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# Marketing Management: A Cultural Perspective

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(eds.)

## Chapter 13.

### Driving a Deeply Rooted Brand:

### Cultural Marketing Lessons Learned from GM's Hummer Advertising

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#### Overview

This chapter explains how marketers can use netnographic, ethnographic and historical analysis of a brands' socio-cultural environment to surface local, deeply rooted beliefs and values that influence how a brand resonates with consumers. Drawing from General Motors' culturally most and least sensitive advertisements for its *Hummer* brand of vehicles, the chapter discusses how brands can tap into powerful cultural tensions that traditional marketing research, positioning/targeting, and communication methods tend to overlook. It suggests that marketers should carefully study the cultural patterns and ideological conflicts that surround their brands; listen to owners' and adversaries' definitions of their brands' cultural meanings; and attune their advertising messages to either strengthening their buyers' ideological position, or trying to bridge the socio-cultural divide with conciliatory meanings. This culture-sensitive approach helps commercial and NGO brand managers to connect their brands with powerful cultural patterns rather than wasting advertising dollars by producing socio-cultural backlashes.

#### 13.1 Driving a Deeply Rooted Brand

*"Every single time I go to the southwest, I get accosted by these monstrosities, these repugnant road beasts, these vile vehicular examples of the greedy, lazy Americans. I hate Hummers. H1, H2 or H3, I hate them with a passion that burns as intensely as a thousand suns. I also have serious questions about the value of Hummer owners as human beings. I'm trying really hard to reserve judgment."* (Csosa, 2005, <http://bakersfield.typepad.com/>)

When General Motors first introduced the *Hummer* line of vehicles in 2002, the brand almost instantly provoked passionate responses from American consumers. The *Hummer* truck's iconic, boxy design spoke of freedom, capability and security. No matter how much the *Hummer* H2 and H3 vehicles departed from the military predecessor, the High Mobility Multi-purpose Wheeled Vehicle ("HUMVEE"), their design and functionality left no doubt that owners were superiorly equipped to escape natural or social threats of any epic dimension. Owing to the brand's prominent role in Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Schwarzenegger's dramatic HUMVEE entrance at the Academy Awards in 1991, the perfidious terrorist attacks in 2001, the doomsday movie spectacle "Day After Tomorrow" in 2004, or the devastating hurricane Katrina in 2005, Americans found it easy to imagine themselves roaring away from a desolate scene in a *Hummer* truck, leaving less fortunate drivers behind, stranded or washed away. Unlike most brands, the *Hummer* was deeply rooted in American culture long before it entered the commercial sport

utility vehicle (SUV) market. Only a handful of brands before have been so deeply rooted in their home market's national identity and developed such a strong cultural connection to its identity conflicts. Among them are long-standing national icons such as Harley Davidson and Coca Cola, but also newer brands such as Ben and Jerry's ice cream and Sweat-X clothes, or celebrity brands such as Barack Obama and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

What an exceptional asset for managers to be able to build a brand that is already connected to national meanings so strong that some citizens are ready to defend them with their lives! But what if marketers ignore these meanings and push a potentially conflicting idea of what the brand should stand for? When starting and managing the *Hummer* brand, General Motors rigorously followed key marketing and branding principles popularized by influential writings of Philip Kotler and Kevin Lane Keller (2008), Jean-Noel Kapferer (2008), David Aaker (Aaker 2002), Christian Homburg and colleagues (2009), and many others. These textbooks advised GM with good reason, that in order to build a brand successfully, they must create compelling brand meanings and associations that resonate with a well-defined target group of customers in a specific local environment.

Using the case of GM's advertising for the short-lived *Hummer* brand as an illustrative example, I will show that these traditional procedures tend to underestimate the extent to which consumers attach meanings to brands that may not overlap with those created by an authoritarian firm. And I will show that the audiences relevant for a brand's success are not only the target groups, but also groups of consumers that love to hate the brand. The *Hummer* case evidences that neglecting deeply rooted, consumer-made social and cultural connections of a brand with a national identity can produce detrimental marketing decisions that contribute to killing a brand before its time.

This chapter explains how marketers can study the cultural patterns and ideological conflicts that surround their brands, translate these insights into resonant advertising messages, and thus leverage the equity of their brands. This culture-sensitive approach to positioning a brand in an ideological context helps commercial and NGO brand managers to connect their brands better with existing cultural patterns rather than wasting advertising dollars by producing socio-cultural backlashes.

### 13.2 The Birth of the Hummer Brand

To begin, let us take a step back and sneak into the marketing department of General Motors (GM) at a sunny Detroit day in early 1999. We hear a group of senior marketing executives discussing the latest results from a national market research project that was started to explore opportunities to satisfy customers' exploding demands for extra-large "sport utility vehicles". The research team has confronted potential buyers with a series of prototypes with alternating GM brand labels attached to them. To their surprise, they found that a militaristic, boxy SUV prototype garnished with a fictitious HUMMER logo sparked the most remarkable responses among their respondents. Americans, so the data suggested, wanted a truck that carried the meanings of military ruggedness, security, and sophistication. By the end of the day, GM marketers had decided to pitch "Project Maria"<sup>1</sup> to their general management. And they won.

