Trappey and Arch Woodside (2005) assert now that changes in lifestyle and media have made it so that the twenty-first-century consumer not only has limited capacity to retain information, but also a more limited attention span to begin with. In today's environment people want information immediately. Thus we have the proliferation of

swooshes, white ear plugs, and apple logos—what Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson (1998) call “sign wars.” This is where branding comes in.

Branding

What is branding?

The most often quoted definition of a brand is that of David Ogilvy, an early giant in the advertising industry and founder of Ogilvy & Mather, one of the world’s largest advertising agencies. He said that a brand is “the intangible sum of a product’s attributes: its name, packaging, and price, its history, its reputation and the way it is advertised.” As the creator of images for everything from Dove soap to the American Express Card, Ogilvy knew of what he spoke.

Branding is about making meaning—taking the individual aspects of a product and turning them into more than the sum of their parts. It is about giving consumers something to think and feel about a product or service beyond its physical attributes. It’s about fulfilling a need; providing what marketers call the benefit. If we talk about something as simple as M&Ms, for instance, the tangible or physical attributes are a small piece of chocolate with a colorful, hard candy coating. The intangible attributes, that is, those associated with the branding of the product, include “melts in your mouth, not in your hand,” small size, convenient packaging, and its history and reputation as a quality candy that’s fun to eat. The benefit, in addition to keeping your hands—and more importantly your children’s hands—clean, is good taste and perhaps a sugar buzz. As a consumer, while you do not consciously think of all of these things when deciding what kind of candy to buy, unconsciously everything you know about the brand, including your past experiences with it, comes into play at the time of purchase.

You may not think this is so, particularly when you are thinking about good experiences, but think about the last time you had a bad experience with a brand. You probably said to yourself, “This widget stinks. I’m never going to buy anything from them again.” Or, “Their customer service is terrible; outsourcing is the bane of my existence.” You do the same thing when you have a positive experience with a brand, though the reaction may not be quite so visceral. Instead of, “Wow! This Swiffer works great! I’m going to have to tell my friend, Susie!” the reaction is more likely to be, “This does a great job. I think I’ll buy it again.”

Whether we are conscious of it or not, we have these relationships with brands—good and bad. We have preferences for one brand over another. We have unconscious thoughts and feelings about products that we use (or don’t use). For instance, we may buy Domino sugar because it reminds us of “Mom.” Intellectually this doesn’t make sense because sugar is sugar. It’s a commodity. But because we have a preexisting relationship with Domino,

we are willing to pay extra money for that name and its perceived higher quality. Or, we may choose an iPod because it is easier to use than other MP3s, it has more available downloads, and those white ear plugs make us look hip while walking down the street or sitting on the bus. This is not to say that some products aren't better than others, but rather that, in the vast majority of categories, it is the brand and not the physical product that the consumer has the relationship with.

From the consumer's perspective branding is about quality and consistency, but for the company that produces a product, branding is about creating long-term profits and growing the business. According to Northwestern marketing professors Don Schultz and Heidi Schultz (2004, p. 18), brands can do five things:

- Create financial value for the owner in both the short and long term.
- Create various forms of value for customers so they are willing to seek out the brand, buy it, and continue buying it.
- Create relationships with employees and other interested stakeholders so they want to continue to be associated with and support the brand.
- Last a long time or at least be remembered a long time. That means long-term income flows.
- Become a part of culture. Cultural icons have great value. Just look at the value Michael Jordan created during his basketball career for both himself and those he worked with and for.

Branding exists to create profits. It does this by creating loyalty among its customers. Loyalty reduces producers' marketing costs, because consumers (brand loyalists) become repeat purchasers of the product. Marketers simply have to remind consumers to keep buying the brand over the long term. The ultimate achievement is for the brand to become part of the popular culture. When this occurs, the value of the product increases exponentially. The value of branding is that it makes it harder for other products in the category to thrive because the brand becomes impermeable to competition (Miller and Muir, 2004, p. xiii). And in today's global economy, branding allows products to travel around the world. Logos are streamlined—simple iconography, no words—to affect this process. Good examples here are the Nike swoosh and McDonald's golden arches.

David Ogilvy once said that he could have marketed Dove as a man's soap or a woman's soap. He just chose to market it to women. In and of themselves, products have no meaning. It is the marketers who give them meaning, and it is that meaning that is the product. It is not the soap or the car or the coffee, but the meaning behind these commodities. Much as religion created meaning for people's lives over the centuries, now marketers create meaning out of the products that fill our existence. These products come to be not just clothes to wear or cars to drive, but elements of who we are.

Brands as part of identity creation

Walk around any mall in America and there can be little doubt that brands aid in defining who we are. Yankee baseball caps. Kate Spade handbags. Abercrombie T-shirts. These are just a few of the thousands of branded products that combine to create personal identities. While this is true for most demographic groups, it is most evident in those under 20. As Juliet Schor (2004) says in her book *Born to Buy*, “more children here [the United States] than anywhere else believe that their clothes and brands describe who they are and define their social status. American kids display more brand affinity than their counterparts anywhere else in the world; indeed, experts describe them as increasingly ‘bonded to brands’” (p. 13). Schor quotes a 2001 Nickelodeon study that showed that most 10-year-olds could name 300 to 400 brands and that tweens (those between the ages of 8 and 12) request specific brands more than 90 percent of the time. She concludes that “today’s tweens are the most brand-conscious generation in history” (p. 25).

Teenagers, unlike children, know they are being marketed to, but this doesn’t stop them from wanting to be like the marketed world they see. For her book *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*, Alissa Quart interviewed teens about the brands they interact with and found that while the teens are acutely aware that the advertising they see is not true to life (“Can you believe this ad? No one’s body looks like that!”), this does not stop them from trying to look and act just like the people in the ads. Quart says, “The personae, self-images, ambitions, and values of young people in the United States have been seriously distorted by the commercial frenzy surrounding them” (2003, p. 13).¹

Adults, too, can’t but help getting caught in the web of 360-degree “touchpoints,” the numerous opportunities—from advertising to e-mail to retail—that marketers use to communicate with consumers. There is no place where you can go and not see marketing, including public restrooms! Being surrounded by advertising makes us want to buy more and more. Says Schor, “What we buy also affects who we become. Recent research suggests that the more we have, the more powerful, confident, and socially validated we feel” (Schor, 1998, p. 57). Thus we end up on a treadmill of consumerism, buying to feel better, and buying to create a sense of self.

In part this reliance on brands for identity stems from a sense of rootlessness. Americans suffer from geographic dislocation that in turn drives their need for commonalities. In the fifteenth century, if you went from place to place you could be sure that most people knew about the Bible; today, as people move from place to place, they know that McDonald’s or Wal-Mart is sure to be at their final destination. Brands, more than anything else in our culture, provide consistency. While we can’t count on a pension, health insurance, or a lifetime career anymore, we can count on Kraft, Apple, and Lexus.

