

The Mythic Status Brand Model: Blending brain science and mythology to create a new brand strategy tool

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Abstract

There is no brand strategy job more fundamental than defining and articulating the core meaning behind a brand. If this is not done properly then all the execution that flows from that brand strategy is wasted effort and money. This paper shows how brand models can be important tools to help forge more profound and more differentiated brand strategy ideas because they provide new lenses for looking at a brand. This paper explains Tait Subler's journey in creating the Mythic Status Brand Model by merging insights from modern brain science with lessons from ancient mythology. It demonstrates the successful application of the model for the Gucci brand.

Keywords

brand model, brand theme, brain science insights for brand, status brand, values-based brand, brand purpose, mythic status brand, values ladder model, brand differentiation

INTRODUCTION

Much of the discussion around brands today is dominated by changes in technology and media because they are rewriting the way marketers reach out to consumers – and the way consumers can participate in conversations with brands. But there is another important advance that could impact brand *strategy* on a more fundamental level. That development is the growing understanding of the human brain offered up by neuroscience. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology can now be used to determine which part of the brain is used when thinking about different brands or making decisions. For

instance, Martin Lindstrom, working with Dr Gemma Calvert, reportedly spent US\$7m over three years comparing, among other things, the brain scans of religious people with those of consumers who have high brand loyalty, to show how strongly brands work – in a similar way to religion – inside the brain.¹ Dr Antonio Damasio's work at the University of Iowa and the University of Southern California has used brain scans to understand better how emotions drive decision-making.² On the whole, brain science has evolved to the point where it should be able to inform our ability to create more meaningful, differentiated brands.

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It is surprising that these incredible new insights from brain science have not already made more impact on how market research is conducted and how we choose to design rich meaning into brands. The hard science provided through these new insights is certainly a more solid foundation for brand strategists than the application of (sometimes debatable) psychological theories that have been used up until now. But it is up to brand strategists to create models and practical applications that can easily be understood and applied to organisations.

This paper will chronicle recent efforts to develop such useable models, and it provides an example of the application of one of these, the Mythic Status Brand Model, to successfully reposition Gucci. The Mythic Status Brand Model worked to help articulate the meaning of the Gucci brand, and it has broader applicability for brands in terms of what could be called 'badge categories'. But before delving into a discussion of this particular brand model, it is important to review the value of brand models in the first place.

WHY ARE BRAND MODELS SO IMPORTANT?

Our experience working with organisations around the world to help them better differentiate their brands suggests that most marketers are open and eager to learn about the insights obtained from brain science. But there seems to be a gap between theory and practice. Most clients have not seen actionable models that translate the science into a tool for articulating a brand's core meaning.

The value of a brand model is that it makes the highly esoteric job of defining the meaning behind a brand into a more systematic and reasonable task. In so

doing, one can engage clients more fully, and everyone involved has a much better sense of where they are heading. A brand model helps make the messy, iterative and creative work of brand strategy into something that seems to have more linearity, hard edges and scientific veracity. It puts everyone in the same place and makes the goals for primary consumer research explicit. Just as importantly, a fresh brand model can put a new lens on the problem of how to define a brand in a differentiating manner. It opens the mind to new avenues for bringing an important and unique meaning to the brand essence, or theme. Finally, it breaks down old, implicitly held models that may cause a client to veer back into well-trodden, undifferentiated brand ideas.

It would be very difficult to sell a recommended brand theme were the senior decision-makers not introduced to the brand model being used and given the chance to apply it themselves in brand work sessions. For instance, even more traditional marketers who may gravitate toward a functionally-based brand theme, may begin to see the power of a values-based brand theme when they understand how it works in a model based on insights into neuroscience.

THE VALUES-BASED BRAND THEME

What do we mean by a 'values-based brand theme'? It is a way of expressing the core meaning of a brand by answering the question, 'to what end do you make the products or services you sell?' It helps consumers see that there is a purpose for the organisation beyond just making money, and it specifically defines that greater end. Functional brand themes tend to be about the means to an end, which neuroscientists have shown is less meaningful to people.² For instance, it is

less powerful and less defensible in the long term for a battery brand to claim 'our batteries last longer' than it is to claim that the entire organisation is focused on delivering its 'core belief in the power of preparedness'. Of course, a company that believes in preparedness may well also claim longer-lasting batteries as a feature or support point. But it is also forging deeper levels of trust and loyalty with people who hold a similar belief or value. Moreover, when their competitors occasionally better their product, they will have created loyalty to their end purpose that will help retain their customers. They will have created irrational loyalty to some degree.