Soon after the board's decision, the team started negotiations with AM General, the producer of the military HUMVEE and the first civilian version of the truck owned by Arnold Schwarzenegger. Their goal was to co-produce a new line of civilian luxury vehicles named *Hummer*. About three years later, the first *Hummer H2* (see Figure 13.1) left the GM production line at Mishawaka, Indiana. The marketing team got it right. In the U.S. market, the brand hit a nerve with its iconic design and its bold message of distinction. Sales sky-rocketed from the start (see Figure 13.2).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Named after Maria Shriver, wife of Arnold Schwarzenegger and niece of John F. Kennedy.

<sup>2</sup> Source: Interview with Hummer's marketing director in 2005.

**Figure 13.1 A Hummer H2**



### **13.3 The Traditional Positioning/Targeting and Communication Approach**

*“At HUMMER our customers can’t be labeled by color, gender or creed. HUMMER is a mindset. A mindset of daring, self-assured, entrepreneurial people who see HUMMER as being a reflection of themselves – unique.” (Randy Foutch, HUMMER marketing analyst)*

Following the prescriptions of the leading branding experts such as Aaker (2002), Keller (2008), and Kapferer (2008), GM marketers targeted the *Hummer* brand to appeal to affluent consumers that characterize themselves as “rugged individualists,” those people who would skydive, mountain climb, trail bike, camp, fish and hunt; but also as “achievers,” who wanted to reward themselves for having accomplished ambitious goals in sports, business, or the arts. According to *Hummer’s* marketing management, prospective *Hummer* drivers identified themselves as “daring, self-assured, entrepreneurial, individualistic” people, who had no problems with defying social conventions.

In the next traditional step, *Hummer* was positioned against off-road champion and World War I veteran *Jeep* and the emerging class of luxurious SUVs. Even though *Hummer* was clearly part of an existing luxury SUV segment, it was positioned as a “class of its own.” The *Hummer* claim readily reflected this ambitious positioning: “Hummer – Like nothing else.” For *Hummer* marketers, this promise was easily fulfilled. Owing to its iconic, militaristic, masculine, and rugged design, the *Hummer* stood out in the masses of extra large Navigators (Lincoln), Excursions (Ford), Tahoes (Chevrolet), Yukons (GMC) or Escalades (Cadillac). Drawing from the original HUMVEE’s cultural legacy, the brand also carried deep meanings of militaristic ruggedness and sophistication that were unique in the SUV market. For *Jeep*, who has carried such connotations decades earlier, these associations have long faded.

It seemed that marketers would only need to announce the birth of the *Hummer* to sell out the dealers’ lots. In fact, *Hummer* introduced the brand with TV commercials that almost entirely ignored the trucks’ particular cultural legacy. Marketers aired ads named “Urban Techno” and “Giddyup” that appealed to lovers of computer graphics and club culture, but seemed disconnected from the rugged individual

defined as their core target group. *Hummer* marketers also broadcasted spots such as “Training Day” or “Submarine” that pointed at the functional capabilities of the truck, but not at the cultural meanings of the underlying icon.<sup>3</sup> It seemed the *Hummer* brand entered the market with enough iconic design and history to find buyers despite these contradictory messages. Customers quickly filled the void opened by the lack of commercial prescriptions and connected in own stories and meanings the *Hummer* with national myths that have permeated the American cultural context for centuries. These longstanding cultural narratives were well represented by the *Hummer* brand, but not related to techno music, or submarine trucks, or training days.

### 13.4 Limitations of the Traditional Approach

When the smaller *H3* model was introduced to the US market in May 2005, it became apparent how little GM’s traditional marketing approach accounted for the deep cultural roots of its *Hummer* brand.

GM marketers again followed classic textbook positioning/targeting and communication procedures when imagining, designing, and communicating the *Hummer H3*. As a *Hummer* manager reports, the marketing team learned from customer surveys that 40 per cent of the *H2* buyers were female, that the truck was considered too expensive for selling to a mass market, that it was too thirsty for not being despised as a gas-guzzler, and that it was too big to be effortlessly parked.

Their conclusions were unambiguous: Build a truck that is significantly smaller and lower priced, ecologically friendly, and with a friendlier design that appeals to female buyers. Ironically, the *H3* looked strikingly similar to a 2005 Jeep Grand Cherokee, its main competitor.<sup>4</sup>

If we presume that GM’s agency *Modernista* was briefed to communicate these new features, the campaign was right on target. The agency tried the new *H3* ads to be humorous and welcoming to female buyers while highlighting the practical features of the smaller models. For its most straight-forward functional ad, *Modernista* showcased an old-fashioned magician character that showed Americans the “magic” of parking a *Hummer* in a low-clearance parking garage (obviously pointing at the difficulties that *H2* owners experienced with parking). Lance Jenson of *Modernista* admits: “*The parking commercial, that’s pretty, like, ‘duh.’ But we had to do it because being maneuverable is important to a lot of people.*”<sup>5</sup> This ad not only establishes quite remote and irritating cultural references, but also disobeys McMath and Forbes’ (1998) classic rule “Don’t mess with your cash cow”. These authors remind marketers to not discredit the features of their most successful product (i.e. large size / not easy to park) when introducing a line extension.