Brands have become so much more than products to buy. Lee Clow, creator of Apple's "Think Different" campaign, states:

Brands aren't just a way of remembering what you want to buy any more. They've become part of the fabric of our society. Brands are part of our system of ordering things—they even create context about who we are and how we live. Brands have become badges for people. They articulate who you are and what your values are.

(Clifton and Maughan, 2000, p. 71)

We are not just talking here about consumer packaged goods. Think also of rock bands or sports teams or celebrities. We wear U2 T-shirts and Red Sox baseball caps and Sean John apparel, and all of those things represent who we are. Brands are not just perceptions about a product or service, they are also bits and pieces of our identity.

Clearly marketers realize that brands have power beyond sales, but scholars and social critics also clearly identify commercial culture as the source of identity creation. Naomi Klein, an outspoken critic of branding, lambastes the "marketing hype" that hides the economic hardships of third-world labor behind the glitz of the brand. In *No Logo*, she criticizes the takeover of public space, but her larger concern is the takeover of internal space. "This loss of space happens inside the individual; it is a colonization not of physical space but of mental space" (Klein, 2000, p. 66). Theologian Tom Beaudoin (2003, p. 5) is in agreement:

For those of us who live deeply immersed in the branding economy, we make an identity for ourselves, and an identity is made for us, by our relationships to consumer goods: what and how we own, when and why we wear. Clothes and other branded products do "identity work" for us, transmitting messages about ourselves to ourselves and others.

David Lyon is more forceful when he puts this into perspective *vis-à-vis* religion (2000, p. 12).

Identities are constructed through consuming. Forget the idea that who we are is given by God or achieved through hard work in a calling or a career; we shape our malleable image by what we buy—our clothing, our kitchens, and our cars tell the story of who we are (becoming). It is no accident that the world of fashion is seen as an "identity industry;" the idea is that self-esteem and our recognition by others may be purchased over the counter.

Or as marketer Douglas Atkin (2004) puts it, "People today pay for meaning more than they pay for it" (p. 95).

The sources of identity formation have changed. Whereas once our family, friends, schools, and religious institutions gave us a basis for understanding who we are and what we value, these groups have been usurped by marketers and mass media. As Schudson explains (1984, pp. 153–4):

Children learn to pay attention not just to their parents but to their peer group and to the mass media...The family remains crucial, but more and more, a common culture, that includes advertising and the mass media, plays its part...If the commercial and national forces for “prefabricat[ed identity]” through persuasion have grown, the local forces toward standard personalities through coercive religion, education, and family have weakened.

So is it really true that we have exchanged one form of socialization for another to aid in creating our identities? Is it that marketers have taken over for other social institutions? And, if we accept that as a given rather than a question, is there really any issue with religion taking on the mantle of marketer?

Given that brands contain meaning for our lives and that products become part of our identities, it is easy to see why religious organizations see the value in inventing their products and services as brands. Stewart Hoover (1996) has said that in today’s culture religious practice constitutes “a situation of seekers turning to a largely commodified inventory of symbols, values and ideas out of which they appropriate those which fit best into senses of themselves.” Those commodified symbols are the branded logos presented to us hundreds of times a day. If people are used to having meaning presented to them via marketing communication, then why not use what is of the culture? If people are looking for meaning, and marketers readily admit that they are, why not become the prime purveyors of the product and take back from the profane marketplace that which is sacred? Good questions indeed.

Marketing and religion

A symbiotic relationship

Here we will begin to examine the similarities between religion and marketing and start to see how the sacred and the secular are not mutually exclusive, but rather aid each other in the furtherance of their goals. Secular objects (books, material goods) are used in disseminating the sacred. The sacred must be promoted via the secular marketplace in order to recruit new members. On numerous levels, the sacred has become more secular and vice versa.² While critics have suggested that there is a culture war—a fight between religion and popular culture—for religion and marketing, the interaction is more of a mutually beneficial relationship than a contest. It seems that

marketers have learned their craft from religion—turning diehard product users into evangelists, for example—and it is simply a situation of religion re-assimilating what is rightfully theirs.

A number of religion and media scholars have written about the intersection of commercial culture and religious objects. Some of these scholars (Hendershot, 2004; McDannell, 1995) suggest that the sacred and profane have not been mutually exclusive either in the minds of the merchandisers or the consumers. Consumers see religious products as a means of expressing their faith while merchandisers see products—including religious practice itself—as a means to spread the faith. These scholars, as well as others whose work will be mentioned in this section, have all suggested that sociology of religion researchers have relied too heavily on the secularization theory, which has obscured the reality of the intersection between religion and commerce.

Leigh Eric Schmidt (1995) provides an extensive study of the commercialization of religion and holidays. He, too, points to the symbiotic relationship between the commercial and the religious, noting that retailers were instrumental in resurrecting holidays that had become moribund, specifically Christmas and Easter. Schmidt provides historical context for this interplay, explaining that religious holidays were feast days or festivals that were regularly ringed by carts selling food and trinkets. Further, he suggests that the criticism of commercialization has more to do with America's puritanical heritage and its accompanying fear of abundance than with commercialization itself.

A common feature of festivity is to overindulge, to eat, drink, or spend to excess, lavishly to use up resources otherwise diligently saved. The surfeit of gifts and spending associated especially with Christmas, but also with other holidays, gives expression to a kind of festal excess that is often fundamental to celebrations. In other words, festive behavior is built in large part on wastrel prodigality, on surplus and abundance, on conspicuous consumption. The critique of American holidays as consumer fetes is often an attack on festival itself, a repudiation of celebratory indulgence and dissipation out of adherence to puritanical or republican values emphasizing hard work, self-control, frugality, and simplicity.

(Schmidt, 1995, p. 8)

The relationship between religion and commercial culture has long been an uneasy one. On the one hand, commercialization has made participation in religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter virtually mandatory within our culture. On the other hand, churches preach simplicity and support for those who are less fortunate. Thus while the underlying beliefs are in conflict, the institutions of religion and commercial culture do in fact support each

other in staying viable. This is why walling off the sacred—no shopping on the Sabbath or holidays, for instance—has become almost impossible.

