

Should You Be Building An Iconic Brand?

By Alex Hiam, author, *Marketing For Dummies*

An icon is a potent symbol, traditionally associated with religion in some cultures. In the U.S., a country where consumerism is virtually a religion, it's no surprise that the term has been borrowed to describe the most meaningful of brand identities. The Starbucks name and logo have high recognition and convey a clear meaning – sophisticated coffee for busy professionals. People who like a strong espresso have but to see the ubiquitous green siren logo and their mouths water for another. The apple-with-a-bite-out-of-it of Macintosh computers is probably also worthy of the “iconic brand” identification.

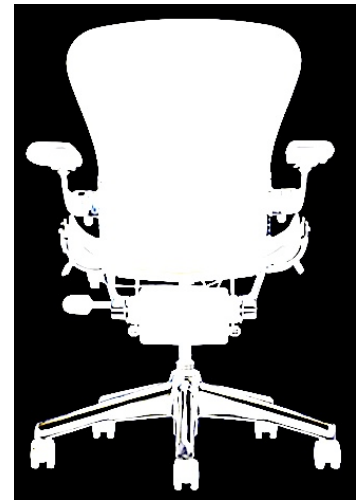
Unique is Different from Popular

Everyone knows the Coca-Cola brand, but I wouldn't call it an iconic brand. It lacks the quirkily defining personality of an icon. As a symbol, it's really too well known to stand for anything iconic. To clarify this point, think of iconic stars – actors or athletes who are so famous for their unique look or style that they have come to represent their style, not just themselves (a much shorter but longer-lived set of stars than any list of today's 'most popular').

Coca-Cola is the heavy-hitting dominant brand name of the soda world, and that's enough. It doesn't need to be iconic too.

An Iconic Success

Herman Miller gets my vote for a great iconic brand. This company pioneered the modern look in furniture in the fifties and sixties (Eames Chairs, for example), and more recently, staged a comeback with the Aeron Chair, itself an iconic brand by now. The company name is not as well known among consumers as, say, Starbucks or Macintosh brands, but the company does not always market to consumers. It's an iconic B-to-B brand, with sales to furniture retailers and to the office design and furnishings industry. Its occasional home runs in the home market give it a certain stylish luster that helps keep it alive as an icon of fresh, creative design concepts. Not everyone knows the brand, but those who do have a clear affinity for it and a strong sense of the style and design elegance it represents.



Caution: Avoid Price-based Promotion!

Herman Miller spent three quarters of a million to settle a price-fixing lawsuit out of court. Why? The company pushes pretty hard to minimize advertising of cheap prices by its retailers. I think they're right to do what they can, within the law of

course, to keep the message on the brand's elegant style and design and not on pricing.

The Iconic Path to Brand Success

If you, like most of us, are working with a brand that lacks the worldwide, instant recognizability of a Coca-Cola or McDonalds, your path to success *might* be to keep hitting consumers over the head with a consistent brand identity until your unaided awareness ratings rise. However, give some thought to the iconic-brand alternative instead.

Can you build a clear, strong, stylish, unique image for your brand? Can you give it such a unique personality that it gains a specific, clear, appealing meaning in spite of the brand clutter plaguing most markets? Brands, like stars, come and go. To endure over the long haul, you have to become a dominant mass-market brand, or you can become a unique icon with a distinctive personality that allows you to live beyond the limits of any specific product's life cycle – like Herman Miller has. For one thing (and it's a very big thing!), iconic brands cost far less to build and maintain than mass-market brands. It's a case of marketing smart versus marketing hard.

Being Unique Above All Else

There is a tendency among some, even at the most illustrious business schools, to treat the term 'iconic' as a trendy synonym for successful mass-market brands. Iconic brands are unique, special, distinctive, and have very strong and appealing personalities. They have the kind of recognition that, say, the actor Cary Grant used to have and still does among those who watch old movies. No matter what the film (or brand narrative), it was always, obviously, Cary Grant in the lead role. His iconic brand identity eclipsed any specific role, and it proved so personal that nobody took it over when he retired.

That's what you want to strive for as you build an iconic brand. Give it a unique personality and a highly distinctive voice, then be true to its personality and voice no matter what. In iconic branding, the brand's identity trumps everything else in the marketing plan. Don't extend an iconic brand too far, for example, or you'll water down its meaning and lose the special boost in sales and loyalty that your iconic status confers. (Are you listening, Apple and Starbucks?)