From a culture-sensitive branding perspective, GM’s traditional positioning/targeting approach got even more bizarre. In an attempt to build cultural capital for the brand, *Hummer* brand managers created a story of a tofu-eating male who acquires a *Hummer H3* to regain the respect of a meatpacking guy that has looked down on him at a supermarket checkout. The spots’ punch line read: “Reclaim your manhood”. This presumably self-ironic ad made strong references to “compensatory consumption” appeals (Holt and Thompson 2004), by suggesting quite squarely that consumers can make up for a lack of masculinity with driving a *Hummer*. The online version of this spot surprisingly came with a different claim: “Restore the balance”. But that was not much better. The second spot in this series featured a woman who buys a

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<sup>3</sup> Some of these spots are available at [www.hummer.com](http://www.hummer.com) [15.03.2011].

<sup>4</sup> *Hummer* features a series of parallels to the Jeep brand. Jeep was a former military brand acquired by Chrysler in 1985 and offers both off-road and SUV products. The design is signified by a massive front grille the similarity of which to the later *H3* grille was the source of legal confrontation among GM and Chrysler in 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Source: [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/28/business/media/28adco.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/28/business/media/28adco.html?_r=1)

*Hummer H3* in response to her child being harassed by the kid of another woman at a public playground. The claim: “Get your girl on” also evoked the unfortunate cultural fame of compensatory consumption. Together, these ads suggested that *Hummers* are for the weak, which directly contradicts both the traditional goal of targeting self-assured, rugged individualists and the deeper cultural references of the brand. These ads were quickly erased from the public eye (including the internet), most likely owing to massive complaints from Hummer owners and dealers that hated the socio-cultural corner in which they were pushed by these messages (see below).

Lastly, at Superbowl 2006, *Modernista* married a Godzilla-type monster with a giant low-tech, tin toy robot. These two ugly giants fell in love while devastating city of apparently Asian style and layout. The two monsters lay together and soon after gave birth to a small *Hummer H3* that drove off from their hands through the devastated cityscape. The caption: “It’s a little monster”.<sup>6</sup>

Hummer owners and dealers that I spoke to over the course of our research project expressed little appreciation for these commercials even though they seemed to address the right target group and some even delivered the key messages: practicability, female drivers wanted, and the image of Hummer as more rugged and “mean” than other brands. But how had Hummer owners perceived the “Reclaim your Manhood”<sup>7</sup> and “Get Your Girl on” television spots? A top-selling Californian Hummer dealer explains in our interview:

*“These spots were just bad marketing. I think that was very bad marketing. They had another H3 and H2 ad out last year or the year before where they had some weird one with techno music on and the car kept changing shape and there was this weird kaleidoscope thing going on. That was annoying. Those were made to drive the younger people to buy the car. But half of those people haven’t graduated from college and can’t afford to buy the car. They were like “hey that is a cool little ad” but it had nothing to do with the car really or anything. Then they had the new one where the guy jumps off the pier and kind of goes in the water and his car turns into the submarine and goes into all that stuff. And the Godzilla commercial, that lost me. How you get a car from a robot and Godzilla creature getting together? Poor advertising! I think people looked at it cause it was a funny ad, but they couldn’t remember what the ad was for or about. They just remembered it was a monster and a robot.”*

Such responses show that even for the most devoted Hummer enthusiasts these ads clearly missed the point of the Hummer’s deep cultural heritage. The spots insulted existing owners rather than supporting their consumer identity projects. The tofu ad, though intended to be ironically self-critical, mainly delivered the idea to our respondents that Hummer is about attenuating a weak self-confidence, a notion that was insulting the intelligence of both Hummer drivers and (sometimes Hummer-hating) vegetarians. The “little monster” spot also subtly fired the public discourse about Hummer owners being racists and prodigals of American natural resources. The two giants were meeting while carelessly destroying a city of an Asian metropolitan layout and gave birth to the H3 in this foreign country. Apparently, that was not the kind of cultural practice that Hummer owners wanted to be associated with, nor was the city relating particularly well to *Hummer’s* American cultural background.

Despite this heap of “poor advertising”, *Hummer H2* and *H3* trucks sales patterns largely followed the typical lifecycle of GM’s extra large mass market SUVs, i.e. the *GMC Yukon* or the *Chevrolet Tahoe* (see Figure 13.2 for a comparison). However, in contrast to its siblings that have been around for centuries (GMC exists since 1200 month, Chevrolet since 1092), the *Hummer* brand was discontinued after only 89 month of market presence.

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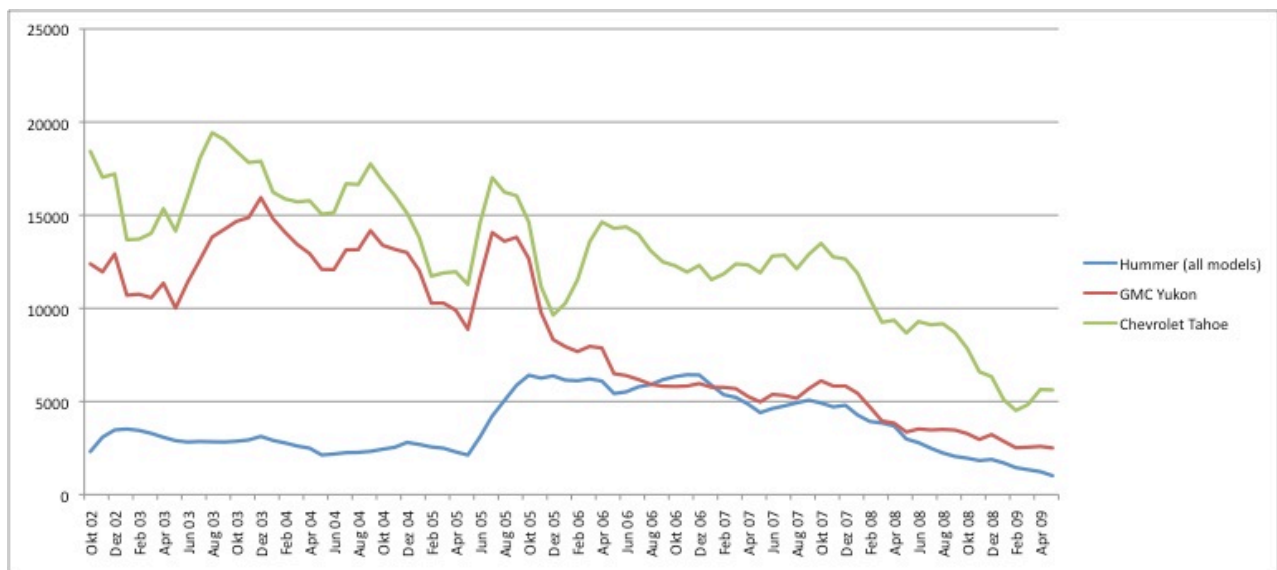
<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.hummer.com/monsters/> [accessed 06/05/2010]