Conrad Ostwalt (2003) has written of the sacred and the secular being intertwined, and of the boundaries between the two being porous. Throughout *Secular Steeples*, Ostwalt argues that the sacred is becoming more secular and the secular more sacred. Megachurches have embraced popular entertainment forms in their services and widely used marketing techniques to attract the unchurched. The best-selling *Left Behind* book series uses secular media to transmit sacred messages. As for the secular becoming more sacred, there are numerous mainstream documentaries on everything from Jesus to the DaVinci Code, and recently there was even a reality miniseries called *God or the Girl* that showed young men making their final decisions about whether to enter the priesthood. These examples are above and beyond the increasing levels of religious content found in all types of secular media, not just television, which we discussed in Chapter 2. But whether it is the sacred becoming more secular or vice versa, the fact remains that people continue to look for religious meaning even in our rational culture. That search for meaning is less likely to happen within the confines of a church, however, and is more often now found in the form of some type of secular event, such as the Super Bowl or even a rock concert.

Dell deChant (2002) has gone so far as to say that the marketplace is a religion, and that the economy is our new God. Like Ostwalt, he does not say that America is not religious—it is intensely religious. However today's understanding of what is sacred is not based on the transcendent, but on the cosmological; that is, what is of the world or the culture. According to deChant (p. 28), what is sacred is participating in the consumption process, which he defines as having three steps:

Rather than simply consuming objects and images, postmodern culture can be understood as explicating meaning and value through a three-stage process, which begins with (1) acquisition of products, is clarified in (2) consumption of products, and finally is fulfilled in (3) disposal of products.

By defining consumption in this way, we can see that consumerism is not about just using the product or service, but also the events that occur before and after the purchase, making the process more encompassing. It is through this process that we celebrate the sacred, much as people once worshiped what was most available in their environment (deChant, 2002, p. xiv):

As the ancients saw nature as the ultimate sacred power and worshiped it in all of its various expressions, so we today see the economy as the sacred power of our culture and worship it in an even wider array of manifestations. As the ancients participated in rituals at temples and

shrines, we participate in similar rituals at malls and department stores. Thus, rather than being functionally secular, our entire culture system begins to look profoundly sacred.

Thus even though we might not all participate in rituals within religious institutions, we still participate in sacred rites through purchasing products and watching the retelling of sacred myths of “economic success and material acquisition,” as presented through the mass media, particularly television (pp. 31–2). Think of our culture’s obsession with celebrity—it’s the redemption story told over and over again. These myths combined with the mall provide opportunities to relate to the sacred and thus “reveals the cosmic meaning of existence, which is also the culturally normative way of life and living” (p. 36).

In their research, Russell W. Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, and John F. Sherry, Jr. (1989) break down the wall between the sacred and the profane in terms of consumer products. Through fieldwork they found that “consumers made sacred and profane distinctions in their behaviors and uses of space, time and objects” (p. 3). They agree with Oswalt, concluding that the sacred has become more secular and vice versa, and that with the blurring of these boundaries, consumption can become a means of transcendence. It is not that the world is no longer separated into these two distinct realms, but rather it is that religious objects are not the only means of interacting with the sacred.

Consumption can become a vehicle of transcendent experience; that is, consumer behavior exhibits certain aspects of the sacred...For contemporary consumers, there are also elements of life with no connection to formal religion that are nonetheless revered, feared, and treated with the utmost respect. Examples include flags, sports stars, national parks, art, automobiles, museums, and collections. Whether we call the reverence for these things religious, contemporary consumers treat them as set apart, extraordinary, or sacred, just as elements of nature are sacred in naturistic religions and certain icons are sacred to followers of contemporary, organized religions. Although the specific focal objects differ, the same deeply moving, self-transcending feelings may attend each, and the same revulsions may occur when these objects are not treated with respect. Religion is one, but not the only, context in which the concept of the sacred is operant.

(Belk *et al.*, 1989, p. 2)

R. Laurence Moore (1994) and James Twitchell (2004) each deal directly with the issue of religion and marketing. In *Selling God*, a book that has been the definitive work in this area since its publication in the mid-1990s, Moore outlines the history of how religion has been marketed in the United States, from the personal selling of Jehovah’s Witnesses to the more advanced

and perhaps abrasive forms used by New Age practitioners, such as expos, advertising, and extensive product lines. In *Branded Nation*, Twitchell suggests that religion and marketing are virtually one and the same thing. He claims that we are all looking to be saved and it is merely the source of salvation that has changed. Both religion and marketing sell stories and “magical thinking is at the heart of religion and branding” (p. 65). We want to believe a product will make us better, just as we want to believe religion will. Twitchell adds (p. 89) that when religion is marketed, it acts just like other branded products:

[According to old line denominations] the megachurch is the dumbing down of American religion, epiphany lite, minister as personality, service as TV with musical interludes, cherry-picking of smug baby boomers, obsession on the “front door” never minding the flood leaving the “back door,” fair-weather churches feeding easy-to-digest junk food to the already overweight.

Conveniently forgotten is that this is exactly the pattern not just of religion but of marketing in general. Someone develops a new wrapper or a new delivery system for an interchangeable product and overnight the market has to adjust. Brand-new brand.

Remember, religion is a commodity. Religion is personal and religion is packaged and sold the same way as other marketed goods and services.

The interdependence of religion and marketing in our culture seems almost inevitable, and there are striking similarities between these cultural forms. These institutions both rely on storytelling, meaning making, and a willingness of people to believe in what is intellectually unbelievable. Religions create meaning through myths, rituals, and practices; marketing creates meaning through advertising and shopping. Religion is the acceptance of a belief system; marketing is the acceptance of beliefs about a product. Religions have faith communities; marketing has brand communities. Religion has become a product; products have become religions.

The parallel process

Marketing is a complex problem of trying to understand the wants and desires of consumers while simultaneously factoring in the many influences—social status, gender, reference groups, and so on—that will affect their purchase decisions. The process begins before the time of purchase. It begins when you, the consumer, notices that your current state of being is not what you would like it to be. This is the first step in the consumer decision-making process. This process consists of five steps: problem recognition, search for information, evaluation of alternatives, product purchase, and post-purchase behavior (Baker, 2000, p. 58).

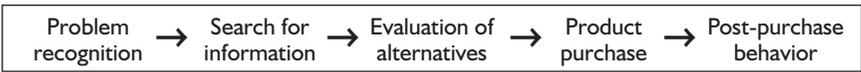


Figure 4.1 Consumer decision-making process

This process is not conscious on the part of a consumer and varies depending on the importance of the product being purchased, that is, whether it is a high involvement purchase (one that warrants consideration) or a low involvement purchase (one that takes little to no thought). Let's take some examples. A low involvement product might be bottled water. The problem is that you are thirsty. Given the relatively low importance of this product within the overall scheme of your life, you don't need to search for information. You go to the store, stare at the shelf, choose a bottle of water from among the various brands offered, and buy it. For a high involvement product like a car, you will likely search for information on the Internet, ask friends about their cars, and test drive the car. Then you will need to make some decisions. Do you want an SUV or a sports car? What is the service contract? What kind of financing can you get? Where will you buy the car? Once these decisions are made, you purchase the car and hope that you are happy with your decision.

