

'People like their products to come from a clear somewhere'

By [Robin Lauffer](#)

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LONDON, UK: Provenance and Marketing: Robin Lauffer discusses the nature of brand heritage. Should brands proclaim their history proudly? Or does trading on past successes come with unwanted baggage?



More people travel the world more than ever before. Even those who don't take regular trips away are exposed to so many cultures through the TV programs they watch, the music they listen to, the food they eat and even the people they live alongside. Our society is more multicultural than ever before. So it might seem obvious to suggest the brands are increasingly playing on their roots, whether that is in the form of encouraging local consumers or exporting their heritage as an exotic product to other regions or countries. But there is more to provenance and marketing than simply slapping a 'made in the UK' sticker on a product and hoping this will appeal to your target audience.

Firstly let's establish exactly what is meant by provenance and marketing. Essentially it is any instance where a brand takes the national or regional heritage of the product and uses it within their marketing. This might sound straight forward but there are a number of considerations for brands that use this tactic; how far should you take it, what are the stereotypes of that country or region (both positive and negative), and perhaps most importantly is it a natural fit for that product to play on its provenance.

Those who are in doubt that this is a rising trend should take a look at Ocean Spray's current TV advert 'Good Taste from a Good Place'. It features two cranberry harvesters, joking about English taste whilst also hamming up their "American-ness". It comes across as a positive, quirky image: almost a little slice of America. Likewise in the alcohol sector we've seen brands like Peroni successful play on their Italian-ness and Malibu rum using its heritage as a Jamaican brand.

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Ocean Spray is actually a great example of how to do provenance and marketing well. They have carefully handled the symbols and stereotypes of two national identities British and American. Successful provenance and marketing is really about finding the attitude and feeling of that area. For Ocean Spray that means quite subtly conveying America - there are no flags and no classic American backdrops like the skyline of New York. It has used people with mild country accents who we want to associate with harvesting the key component of the drink, and an attitude of naïve optimism that we in the UK interpret immediately as American.

So why are we seeing this rising trend? I think one issue is sheer competition in virtually every industry, paired with the downturn which has made consumers more careful and selective. In many sectors such as FMCG and automotive there is huge potential for imitation. A competitor can always copy your product, replicate your service and your design, but what is much harder to copy is authentic origin and heritage. This is as true whether you're a person or a product - there's grounding, a truth and an authenticity when you go back to a product's origin. In our highly globalised world, consumers don't automatically buy into big global brands which can sometimes be seen as part of 'faceless' companies.

People like their products to come from a clear 'somewhere'. A global brand might be sold from everywhere, but often benefits from originating from a particular place to feel authentic.

I'm not talking about slapping on a flag. It won't work. Rather it's about tapping into the value of a country, such as Italian style for Peroni. By focusing on the effortless style, passion and flair that we associate with Italy they created something with real standout. Successful provenance and marketing campaigns are based on genuine understanding of a country and using that intelligently to give depth to a brand.

Consumer association between products and their memories and feelings about destinations can work well in marketing. So if drinking a certain brand of beer or eating a certain type of biscuit takes us back to a beach holiday or a memorable experience, we enjoy the strong feeling that association creates. With budgets remaining tight for many brands, national identity branding or tapping into aspects of a country's identity can be an effective shortcut to creating a distinctive brand. It's a fast and efficient method to generate a reaction from consumers.

However brands that choose this route also need to ensure it is an intuitive link. Watches from Switzerland make sense as we associate that country with precision and excellence. Likewise lingerie or more generally fashion items from France works well. Other brands perhaps wouldn't be able to use their national heritage in the same way. For example Zara is an impressive fashion business but is based in Spain, which is a country not particularly known for its fashion so making this link would not resonate with consumers in the same way.

'The risk of a backlash should be a serious consideration'

There is a potential downside to associating a brand with national identity. The risk of a backlash should be a serious consideration. If perceptions change to the country of origin, the brand could also be tarnished and ultimately suffer from a sales drop. Protecting a product from this is difficult. Even countries that might be seen as 'safe' can quickly lose credibility or reputation. For example in the last couple of weeks American's perception and feelings towards British products and brands is likely to have changed dramatically. Other brands, in completely different sectors from BP, that also have British in their name or market themselves on being from the UK, may find American consumers taking out their anger on them.

So it is vital for brands that choose to use this technique to really do their research. Know what association with that region or country means to different people and how they feel about it.

'Brands need to hone in on elements of provenance that are easy to understand'

Any brand that tries to rush it may find themselves falling into the traps of well-worn clichés that irritate consumers rather than generate a positive reaction. Likewise at the other end of the scale brands need to hone in on elements of provenance that are easy to understand and resonate with them. References that are too obscure will be lost on the target audience which again misses the point. So there is a fine line that brands must tread; which is about finding the compelling element whether that's a link to culture, an attitude or a shared memory.

Whilst there are risks, there are also brilliant benefits for brands that use effective provenance links in their marketing. Over and above anything else, in the long term a compelling heritage, communicated well can create stronger links between brands and their consumers. But they must remember consumers are savvier than ever and will only respond to brands they see as being genuine, that really live and breathe that country's values.

I think we will continue to see national branding and marketing as a growing trend, in the war on differentiation. It will be interesting to see whether consumer's attraction to local companies means marketing will also push their regional differentiations more. Such as the association with the West Country for cider brands like Magners in the UK. Potentially brands from any sector can harness this technique, but they must do so in an intelligent manner or miss passing consumers by."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin Lauffer is director of planning at The Bank, an advertising agency whose clients include Peroni, Grolsch and William Hill.

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