<sup>7</sup> The spot is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL4ZkYPLN38> [6/5/2010], however in an updated version. The original commercial features more pointed characters and ends with the claim “reclaim your manhood”.



Could GM have sold more *Hummers* or significantly extended the length of the brand life cycle, if they had better catered to the brand's deep cultural connections? I cannot develop a definite answer here, since market success depends on more than just good positioning/targeting and communication, but in the next sections I may offer empirical evidence based insights that allow for some educated recommendations.

**Figure 13.2. Averaged monthly unit sales of Hummer vehicles compared to sales of GM's GMC Yukon and Chevrolet Tahoe models. Hummer H2 sales started in June 2002. The H3 entered the market in May 2005. Data Source: GM investor relations website.**



### 13.5 The Culture-Sensitive Approach to Positioning/Targeting and Communication

*„I have 2 Hummers, an H2 & a SUT. Our Experiences:*

*Love - We get waved to by children like we are driving a fire truck. People are constantly asking us to sit in, look in & even feel it. Many thumbs up and "I wish I had ones."*

*Hates - People actually try and cut us off on the freeway. We have been cussed at, yelled at, given the thumbs down for "killing children" (not sure what that was about). Six times in the last three months people have tried to steal a parking spot from us when we were waiting first. When we confronted one, the guy actually jump out of his truck and acted like he was going to go after my wife. Then I jumped out and he sped off shouting cuss words at us.*

*This only makes me want to drive a Hummer more. Why be like everyone else, when you can make a statement and cause much hooplah everyday!" (John, email interview)*

No doubt, defining the target group's individual attitudes and characteristics such as "daring", "entrepreneurial", and "unconventional" is important for marketers to get a sense of whom to sell to and where to find these potential buyers. But as the Hummer case shows, deeply rooted brands like *Hummer* thrive on shared cultural narratives, many of which precede the manufacturers brand building activities. *Hummer* touches upon more than just individuals' preferences for distinctly designed, comfortable,

parkable, secure, and capable sport utility vehicles. The brand rather evokes a set of almost sacrosanct national identity narratives that matter to a large fraction of American consumers more than any functional, emotional, or social symbolic feature of the brand.

For surfacing these influential narratives, we may ask very broadly what kinds of tensions the *Hummer* brand produces in American popular culture? Why have *Hummer* owners – not owners of equally big and thirsty Ford or Cadillac SUVs – become targets of the most passionate brand-mediated social conflicts in recent history? And why are *Hummer* trucks – not Navigators, Escalades, or Excursions – are keyed, spit on, parked in, cut off, and “flipped off” for their owners’ presumed “misbehavior” most (Luedicke and Giesler 2008)?

However, we may also wonder why so many American consumers passionately love the *Hummer* brand, even though many of their social peers and international observers consider the vehicle the most ecologically destructive choice on the consumer market? Do *Hummer* drivers actually hate the environment? Which cultural models do they use for framing *Hummer* ownership as true and faithful to the American identity rather than as the vehicle of choice for ignorant, self-absorbed polluters?

The thesis of this chapter is that accurate answers to these questions provide marketers with important cultural knowledge needed for successfully positioning/targeting and communicating brand meanings that are deeply rooted in cultures that lie beyond their direct influence.

The following sections explain how both brand managers and anti-brand activists may gain knowledge on these cultural meanings and use it to better achieve their communication goals. I begin with outlining a procedure of culture-sensitive research that has proven useful for understanding the cultural grounds on which the *Hummer* brand thrived and then use the *Hummer* case to detail three cultural positioning/targeting and communication strategies that build communication on cultural tensions, not individual, functional preferences.