This process looks at purchasing from the consumer's point of view. There is, however, a way to look at buying through the lens of the marketer. This is the relationship marketing curve, which is based on the RM (Relationship Marketing) ladder of customer loyalty (Payne, 2000, p. 113).

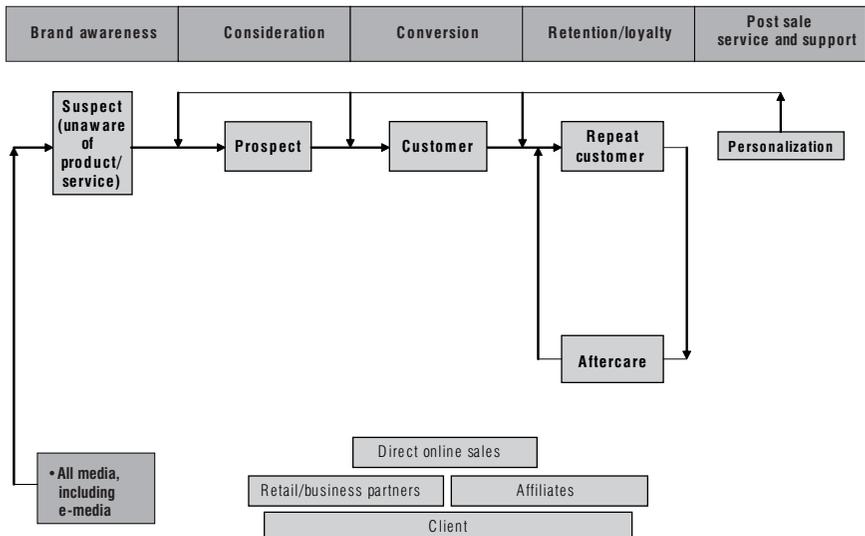


Figure 4.2 Marketing relationship curve

The marketing relationship schematic shows the path of the relationship curve between a marketer and a consumer. The process begins with creating brand awareness. This is where marketing is most important—teaching people that the product exists as well as how to think about the product. Marketers can use any number of tools, including advertising, public relations, or personal selling, to increase people’s awareness of their product or service. Once a potential consumer is aware of the product, the next step is to make sure the product becomes part of the consideration set—the evaluation of alternatives step in the consumer decision-making process. When the product is still under consideration, the potential customer is a prospect. In order to push the prospect toward purchase, the marketer might do sampling—letting the prospect try the product before buying it. If it is a Web-based product, prospects may be treated to a virtual trial; or, in the case of a retailer, they might make the shopping environment one that is more conducive to lingering. That Barnes & Noble feels more like a library and Starbucks more like a comfortable place to hang out by yourself or with friends is what marketers call a “third place.” A third place isn’t home or work, nor is it completely public or private (Lewis and Bridger, 2001), but it is a place where people want to spend time and is conducive to buying. These are the retailer/business partners on the bottom of the chart.

The next step is conversion, when a shopper has become a full-fledged customer. This is the most straightforward step in the process—the initial marketing work has been successful and the prospect has responded to the call to action (“buy our product”). The sale is closed and conversion has occurred either through direct sales (e-commerce, for instance) or through a retailer. Once the customer is converted, he or she can be used for lead cultivation (“Do you know someone else who could benefit from this product?”).

This, however, is not the end of the process. The goal in marketing, in addition to growing the size of your consumer base, is to create a repeat customer. Even though there are in fact two ways to grow your business—bring in new customers or get your current customers to buy more—it is much more cost efficient to get your current consumers to use more of your product because you do not need to teach them about your product, the category, the benefits, and so forth. Existing consumers already know about your brand and may simply need to be reminded to purchase the product.

To keep a prospect that has been converted into a consumer, marketers use a number of retention or loyalty techniques. Since most products today are commodities, it is the things that surround a product that garner retention. Saturn, for example, creates loyalty through their customer service. Gerber, a producer of premium products for babies and toddlers, creates retention and loyalty through providing information about child development and coupons for products that are appropriate for the child’s age. Amazon.com “remembers” your purchases and provides suggestions for future purchases

based on your past preferences (“Joe, last time you bought *The Passion of the Christ*, so now you might be interested in *The Da Vinci Code*”). Providing other spaces where the consumer can interact with the brand furthers brand attachment. Starbucks, for example, has branched out into supermarkets and even movie theaters with the 2006 film *Akeelah and the Bee* (affiliates in the chart). These exchanges between consumer and producer help lead to a bonding between the two. There is consistent reinforcement that the purchase decision is a good one and the brand can increasingly become a source of identification, for example, “I am a Coke drinker.”

The final stage is post-sales service and support. This is where further personalization occurs between producer and consumer. The more the producer knows about the consumer, the better it is able to fulfill the consumer’s needs. Using the Gerber example, if Gerber knows the age of your child, the company can send you the appropriate information and coupons that correspond to your child’s age. Another example is the expanded use of the Internet, which has become an important space for personalization. A major part of that is the creation of places within a company’s site where consumers can interact with each other, such as on bulletin boards or in chat rooms, creating opportunities for positive reinforcement of their purchase decisions. Through these interactions the company can continue to cross-sell (getting consumers to buy more products) and up sell (getting consumers to buy more expensive products) the convert—all in the hope of creating positive word-of-mouth, which is the most effective form of marketing.

Conversion career

Having examined the marketing relationship curve, we will look now at the conversion career and how it parallels the marketing process. While they are not exactly the same, there are some decided similarities between product acceptance and the framework of conversion for religious seekers.

Building on the work of conversion theory, Henri Gooren (2006a, 2006b) has developed the taxonomy of the conversion career. Under this theory the religious seeker or shopper goes through a multistage process in coming to accept a religious practice. The steps are: (1) pre-affiliation (potential members who have not yet committed to a group); (2) affiliation (formal membership); (3) conversion; and finally (4) confession (committed membership). I add to this framework the initial step of *spiritual awareness*, as people do not become involved in the process of becoming a member of a religious group unless they have determined that this is something missing in their life.

