

5. Warning - don't innovate here!



By [Douglas Kruger](#)

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Semi-sacred cows and levers to leave alone.

A brand is not what most people think it is. Ask a new or small-business owner what their brand is and they are likely to spin off a set of well-worn, fairly meaningless phrases: 'My brand is excellent customer service, professionalism and dependability.'

Wrong. These things are expected of you, but they are not your brand. Not at all.

Brand is more about personality, tone, flavour, vibe, feel and a way of looking at the world. It's the story, the outlook, the lifestyle. Take the quintessential example: Harley-Davidson. When you think of Harley, do you think of customer service? Or professionalism? Certainly, you expect to experience these things when walking into an outlet, but they are not what Harley-Davidson is.

Harley is open roads and lost highways. It's the American dream, endless desert landscapes, rock 'n' roll, roadside diners, beautiful blonde babes, leather jackets and spectacular midlife crises.

Whenever you struggle to put your finger on the idea of what a brand actually is, try to think of it this way: Stephen King and Dr Seuss are both writers. But they are completely different brands. It's the feel, the tone, the flavour that counts. It's their core 'them-ness'.

Understanding your brand can provide you with an extremely useful set of parameters within which to innovate. If your brand is Mercedes-Benz, then diners and rock 'n' roll are not part of your brand personality, and you would not innovate in ways that enable that lifestyle.

But when you understand that your brand is about luxury and exclusivity, your opportunities to innovate practically line up before you. All you have to do is continually ask, 'How do we make this more luxurious, more elite? How do we make interacting with our brand continuously feel like you are being served by a well-mannered concierge, handing you useful suggestions and easing your way?' You can do very practical things inside a car with that brand idea as a reference point. Hence, your brand becomes your road map for innovation.

But once the brand is well established, tinkering with it can be very dangerous. Imagine if Harley were to try to appeal to a bigger market with a softened version of their bikes - ones that might appeal to tie-wearing corporate types or soccer moms. Doing so would be outright brand suicide. That's not what they are, and their faithful followers would never forgive

them for betraying that brand proposition. In a way, a brand is like a religion. People believe in it, and woe betide you if you do not continue to represent its values faithfully. You may expand upon those values. You may take them further. You may champion them into the future with new features and approaches, but to retain the faithful, the brand must always do the thing people want from it.

History Channel and Subaru are two examples I've seen recently of brands playing with fire. Flick over to History Channel and you will see a line-up of shows with titles like *Duck Dynasty*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Storage Wars Texas*, and a plethora of other reality shows that have little or no connection with history. They've tried to fudge the lines by using the tagline: 'History, made every day.' It doesn't work.

The only reason that this broken brand has not been replaced by a competitor is that there currently are no competitors. But the day is coming. They have been untrue to their core promise, they have betrayed the faithful and abandoned the central value that appealed to their viewers. When another vessel comes by, the unhappy passengers will almost certainly jump ship.

Subaru is an interesting case scenario because, so far, the company is only flirting with brand betrayal. To explain this one, let's take a momentary step back and talk about cigarettes. In the 1960s, cigarette manufacturers decided that it would be cool to broaden their market. Why should they advertise only to working-age males, they reasoned. They could also target grandmothers, nuns, children, infants and pregnant mothers going into labour ...

So most cigarette manufacturers changed their marketing message, almost simultaneously, and tried to appeal to everyone. One smart manufacturer cottoned on to a law identified later in *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding* by Al and Laura Ries. The law essentially states that the narrower you focus your marketing, the broader your appeal. The broader you focus your marketing, the more dissipated your appeal. Weird, perhaps, but its validity is borne out by many real-life studies and examples.



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This cigarette manufacturer, which had some completely forgettable generic name at the time, rebranded with a focus on appealing only to the über-macho male, and no one else. The company started using cowboys in all its ads. In other words, instead of doing what every other competitor was doing and trying to gain a broader market, it narrowed its market focus to a laser point.

The rebranded company was Marlboro, a brand that quickly came to dominate its market. Counter-intuitively, women seemed to prefer Marlboro as well, not despite the advertising, but somehow because of it.

And with this background, we now return to Subaru. Known as the maker of tough rally cars, and renowned for its four-wheel-drive capabilities, Subaru has started selling in huge numbers to South African soccer moms, who use them as

moms' taxis. When Subaru realised this, the company started to change its advertising (tinkering with the core brand), to give the message: 'South Africa's favourite mom's taxi.'

Here's the hitch: moms don't buy Subarus because they are moms' taxis. They buy them because they are hard-core rally cars. Shift the core proposition, and you could destroy your brand.

In *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, the authors observe that when you do this, you will usually experience about four or five years of spikes in sales (it works temporarily), followed by a long, slow decline into obsolescence as your brand dissipates and becomes meaningless - just another commodity to be purchased on price. If Subaru wants more moms to use its cars, it should stick to the hard-core rally-monster message - that's what got the moms into the cars in the first place.

Using your core brand proposition as a set of parameters for innovation is a very good idea. Taking what your brand is and does and innovating outwards from this starting point is an excellent way to go. I would say that you shouldn't even begin to innovate until you understand your own brand. However, if your business is new and you have not yet nailed down your core proposition, innovating may actually create your, as yet undetermined, brand.

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