### 13.5.1 Study the Cultural Nexus of the Brand

To resolve the puzzle of what *Hummer* means for consumers in the United States, we drew upon three established consumer culture research methods: netnography, ethnography, and historical research. Inspired by the passionate cultural conflict about the brand, my colleagues Craig J. Thompson, Markus Giesler and I started with netnographic desk research as described by Robert Kozinets (2002) to gain an overview of the diverse discourses that evolved around the *Hummer* in the US American context. This step included searching the Internet for websites, forums, and blogs that held discussions about the *Hummer* brand. We studied and clustered the themes of texts, conversations, and images that occurred on these online contexts and followed up some of the forum discussions with email interviews. We included myriad pages at which enthusiasts cheered the brand, for instance, by exchanging technical information (e.g. <http://www.h2fanatic.com/>), or organized brand community activities (e.g. <http://www.thehummerclubinc.com>). But the netnographic research also revealed that *Hummer* was a central topic at specialized websites critically addressing ecological and political issues. One particular page, <http://www.fuh2.com>, gained enough prominence in the public to be listed for many months right below GM’s [hummer.com](http://www.hummer.com) page on Google’s search results for the word “*Hummer*”. As I write this chapter, the [fuh2.com](http://www.fuh2.com) (= Fuck you and your *Hummer* too/two) website hosts 5,092 submissions by individuals from all parts of the world that express their contempt for *Hummer* trucks and ownership (see figure 13.3 for an example). People upload pictures of their middle fingers raised against *Hummer* trucks and owners (i.e. “flipping the bird”) and add comments such as the following:

*“Just one of many of these useless fucking vehicles in AZ. I saw this one in Mesa today, while parking in a business complex. Gilbert and Baseline. My daughter was with me, and asked why I was giving that car the finger. :-) Then she told me when she turns 5, she’ll be able to do it too!” (Jenn Z, Mesa, AZ, uploaded to [fuh2.com](http://www.fuh2.com) on October 23, 2009).*

**Figure 13.3** A typical fuh2.com submission photo.



The netnographic study of pro- and anti-*Hummer* pages proved to be a rich source of insights on what the brand means to people, not only owners, potential buyers, and target groups, but also those hating the *Hummer* for what it seems to tell about American individuals and their nation. The webpages and forums held countless implicit and explicit links to the cultural roots of the brand, yet not always as direct as in the figure 13.4.

**Figure 13.4** A patriotic Hummer H3 drives spray painted the truck with Stars and Stripes.



Next, I followed up on the most salient themes within the online world and went offline into field research. Following the conventions of ethnographic data collection, I spent several weeks over a course of 4 years meeting *Hummer* owners at their homes and at off-road sites to learn about *Hummer* meanings, politics, national identity and other related topics that were addressed on the Internet. My goal was to better understand the personalities behind the posts and the (national) cultures in which these persons situated their own identity positions. This ethnographic work revealed what the Hummer discourse was about all along: A passionate moral conflict about the identity of the American people, their shared ideals, visions, and foundational myths, and if *Hummer* driving legitimately expressed these meanings or violated

them and the global image of the American nation.

This broad kind of insight lay beyond individual characteristics, social class, lifestyle, and other social patterns that GM marketing used as grounds for targeting and communication. It also inspired us to gain more knowledge on what these shared ideals, visions and foundational myths were that animated this conflict.

A thematically focused literature analysis of American history and its inflections in American popular culture provided us with useful knowledge about the qualities and contents of these myths and visions. As we detail in our study “Consumer Identity Work as Moral Protagonism: How Myth and Ideology Animate a Brand-Mediated Moral Conflict” (Luedicke et al. 2010), the Hummer brand discourse can be read as a moral conflict about the current state of a national ideology known as “American exceptionalism” (Lipset 1996).

The ideology of American exceptionalism embraces a set of beliefs and visions that position the American nation as a global cultural and political leader (in metaphoric terms as a “City Upon a Hill”), as a nation of independent, “rugged” and solidary individuals (the “Cowboy in the White Hat”), and as a nation of forward looking entrepreneurs and unlimited natural resources (as in the “American frontier myth”). In addition to and as a result of the nation’s idea of an exceptional role in the world’s geopolitical scheme, many Americans feel not only to inhabit a superior social system, but also one that (almost naturally) attracts the negativity of terrorists, political activists, environmentalist and social critics that question America’s morally leading role in the geo-political scheme and discredit the nation as ruthless, greedy, and hegemonic. The historical research has shown that this feeling of besiegement by other nations or internal critics emerged with the nation claiming the moral high ground as a global social, cultural, and economic leader vis-à-vis the encrusted social systems of old Europe. The myth of besiegement is very strong in American culture and frequently updated through socio-cultural occurrences. In 2001, the 9/11 terrorist attacks dramatically re-produced the idea of being under siege and, in consequence, brought many American citizens temporarily closer together in their desire to defend endangered American values.

The besiegement motive also serves American consumers to frame environmental, political, and consumerist critics as enemies of the American identity. In this view, Americans that critique and try to restrict other peoples’ consumption choices (e.g. by flipping off a *Hummer* driver) are violating the *laissez-faire* and rugged individualism cultural traditions. They are consequentially perceived as similar to prophet Jeremiah lamenting about the decline of his people’s morals and cautioning against the imminent end of the world. Therefore we refer to this form of this critique as the “Jeremiad against consumerism” (Luedicke et al. 2010). Framing a social critique of *Hummer* driving as an expression of the anti-American, anti-consumerist, anti-capitalist „Jeremiad“ allows our *Hummer* informants to experience these historically rooted feelings of besiegement and evokes desires for rhetorically and physically defending their consumption choices against their critics (see John’s report on his Hummer experiences above).

The myth of the American frontier originates another view of American consumption that is key to understanding *Hummer* ownership and its critique. We found that *Hummer* owners have no difficulties in combining environment protection with off-road driving. Other than their critics, owners consider off-road driving an appreciation and consumption of a beautiful yet abundant nature, rather than the destruction of pristine ecosystem.