In the spiritual awareness phase, religious seekers become aware of a need for spirituality. They may have experienced a trauma in their life or it may be that they are in the period in their life cycle when they have children whom they believe should have religious instruction. It may even be that they have

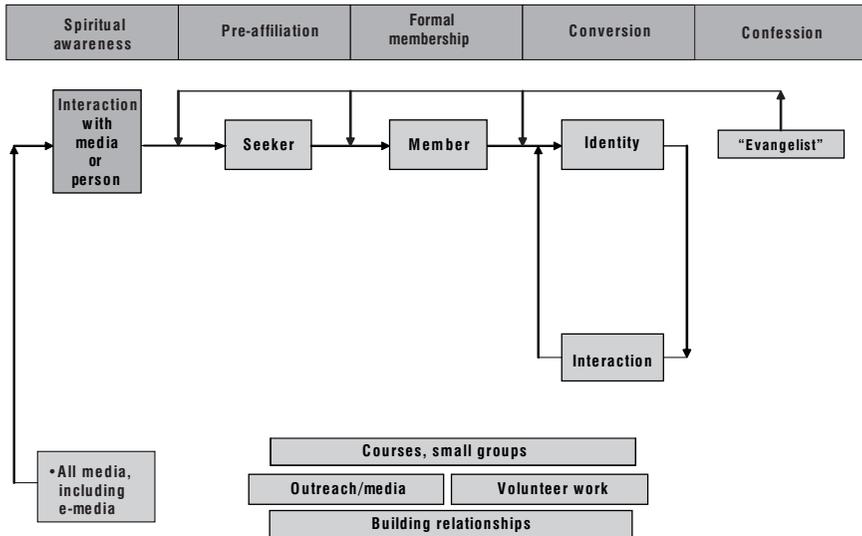


Figure 4.3 Conversion career

not specifically thought of seeking out religion or spirituality, but instead it has come to them either in the form of some type of marketing—advertising, direct marketing, or personal selling, for example—or through the media.

The next step, which is where Gooren's theory begins, is the pre-affiliation stage, or what I call the seeker stage. This phase is a trial period. The institution trying to woo potential members uses a less hard sell approach than that of traditional marketers. At this point the main objective is to allow the seeker to sample the "product" without scaring him or her away because of negative associations in their past. The organization makes information about its services readily available, but it does not require seekers to identify themselves to the organization. Seekers are allowed to go at their own pace. They are not forced to accept anything they are not ready for. We will see this in subsequent chapters when we discuss the Alpha Course and the Kabbalah Centre.

After spending time with a religious organization, the seeker may decide to become a full-fledged member. This is the first step in making a commitment to the religious institution. While committing to membership, the religion or spiritual practice has not yet become integral to the person's identity, but religious identity is likely to build over time as the new member moves from being anonymous to being identified, and in the case of megachurches, from merely attending services to participating in small groups, such as Bible study or recovery groups. As participation increases, this may also lead to volunteer work, which also increases a person's attachment and identification with the organization (see bottom of chart).

Increasing commitments of time, and also money, lead the member to the next step, which is conversion. At this point, the member has become fully identified with the religious group (“I am a follower of Kabbalah” or “I am born again.”) This self-identification comes with a change in worldview and a change in the representation of the self as religious. As with the marketing relationship, identification is supported by interaction with other individuals. Being part of a community that supports your belief system is what is most likely to keep you believing. Starting from pre-affiliation and moving through conversion, an important support for the system is the building of relationships. The more connected people become to other people, the more likely that they will be committed to the institution—religious or secular—because by walking away, you are abandoning not just the institution, but also everyone with whom you have established a relationship.

The final step is confession, or what I call the “evangelist.” I put this in quotes because I am not referring to Evangelicals per se, but rather the movement of the member from his or her own belief to wanting to share that belief with others. At this stage, the member has become fully immersed in the beliefs, rituals, and myths of the institution and participates regularly in services and other activities. Because such members feel so strongly about their newfound beliefs, they want to tell others, making them missionaries or evangelists for the belief system.

Parallels and repercussions

Broadly, the parallels between the marketing relationship curve and the religious conversion process are arresting. Within the marketing context, the seller of the product is trying to become part of a person’s consideration set once that person has decided that there is a need in their life (problem recognition). In the marketing relationship curve that need could be religious or secular, it really makes no difference. In the conversion career, it is strictly religious or spiritual. In order to fill that need, the person needs to become aware of the alternatives available. In both cases, marketing and advertising are instrumental in informing prospects or seekers of their various options. A wide array of marketing tools is used, from billboards to personal selling to the store or church building itself. In both cases personal selling is the most effective means of creating “buy in” on the part of a prospect, because personal connections generate the highest levels of acceptance. Once acceptance occurs, the ultimate goal is to turn your loyal customer, your convert, into an evangelist for your product—whether that product is religious or not.

The key difference between religion and consumer products occurs at the point when the need is first recognized. A consumer need like buying a car, a computer, or a cell phone can be driven by external forces. This is the whole point of marketing—to generate a need or want for a specific

branded product. But for the majority of people, the choice to pursue a religious practice tends to be an internally driven decision. The choice of *which* church or synagogue may be external, but the choice *to pursue* a faith practice is internal.³ It is at the point when a person begins to look for a means to fill that recognized need that the conversion process becomes the same. That initial step is the search for information, which is aided by marketing methods, from advertising to PR to direct mail.

I would suggest here that the increase in religious shopping directly relates to religious consumers' ability to learn about alternatives during the search process. As discussed earlier, it is not enough that you be sociologically released from your ties to a religious institution; if there were no means to find out about something you would prefer, you would stay where you are. However, with the wealth of media alternatives available, a person need only turn on the television or search the Internet and hundreds of religious and spiritual alternatives become available, some virtually, some physically. For many consumers, it really doesn't matter if the religious message is through a communications medium; if a person is looking simply for an uplifting message and doesn't care about community and fellowship, online and televised churches may suit this religious shopper just fine. In sum, it is the combination of no fixed ties to a community and readily available information about alternatives that creates the increasingly popular shopping mentality around religion.

Pre-affiliation is identical to consideration. In both cases the prospect is still anonymous to the product company or religious institution. While marketers may be more blatantly aggressive at this point, religious institutions take the soft sell approach. We will see again and again that religious organizations do not push seekers to join the church or to commit to a belief system before they are ready. Membership is cultivated through small increments. Take a class and if you like it, you can take another. What happens between the first and second class, however, is that relationships are formed so that the person is committing not just to the study of the belief system, but also to the friendships he or she is developing. However, whether hard or soft sell, both marketers and religious organizations are attempting to cultivate a long-term user for their good or service. In support of this, different methods are used. Churches may use outreach programs as an attempt at establishing relationships. Open houses and free books are popular tactics used in this regard. This might be followed up with asking people to attend an additional meeting or to sample a small group. For marketers, it may be requesting more information like e-mail addresses or phone numbers, so that a more personalized, subsequent interaction can take place.