The findings from brain science seem to make it clear that the most powerful brands are able to transcend functional benefits and become lodged in the part of the brain where intimate belief structures exist. Indeed, the icons of powerful brands work in exactly the same way as religious symbols do for religious people, according to the aforementioned study by Martin Lindstrom. Brands like Harley Davidson and Apple act in an almost indistinguishable way from religious symbols in a person's brain. Essentially, their brand iconography lights up the same region of the brain for their fans as religious icons do for religious people. But it is not just about symbols. The meaning behind a brand can also connect with the values and self-image of its consumers. Brands that make this kind of values connection are able to create irrational loyalty. They are forgiven for their failures and loved more deeply for their successes. This kind of loyalty allows for a price premium to be charged, and it can even allow for that price premium to be perceived as a *benefit* by the consumer.

Procter & Gamble have typically been very focused on functional brand themes

around their range of products, but they are now evolving to overlay a values-level approach through the 'Proud Sponsor of Moms' work featured in their sponsorship of the last two summer Olympic Games. Apple is another (perhaps over-used) example of a brand that makes a values connection in the way the brand is defined. In the last 15 years it has let us know through advertising, product design, its stores and the voice of Steve Jobs that it deeply values and recognises the power of creativity. Consumers who have similar values put the Apple logo in their car windows. They use the brand as way of announcing to all that they value creativity, and indeed are (or at least aspire to be) creative minds.

We call the core idea that articulates a brand's meaning a *brand theme*. It is a combination of the positioning statement and the mission statement into a single powerful idea that works to drive internal behaviours, as well as to position the brand for consumers. Using the same concept to express both the internal and external idea behind the brand ensures better alignment in all of the organisation's efforts to consistently live up to the desired image of the brand in the marketplace. Moreover, a brand theme makes it possible to create a differentiated idea that provides shared meaning and purpose for both consumers and employees.

Experience suggests that a brand theme has a greater likelihood of driving real change across all aspects of a business, whereas a brand positioning tends to affect only the marketing communications. A brand theme works because it becomes the conceptual centre of the business strategy (see Figure 1).

Creating a brand model helps to frame and articulate the brand theme in the most powerful manner possible.



Figure 1 The brand theme is the conceptual centre of the business strategy

HOW GUCCI LED US TO THE MYTHIC STATUS BRAND MODEL

In late 2004, Gucci's then new president, Mark Lee, was looking to help his team articulate a point of view and core brand theme after the sudden departure of their visionary designer, Tom Ford, and his business partner, Domenico De Sole. Both the business and fashion press were predicting the imminent demise of Gucci without Tom Ford, who had spent the better part of ten years making Gucci a darling of the fashion press. In fact, sales hit record levels just a few years before he left. Most prognosticators felt that without Ford and De Sole, both the creative design and the business were in big trouble.

From a brand perspective, Gucci had evolved into 'Tom Ford for Gucci'. Mark Lee was determined to ensure that the brand would never play second fiddle to a star designer in the future. He eventually elevated Frida Giannini to be the new cre-

ative visionary for the brand, but the focus would be on the brand moving forward, and that meant that a very clear articulation of what the brand stood for was vital.

The brand model that initially drew Gucci to Tait Subler was the company's values ladder model (see Figure 2). In the book *The Mental World of Brands*, Franzen and Bouwman describe the high degree to which a person's values system influences the way they see themselves in relation to the rest of the world.³ Moreover, they cite various models from brain science that describe the way the brain structures meaning around the conception of things. They point out that the scientific models around structures of meaning have different levels in a means-ends hierarchy (as previously discussed), with the lowest levels being the concrete, superficial characteristics of a product (such as more horsepower or fresh ingredients); and the highest, most