When our informants are criticized for consuming too much gas and caring too much for their own interest, they are likely to respond with two arguments that draw legitimacy from the ideology of American exceptionalism: “What I buy or drive is none of your business” (*laissez-faire*) and “You do not understand what America is all about. Your behavior is betraying the nation’s values” (besiegement). In the light of the besiegement discourse, a Jeremiad-style critique as expressed, for instance, through insulting bumper stickers that seek to educate owners about their “excessive” pollution is likely to strengthen the owners’ feelings of besiegement and thus strengthen their brand relationships. Some *Hummer* owners that I have met are biologists, scientists, teachers, and farmers that live far out in the woods and possess extensive knowledge about their surrounding nature. They believe in rugged individualism, self-dependence, and *laissez-faire* as nationally shared cultural ideals that also stretch into the realm of free consumption

choices. In their view, *Hummer* consumption is not a threat to the social or ecological system that they hold dear, but rather serves the local and national community. Robert's following report on the activities of his local Hummer owners group reflects an extreme version of this view:

*"Why Hummers are good for the environment? [Our group] donated over 2,000 hours to the SBNFA, donated over \$5,000 in cash to SBNFA, donated over \$30K in toys to the USMC, reserve for Toys for Tots in 2005, donated over 10,000 hours in disaster relief at Katrina and Rita Efforts: Four Wheeling can be good for the environment and its people." (Robert, Interview)*

If critiqued for unnecessarily spilling oil, my informants have frequently argued, for instance, that their country has experienced at least three phases of media-made peak oil panic that came and went without any notable impact. Their adversaries, they find, are hypocrites that care for their own media careers more than for hard science facts.

In summary, the peoples' diverging positions towards morally legitimate contemporary interpretations of the boundless frontier, the rugged individual, the city upon a hill and the besiegement/captivity narrative split the American people (squarely) into two camps: those who seek to affirm the traditional tenets of American exceptionalism through their consumption choices and narratives, and those who criticize this identity system and its cheerleaders for their excessive self-interest and greed. Of course, both fractions claim the moral high ground for their own vision of contemporary American identity.

But how does this relate to the *Hummer* brand and its positioning in the American market? I argue that the positioning of a brand alongside or against one of two oppositional cultural positions – in our context the "affirmative" vs. the "critical" take on American exceptionalism – is a more promising path to crafting culturally resonant brand messages than pursuing a position and target group on the basis of individual character traits and consumers' socio-demographics.

Consider the following GM's advertisements in the light of the affirmative and critical views on American exceptionalism: By connecting Hummer owners with insecure vegetarians or fearful mothers, GM firstly insulted rugged individualists and secondly aligned *Hummer* owners with their social antagonists, the "Jeremiad" activists that critique other consumers for their consumption choices. But Hummer also aired at least two spots that – in contrast to most spots – catered almost perfectly to the tensions produced by the myths of American exceptionalism. In the spot "The Big Race," a boy builds a Hummer-like soapbox vehicle to beat the competing kids by racing down the hill in a direct off-road route instead of following the serpentine trail that all other kids followed. The cunning, rule-defying behavior of the boy reflected the mindset of an independent, self-reliant American explorer that breaks with cultural conventions for the sake of progress (and fun). For Hummer haters, in turn, this commercial offered food for agitation: though cute and clever, the Hummer-box kid disobeyed the rules of the game and, later down the hill, even blocked the road for the faster kids that tried to pass him at the home stretch. 3) The second, and almost perfect, *Hummer* ad named "The Right Tool" shows a series of events in which individuals use life-saving tools under life-threatening circumstances. First, a fire fighter rushes towards a burning wall (caption: "Heat resistant to 1500°"), then a single man fires a light bullet on a deserted mountain ("visible up to 20 miles"), then a climber falls into his robe from an extreme height ("8000 LB tensile strength") and lastly a Hummer H3 with full outdoor gear climbs up an almost impossible terrain with roaring engine saying: "Scales 60% inclines". The ad closes with the claim "Purpose built". This ad is the most culture-sensitive among all *Hummer* ads even though it superficially delivers a functional message. The spot makes references to 9/11 besiegement motives (the heroic fire fighter), to contemporary versions of the rugged frontier-exploring individual (climbers, mountaineers), and to male fascination with technical achievement. Other than its predecessors, the ad does not raise explicit references to social class (like "First Day" described below) or cultural styles (like "Techno") references. Rather than framing the truck as a toy for self-absorbed urban professionals, GM framed the truck in this ad as a tool that has legitimacy in the authentic American cultural frame.

### 13.5.2 Address Cultures, not Individuals

How can these kinds of insights be useful for brand managers? Our three-step research, as detailed above, has helped reveal what *Hummer* means for American consumers not only at an individual character traits or demographics level, but at a more deeply rooted level of longstanding, shared cultural myths and narratives. Before the Hummer SUV hit the road, the Hummer/HUMVEE was already a cultural icon, reflecting American military achievement and the nation's globally leading role. Later, *Hummer* owners used their trucks for pleasure and self-reward, but also for helping fellow citizens (e.g. as Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, Hummer owners provided extensive first aid support with their trucks) and for protecting the environment (e.g. a group of Hummer owners frequently supports Californian park authorities to clean up trails from boulders by use of their capable engines) in the spirit of affirmative American exceptionalism. Critical consumers, instead, used the brand as a diagnostic tool for questioning American exceptionalism and its detrimental features for the nation's long-term survival.