Conversion is different in the marketing sense than in the religious one. Marketers consider a person converted once they have made a purchase, not when they have become a repeat user. But in the religious framework, conversion does not usually occur until the belief system has become part of

the person's identity. In both cases, the ultimate goal is for the convert to take on the identity of the product.

The final step in marketing is the most important, particularly in these times of easily available, virtually identical alternatives. That step is converting someone into an evangelist for the product—religious or otherwise. For consumer products this entails providing customer service, product information, and branded events. For religious groups this starts with confession (the final step) and then providing opportunities to evangelize.

Overall the psychological, if not physical, steps in both of these processes are identical: the seeker/consumer becomes aware of a choice, makes it part of his or her consideration set, purchases the product, and then wants to feel good about having made the decision. There are obviously larger considerations when choosing a truth/belief system than when choosing a computer or a bar of soap, but recognizing that the underlying process is the same aids in our understanding of why purchasing a product feels on some level like a religious experience, and how religion could become just one more product to fulfill consumers' needs.

The process of conversion is nothing new. What is new is that over the past 50 years it has been applied to consumer products. Consumers take on brands as part of their personal identity and in turn become evangelists for the product. The irony is that conversion and evangelizing have traditionally been religious processes, and now that religious institutions are reclaiming the concept of self-promotion, they are being chastised for being marketers. Thus it is not religious conversion that has changed, it is that consumer goods have taken ownership of the experience. In writing about missionaries and monetary fund marketers, Russell Belk (2000, p. 343) has come to a similar conclusion.

The conversion experience...marketers seek is brand, store, or place loyalty. But while the goods and services marketers offer may be real, the paradisaical bliss they promise has proven equally as ephemeral as the parallel promises of missionaries and monetary funds. In each case these change agents hold out images of material utopias that create, enlarge, sustain, and nurture, but ultimately dash human hopes. The one perhaps redeeming feature of the consumer goods marketers' promises of paradise is that we largely recognize the puffery and have few illusions that the goods promoted will actually bring us bliss. This is not to say that we have entirely given up the hope that they will. But we have been fooled so often in the past that we are no longer surprised when the acquisition and possession of a new car, clothing outfit, or fragrance fails to make us the popular and successful person shown in the ads. And alternative attributions may locate the fault less with the product than with our selves. A lingering doubt remains whether we have such incontrovertible flaws that even our latest acquisition, with

all its magical power, cannot help us. And if we ultimately fail to find nirvana with our purchases, we may still be grateful to the marketer for having tried to help us achieve it. For our parts, at least we have tried to find material happiness, and with luck next time we will succeed. For with the help and encouragement of marketers, we can always hope.

Whether we are talking about religion or brands, what we are searching for is a sense of hope, a sense of satisfaction, perhaps even nirvana. Today that sense is as likely to be generated by a product as it is by a preacher. However, as Roof (1993a) has said, “Deeply influenced by a culture of consumption, boomers have grown up with religion made into a commodity and have looked on it in much the same way as other purchasable goods” (p. 195). Thus the product and the preacher may just well be the same thing.

The marriage of marketing and religion

Brand communities and brand cults

Generation Y is a new kind of consumer...Looking for community, these 78 million young people...want their brands to express a new reality—one in which they're interactive, interconnected and involved. These findings...have particularly significant implications for children's business retailers: change your goal from selling a product to creating a hip, community experience.

(Children's Business, March 1, 1999)

The goal of marketing is to transform products into objects with meaning, not just for Gen Y, but for all consumers. This is particularly in evidence when we examine brand communities and brand cults. Marketing cultures fill in the void left by social structures that have abdicated their position in society. Just because people are not attending church doesn't mean that they do not value community. Just because people are not professing faith to a single religion does not mean that they do not trust or have faith in other institutions. Robert Putnam's now famous *Bowling Alone* thesis demonstrated that old types of community were no longer robust, but that newer ones, like the Sierra Club and women's groups were growing, and had replaced traditional communities. Now brand communities are yet another new method of coming together and these, too, are replacing traditional forms of community.

The idea of a brand community was first espoused by Albert M. Muniz, Jr. and Thomas C. O'Guinn (2001). According to their research, “a brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (p. 412). Brand communities, unlike traditional communities, coalesce around a

manufactured product, which makes the community specialized. The product is geographically dispersed because the media that advertises the product is dispersed, and because the users of the product are dispersed. These product users do, however, have multiple points of contact that may or may not occur in a physical space. And, as we will see, these communities demonstrate a number of social interactions similar to those of a physically based, traditional community.

Muniz and O'Guinn explain that, to date, the discourse of community has centered on the idea that modernity and consumerism have contributed to the demise of community. They argue, rather, that community has not disappeared, but exists within the commercial culture as brand communities. These communities are "most likely to form around brands with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history, and threatening competition. Also, things that are publicly consumed may stand a better chance of producing communities than those consumed in private" (p. 415). Thus history and competition (with its ominous sense of doom) aid in generating meaning and a sense of purpose in these communities.

The authors support their thesis with sociological theories about other types of communities. The first idea is that of neotribalism, which suggests that individualism is declining and in its place are neotribes that "are characterized by fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal" (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 76, quoted in Muniz and O'Guinn). Brand communities are fluid in that they regularly meet in cyberspace, but there are no regulations on participation. They meet in person for periodic events sponsored by the product company and these gatherings are usually the only time that members come together physically. Brand communities are also similar to "communities of limited liability" (Hunter and Suttles 1972; Jannowitz 1952); that is, they are like urban neighborhoods, which are "intentional, voluntary, and characterized by partial and differential involvement" (p. 414). Both of these theories suggest that communities do not require intense, consistent interaction on the part of members.

Muniz and O'Guinn claim that these groups are communities, and not simply a mass of people, because they "exhibit three traditional markers of community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility" (p. 412). Shared consciousness, or what Joseph Gusfield (1978) calls "consciousness of kind," describes how members feel connected both to the brand and to each other. This connection, often forged by a quality that members cannot articulate, delineates users from nonusers. The authors include two underlying aspects of shared consciousness: legitimacy—someone who really knows the brand and thus legitimately belongs in the community; and oppositional brand loyalty—demonstrating opposition to opposing brands. In the study, which examined Ford Broncos, Macs, and Saabs, community members expressed disdain for those who drive Broncos for "the wrong reason," for example, because they happen to

be trendy. For Mac users, expressing contempt for IBM and Microsoft is an ongoing theme.

Rituals and traditions, for any community, reproduce meaning for the group both internally and externally and aid in maintaining the community culture. For brand communities, these rituals and traditions center on product experiences. For Saab owners, one ritual is to wave or honk to one another when they pass on the street, almost like a secret handshake. Tradition is perpetuated through “celebrating the history of the brand.” For Mac users, this manifests in having intricate knowledge of Steve Jobs, the company founder, and knowing the importance of January 24, 1984—the day Macintosh was introduced. Being aware of such rituals and traditions defines true believers. Moving from a marginal community member to an insider becomes a strong incentive to become more involved with the brand, and learning rituals and traditions is part of that process. Another important aspect of ritual and tradition is the sharing of stories.

Storytelling is an important means of creating and maintaining community. Stories based on common experiences with the brand serve to invest the brand with meaning, and meaningfully link community member to community member. Communities traditionally create and retell myths about what happens to those who leave the safety of the community to venture out to the unknown world. The telling of these stories has a ritualistic character about it, and certainly represents a strong tradition within the brand communities.

(Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 423)

These stories fall into a number of categories. For Saab users they may include “odyssey” stories, which include tales of traveling adventures and sleeping in the car. Others talk about life saving stories, which support Saab’s safety attribute. For Mac users, stories include “Mac immunity” stories, which tell of how viruses do not attack this brand. Interestingly these myths or stories may initially come from a “commercial text.” Marketers help perpetuate stories “by publishing and distributing community socialization materials such as histories, important brand stories and myths, and insider talk in the form of marketing communications such as brand magazines” (p. 423). However the community does not swallow this information whole hog, but rather acts as an interpretative community (Fish 1980; Scott 1994), adding their own input about how the brand should be presented to those both inside and outside the community.

The final aspect of community discussed by Muniz and O’Guinn is moral responsibility. This manifests in responsibility to the whole community as well as individual members. Two missions are included in this responsibility: “(1) integrating and retaining members, and (2) assisting brand community members in the proper use of the brand” (p. 424). Integrating and retaining

members means helping others learn about proper behaviors with the brand. For example, if someone is a Mac user, it would be blasphemous to also use a PC. Assisting others may include offering basic help and guidance in using a product as well as providing information on additional sources that will assist them.

James McAlexander, John Schouten, and Harold Koenig (2002) further developed the concept of the brand community. One key additional concept is that the relationships in the community are threefold: community member to brand, community member to firm, and community members to each other. Within these complex interactions, community members share “essential resources that may be cognitive, emotional or material in nature” (p. 38), but most of all they create and negotiate meaning, which the authors suggest is true of all communities.

McAlexander *et al.* initially thought to base their ideas on Daniel Boorstin’s (1974) invisible consumption communities—communities based on what people consumed as opposed to interpersonal, geographically tied groups. However, their fieldwork suggested that there were “subcultures of consumption” (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), groups in which people were more tightly connected than Boorstin had assumed. They found this to be true in their study of brandfests, events that “provide for geotemporal distillations of a brand community that afford normally dispersed member entities the opportunity for high-context interaction” (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002, p. 41). More specifically, these are events put together by marketers as a means to provide more personal interaction with the brand, the people who produce it, and other brand owners.

McAlexander *et al.* did some of their fieldwork at Jamborees and Camp Jeep, events that allow consumers to learn how to drive their Jeep off road and to talk with the maker of the vehicle. Learning to drive with an expert helps move consumers toward being “legitimate” brand community members because they are more versed in the correct use of the product. These brandfests also allow for interaction between more and less experienced brand users. McAlexander *et al.* also suggest that communities are solidified through inviting friends and family to share their brand experience, which is promoted by the brand company. This helps to integrate the community because users have continuous reinforcement of their brand beliefs. “Sharing meaningful consumption experiences strengthens interpersonal ties and enhances mutual appreciation for the product, the brand, and the facilitating marketers. Virtual ties become real ties. Weak ties become stronger. Stronger ties develop additional points of attachment” (p. 44). Moreover, these personal relationships act as exit barriers to the community, making it more difficult should someone decide to leave or switch.

Further developing the idea of communities and then relating it to religion can be seen in subsequent work that Muniz did with Hope Jensen Schau (2005) in examining the Apple Newton community. The

Apple Newton was the predecessor to the Palm Pilot, and though it was discontinued by Apple, this did not stop avid fans of the product from building a community to support and perpetuate the use of the product. The narratives that this community uses most reflect that of a religious community, including stories that contain themes of persecution, miracles, and resurrection.

Adding to his earlier work, here Muniz with Schau suggests that brand communities are defined “by their capacity for powerful and transformative experiences. Many of these experiences have religious and magical overtones” (2005, p. 738). These experiences become shared through community myths, which in turn further solidify relationships within the group. Within the Apple Newton community, the myths surround “survival, the miraculous, and the return of the creator” (p. 739). The authors state that these themes not only stem from the context of the community, but also are “indicative of the very clear and resilient need humans have to believe in something or someone outside mundane reality” (p. 739). Like a religious community, Newton enthusiasts feel compelled to explain their brand. Oftentimes this comes up when defending themselves against conversion to other products. These members fight back by demonstrating the wonders of Newton. Muniz and Schau see this as a fundamental religious aspect of the community—the use of these stories is an effort to create a world where Newton flourishes and nonbelievers are converted.

Religious aspects are in evidence in other ways as well. Community members are empowered through their faith in the brand. A slogan often used by the group is “keep the faith,” and myths exist about how faith in the product was rewarded. Online community members share tales of how wireless technology, which did not exist at the time of the Newton’s creation, can be configured to work with the Newton. Community members see this as a magical element of the product. Survival tales are legion. Community members often talk about the product being indestructible, thus suggesting that Newton has become a religious totem. Tales of miraculous recovery—data once lost is recovered—are also common. Such stories are often responded to in the online community with religious affirmations such as, “Hallelujah, I believe!” (p. 742). Finally, tales of resurrection—that some day Apple will see the error of its way and bring back the Newton—is a recurring theme in this community. All of these myths and the reactions to them suggest a strong similarity between this brand community and more traditional religious groups. In fact, the authors state, “Our findings reveal important properties of brand communities and, at a deeper level, speak to the communal nature of religion and the enduring human need for religious affiliation” (p. 737).

Taking the community analogy still further, the symbiotic relationship between religion and marketing has been adopted by the marketing industry under the rubric of the brand cult—the new gold standard for brand success.

There is little discernible difference between brand communities and brand cults other than as a way to further equate products with religion and, perhaps, the level of commitment by cult members.

Brand cults are self-selected groups that surround a particularly powerful branded product. A good example of this is Mac users (as mentioned earlier, this group was also researched as a brand community). People who use Macintosh computers are devoted to the brand. Mac users share information, use a special language, and even have their own trade show (Macworld). Products become a form of religion for these brand cult members, providing rituals, traditions, and a shared worldview.