Marketers of brands that strike such a powerful ideological chord face a particular challenge: They have to decide whether they want to ignore and try to overwrite these references (as Hummer marketers tried in most of their ads), to affirm their buyers' ideology and (implicitly) devalue their antagonists, or to try to bridge the cultural divide between the cultural camps. There are no definite answers to this question, since strategies depend on cultural context, but the following three generic strategies to positioning a deeply rooted brand are worth considering for marketers.

#### Strategy 1: Let Consumers do the Magic

One option to cater to a brand with a strong cultural nexus is to let consumers lead the brand meaning creation. As its products and logos already carry powerful references to culture, marketers can announce the launch of the new brand and explain its products' key features largely without trying to define precisely what kind of people are meant to love, buy and hate the brand, what it stands for socially, or what values the brand wishes to promote. If the brand resonates with some cultural corner of the market, consumers will take care of the meaning creation process. The underlying strategy is akin to what Alex Wipperfurth (2005) celebrates as a "serendipitous brand hijack" and that is widely discussed in studies concerning the rise of co-production between consumers and producers (Arvidsson 2008; cfr. chapters 11 and 12). As with open source brands (Pitt et al. 2006), consumers will surround "their" brand with resonant meanings and narratives that they feel align best to their individual and collective identity projects within a given cultural context.

The marketing department is called to observe, follow up, and interpret the meanings, artifacts, and cultural references that consumers make and turn them into culture-sensitive messages. What is it that people see in the brand, and how do they use and frame it? What, if any, contemporary cultural discourses do they connect with this brand?

Hummer has initially started with communications akin to this empty canvas strategy. Yet even though they have carefully defined their target group and key messages, the first ads came across to our informants at best as obscure. The ad "First Day", can be seen as *Hummer* marketers' attempt to respond to consumers' responses to the brand. The spot highlighted just the opposite ideal: A caring mother of three children driving her eldest son to school with the other two kids secured on the backseats. As the little boy is observed jumping of a black Hummer H2 at his first day at a new school, the ad suggests, he is right away endowed with enough social capital to not be bullied by taller kids that await him walking towards the entrance. The ad supports the idea of Hummers being driven by responsible mothers that fully support their daring, individualistic children and contradicts the idea that Hummer owners are selfish, ignorant, and masculinity-compensating males. Of course, antagonists can also use the spot to frame mother and children as insecure consumers that need the support of a brand for compensating their

insecure personalities. This ad fires the brand discourse, as it provides both parties with visual and narrative ammunition to defend their side of the moral divide. In this ad, *Hummer* supported only one (“their”) side, a strategy I detail next.

### Strategy 2: Support One Side of the Cultural Divide

A second way of building on the above kinds of cultural knowledge is to position a brand to explicitly leverage one side of the ideological divide and accept to provoke a cultural uproar. This strategy is closest to the traditional positioning/targeting and communication approach, but does not remain on the level of individual traits or preferences. Instead, it leverages one side of a moral or ideological divide and thus leverages a powerful social conflict rather than just individual attitudes and demographics.

In the case of *Hummer* such a strategy would have resulted in marketing messages that celebrate freedom, independence, reward for individual achievement, enjoyment of nature, solidarity, and rugged individualism, while ignoring themes like environmentalism, political criticism, vegetarianism, or social inferiorities. In this vein, *Hummer* could have tried to not hide the poor gas mileage of the trucks, but rather connected its gas consumption to its functional capability (as implied in “The Right Tool”), a link that is well accepted among *Hummer* owners and likely provocative for anti-*Hummer* activists that do not believe in the truck’s capability. The benefit of this strategy for a firm is that it can powerfully appeal to one customer segment and create buzz among the opposite camp via negative press.

In the *Hummer* case, negative publicity has throughout fostered brand awareness and recognition. But if strategically consistent, *Hummer* communications would have followed this second strategy better by fostering the images of free and independent explorers, rugged individuals who do not care about other peoples’ opinions while exploring the boundless frontier in their *Hummers*. The spot “Big Race” that I have described above gets closest to this strategy.

Key to successful communication that aspires to leverage the ideology of American exceptionalism (as one among many different potentially influential meaning systems) is to cheer the values of the American nation while avoiding complaints about the citizens’ or nation’s potential failures. Complaints (or even calls for more ecological consumption) likely result in the type of anti-Jeremiad counter-resistance explained above (Frank 2004).

### Strategy 3: Bridge the Gap

The third strategy echoes the suggestions brought forth by Douglas Holt (2003, 2004) in his work on iconic branding. Holt suggests that brands can gain iconic status if they help individuals to attenuate tensions emerging between their own identity position and the demands directed at them by the surrounding popular world. The key is a rhetorical resolution of an internal tension by implicitly communicating consumers that the brand celebrates an alternative, almost rebellious identity position that does not try to live up to the dominant social norms. In the *Hummer* case, there is no clearly dominant or subordinate group. Hence, a bridging strategy would have to situate the brand between the two camps of citizens that share affirmative or critical views towards the tenets of American exceptionalism. This can be generally be done by addressing shared national identity projects, such as advancing a path-breaking, fearless, noble, entrepreneurial, and independent nation.