While Apple has come up repeatedly as an example, it is not the only brand cult. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) studied Harley Davidson users, and while they do not refer to them as a cult, they do say that the brand is “in effect, a religious icon, around which an entire ideology of consumption is articulated” (p. 50). In *The Power of Cult Branding*, Matthew Ragas and B. J. Bueno (2002) list nine different successful cult brands, including Apple and Harley Davidson, but also Linux, the Volkswagen Beetle, Jimmy Buffett, and Oprah.

Douglas Atkin (2004), a strategic marketer for an advertising agency and the creator of the cult brand concept,⁴ found in his research (p. xiii) that:

[T]he same dynamics are at play behind the attraction to brands and cults. They may vary in degree of strength (although not always), but not in type...When research subjects were recounting their reasons for joining and committing, they were describing the profound urges to belong, make meaning, feel secure, have order within chaos, and create identity...The sacred and profane are being bound by the essential desires of human nature, which seeks satisfaction wherever it can.

Atkin, too, studied Apple and Harley Davidson users along with eBay and JetBlue consumers, among others. His conclusion was that as commercialism increases, so, too, will the commercialization of organizations that sell “community, meaning and identity” (p. xiv).

What we can learn from this examination of brand communities and brand cults is that as our physical communities have become more fractured, other social agents have stepped in to fill the void. Online communities have been popular among different demographic segments and now brand communities provide an opportunity to come together through products that engender shared interest. As Howard Rheingold (2000) noted in his examination of online communities, these groups seem to function best and are more cohesive when physical interaction occurs in addition to other forms of interrelationship. Thus annual marketing events aid in maintaining the online interaction.

These groups are true communities with shared experiences, rituals, and myths and a sense of responsibility to the community. That they occur in relationship to a marketed product does not diminish the importance of these communities for their group members. If we think about religious groups as “brand communities,” we can see where religions have taken on some aspects of these product groups. For instance, less face-to-face meetings are acceptable and are supplemented with mediated interaction. Big events, like Christmas and Rosh Hashanah, become similar to the brandfests of the brand communities—a few key times a year in which community members interact and repeat their myths and rituals is enough to perpetuate the group.

Intimacy is also an important aspect of community. The obvious question becomes: how does a brand create intimacy? In part it occurs through the elements that we have been talking about—shared experiences, the development of myths, and the acting out of rituals. Intimacy is also fostered by the relationships within the community, and as marketers have advocated, bringing family and friends to the brand is the most effective means of connecting consumers to the community. At the ultimate (from the marketers’ perspective), product purchasers will become “community-integrated customers [who] serve as brand missionaries, carrying the marketing message into other communities” (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002, p. 51)—the very essence of the marketing relationship curve.

Faith brands

There are numerous similarities between marketing and religion, and the line between the two has become increasingly blurred. Evangelicals are marketing by using demographics and psychographics; marketers have learned the value of creating brand cult members—users so enthusiastic for a product that they become product evangelicals. Religions and brands create myths for understanding the world. Products and faiths are both sources for identity creation. From the marketing side, there have come brand cults; now, religions are faith brands.

Faith brands are spiritual products that have been given popular meaning and awareness through marketing. They have a readily recognizable name and logo, though there may or may not be a tagline. These products may be books, religious courses, a spiritual practice, a pastor, or some combination of all of these. More so than with consumer products, spokespeople—pastor, rabbi, or television personality—are an important aspect of the brand.

In the next section of this book, I will present some of the most popular and profitable faith brands. Church courses, like 40 Days of Purpose and the Alpha Course, which has significant brand recognition in England and is becoming increasingly known in the United States, are important marketing products for bringing prospects into a church. These brands are highly associated with the people who created them—Rick Warren and Nicky

Gumbel respectively. These pastors are important elements of the brand, just as the new televangelists—Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, T. D. Jakes—are faith brands with line extensions that include their ministries, their books, and their conferences for believers as well as church leaders. Note here that it is the televangelists that are the faith brands and not their churches. Joel Osteen, for example, is the pastor of the Lakewood Church in Houston, and promotion for the church is conducted under the “Joel Osteen Ministries” logo rather than a separate logo for the church.

Joel Osteen will be examined, as his is the country’s largest megachurch. We will also look at Oprah Winfrey as part of this group, because while there is no doubt that she is a major brand, I believe that she is also a faith brand. Her show is an important example of the secular becoming more sacred, just as Joel Osteen is an example of the sacred becoming more secular.

Kabbalah, too, is on the list of faith brands because it is now widely known throughout the world as the result of a well-orchestrated marketing campaign through the Kabbalah Centre. This is the most product-oriented of the faith brands, and it also has its own popular spokesperson in Madonna, even if she is not the leader of the organization. Many of the organizations discussed in the next section are part of megachurches, but they will not be separated out because it is usually not the church itself that makes up the brand. These organizations will be discussed, however, within the context of the other faith brands.

As we will see, faith brands act like other consumer products. They are repackaged and retooled to appeal to consumer tastes. This means changing the product as well as the packaging. In the case of religion, this means changing the content of religious services to appeal to specific target audiences. For many this has meant shorter, more entertaining weekly services. It also means marrying the product to the faith brand message. For example, if Joel Osteen is “the smiling preacher,” then the content of his sermons must match this image in order to perpetuate the brand. Therefore, sermons are overwhelmingly positive and uplifting without mention of sin or salvation.

Faith brands, as marketed products, take on the ultimate goal of all marketers—growth. Growth is measured in terms of attendance as well as in terms of the number of products sold. While some may measure growth in terms of the number of actual members added to their church or synagogue, simply getting people in the door seems to override this goal. Growth can also be measured in terms of brand extensions or franchises.

That faith brands and brand cults exist demonstrates the full extent to which marketing and religion have taken on aspects of one another. In a culture where we spend more time with media than any activity other than working and sleeping, and that media is supported by advertising and marketing, it should not be surprising that religion would need to take on aspects of the market in order to stay relevant within the culture. It is at

its base a product, competing against an overwhelming number of other products in the consumer marketplace.

If religion is to win the marketing war (and marketing is a war as evidenced by the terminology—objective, strategy, tactic), it has to fight with every tool available.⁵ If a religious institution wants someone to get up out of their Barcolounger, drive through traffic, sit for an hour or more during a service, and then drive home again—all this when the person could be engaging with a plethora of media and entertainment options—then that religious institution needs to offer a product that’s worth the effort. If it means changing the message and the way it is packaged to get people in the door, so be it. Moreover, in order for a religious institution to be noticed by people, it has to find a way to “stick out in the clutter,” that is, be heard above all the other noise of the culture. That’s what branding does. But taking on the mantle of branding means also taking on the mantel of marketing. This means pandering to audience tastes, no matter what the consequences are, all in the quest for the elusive goal—growth.