However, the *Hummer* brand had little currency for adopting such a strategy, unless the brand had credibly managed to combine weight and engine power with social and ecological sustainability. Despite all odds, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger pursued this strategy with his Hydrogen-*Hummer* initiative. By promoting the development of a hydrogen drive powerful enough to power (even) a *Hummer* and by calling for a network of hydrogen stations along Californian highways, Schwarzenegger celebrated the affirmative image of Californians driving the biggest trucks (e.g. laissez-faire, rugged individualism) while



conserving fresh air and pristine natural resources. This strategy allowed Schwarzenegger to subtly address the needs of both parties while only earning disapproval at the extreme ends of the political spectrum. GM and its Hummer division, however, were not equally credible (and comfortable) in the role of the technological and social innovator.

Marketers operating in other American industries or in different cultural contexts may find resonant ways to bridge ideological gaps with technological and communicative means. Bridging, it seems, is the most sustainable option if the brand goes for a mass market, but letting consumers define the meaning of the brand and then supporting one side of the emerging divide seems particularly viable for niche market brands.

### 13.6 Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how ethnographic, netnographic, and historical research findings can translate into culture-sensitive positioning/targeting and communications for brands that build upon deeply rooted cultural meanings. Such brands forge particularly strong linkages to history and culture within a given social context, and often also inherit their socio-cultural conflicts.

Using the Hummer case for illustration, I have argued that managers that want to position/target and communicate a deeply rooted brand are well advised to analyze the social, cultural, and historical narratives underlying their brands and study consumers' contemporary interpretations thereof rather than focusing on individual attitudes, lifestyles, or socio-demographic factors. Such cultural insights may allow marketers to pursue three strategies for cultural positioning/targeting and communication; letting consumers do the magic, supporting one side of a cultural divide, and bridging the gap between opposing camps. In order to position the brand unambiguously on existing cultural grounds, marketers define which deep cultural meanings they wish to leverage, e.g. by speaking to rugged individualistic drivers, or to environmentalists, or rather letting consumers and mass media define the cultural meanings that attach best to their brand before they build upon these emerging discourses.

In the empirical case of *Hummer* advertising, I have shown that the Hummer brand unfolded a particularly strong cultural resonance right from the start because it crystallized two opposing visions of American national identity, one that seeks affirmation and another that seeks to redress the tenets of the ideology of American exceptionalism. However, *Hummer* marketers have apparently not chosen to consistently support the affirmative side of the cultural divide that drives the brand system (Luedicke 2005), but clinging to classic individual targeting procedures have sent ambiguous and sometimes insulting messages to owners and prospective buyers. Adopting a culture-sensitive approach would likely have opened *GM* alternative roads for more successful and even iconic communication.

I have only cited one single empirical case in this chapter, but I believe that the market-mediated moral conflict that animates the *Hummer* is not only relevant for American brand managers in the SUV market. In fact, any organization that seeks to sell resource-intensive or resource-conserving goods, services, and messages in the United States is well advised to consider this cultural conflict when briefing their agencies. My thesis is that when Greenpeace, Code Pink, and other social and environmental activist organizations begin to frame their messages in the vocabulary of the Jeremiad against consumerism, e.g. by complaining about American consumption excess or by trying to educate Americans to consume less, they produce a backlash among affirmative American consumers rather than positive resonance. A CNN news interview with Adbusters founder and activist author Kalle Lasn about "Buy Nothing Day" amply illustrates this mechanism of an affirmative interviewer winning rhetorically over the complaining activist (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8uZEjAsR94> (accessed 15 Mar. 2011)). But when these organizations frame their messages in a vocabulary that is more akin to American exceptionalist values, e.g. by calling for creative ideas that remind consumers of the entrepreneurial spirit of the American frontier, or addressing cultural ideals such as American independency from foreign economies (as more frequently done by [www.greenpeace.org](http://www.greenpeace.org) than by [www.alternet.org](http://www.alternet.org), for example), marketers are likely to produce more buy in



among their affirmative American audiences.

To conclude, gaining a better understanding of the deep cultural roots of a brand through netnographic, ethnographic, and historical interpretive research can help brand managers to better position their brands and create more resonant brand narratives that leverage existing cultural meanings and reinforce consumer-brand relationships (McCracken 2009). Cultural knowledge of the historical, local, and national cultures that some brands evoke in consumers (willingly or accidentally) is key for designing culture-sensitive products, agency briefings, and advertising messages, not only in the launch phase, but particularly throughout the deeply rooted brand's cultural lifecycle.

## Review and Discussion Questions

1. How can proper traditional segmenting and targeting of potential buyers result in detrimental brand messages?
2. Why is tapping into the "Jeremiad against consumerism" vocabulary dangerous to marketers that wish to promote a social or ecological agenda.
3. Watch the spot "The Big Race" on youtube (Available HTTP: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bV65Z7p2Xy8> (accessed 1 Nov. 2010)). How does it express deeply rooted American values for some people but violate them for others?
4. Observe Kalle Lasn and a moderator talk about "Buy Nothing Day" on CNN (Available HTTP: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8uZEjAsR94> (accessed 1 Nov. 2010)) and study if and how they are expressing the Jeremiad logic and the affirmative American exceptionalism logic. What would you recommend Kalle to change if the goal is to convince the moderator and like-minded individuals?

## Keywords

American exceptionalism, cultural analysis, moral conflict, Jeremiad against consumerism, Hummer, cultural branding.

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