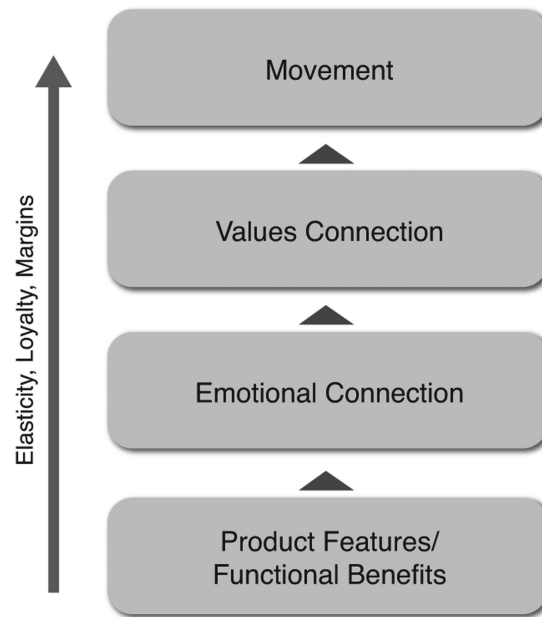


Figure 2 The Tait Subler Values Ladder Model

potent levels being those that relate to our feelings and ultimately, our values (as ends). For this reason, Tait Subler created an explicit ladder that pushes a brand toward an explicit statement of its ‘ends’ – otherwise known as its values or purpose. The goal is to articulate how a brand will work at each level of this ladder, and to push toward a values connection with its targeted consumers so that they see like ‘ends’ with the brand, and thereby become more deeply invested and loyal. Then for some brands, it is appropriate to frame the values in the context of how a brand wants to change the world, or the movement it wants to own. This idea of a movement as a highly powerful brand strategy is well described in Mark Earls’ book *Welcome to the Creative Age*, where he shows that what he calls a ‘purpose idea’ can make a greater impact both on consumers and internally at organisations.⁴

The values ladder is a powerful tool to help clients articulate their brand themes

in a manner that would engender greater loyalty, increase brand elasticity and ultimately, improve margins. The values ladder had brought a lot of success to Tait Subler in the company’s work with many major brands, so we were confident that it would be helpful for Gucci. But we were wrong.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE MYTHIC STATUS BRAND MODEL

Gucci is among a very short list of brands that are truly global, luxury, designer fashion brands. Louis Vuitton and Chanel are in the same elite category. These brands take themselves very seriously, and their core customers take the brands equally seriously. Yet the kinds of movements that we arrived at for Gucci somehow seemed *shallow*. Every fashion movement we created failed to capture the power of the brand. The movement ideas we developed even seemed to strip away some of the grandeur and magic that the brand still

had. They were not authentically Gucci. In effect, there was something else that had made Gucci such a potent brand – and we needed to discover what was behind the magic. Tait Subler was in a high-profile, high-pressure situation and its most proven model was not working.

It was not the case that brain science could not help, because the new Mythic Status Brand Model that was ultimately developed certainly draws on some of the same insights. The new model also helps to connect the brand to the emotional side of the brain that is so powerful in our decision-making, according to neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's work;² and it still connects deeply into values, as it defines the target's greatest fears or aspirations as well as their desired self-image. But the new model does so in a surprising and distinct context that reflects an ancient human need to make sense of our world and our social order. At the same time, it provides a new lens through which to view the brand in order to articulate a more original and differentiating brand theme.

As we worked to unravel the way Gucci could be optimised, we started to focus more and more on status. Gucci is desired by many but available only to a few. Understanding social hierarchy is vital because Gucci is really in the business of brokering status. It manages its social currency (and relative rarity) to offer a glimpse of something just out of reach, but not beyond hope – the keyhole effect. Price is one reason for this limited availability, so a high price is actually a benefit to consumers. Some of the best insight we found into the nature of status came from Alain de Botton's book, *Status Anxiety*. He sums it up like this:

'Every adult life could be said to be defined by two great love stories. The first — the story of our quest for sexual love ... The

second — the story of our quest for love from the world — is a more secret and shameful tale ... like something of interest chiefly to envious or deficient souls ... and yet this second love story is no less intense than the first, it is no less complicated, important, or universal, and its setbacks are no less painful'⁵.

Our deep investigation into the machinations of status led us to mythology.

Mythology exists in virtually every culture in the world (important for a global brand) because it addresses some basic human needs. Mythological stories were often used by elites to ensure that their status was unchallenged. According to the social philosopher Mache, 'myths were used to allow social order to establish its permanence on the illusion of natural order'. This would suggest that mythological stories sanctified and secured status for those at the top.

Wikipedia's definition of mythology states that 'Myths are intended to explain natural phenomena, inexplicable cultural conventions, and anything else for which no simple explanation presents itself'. So societal status, as an inexplicable cultural convention, is linked to the idea of mythology. In fact, the term 'mythic status' is often used in scholarly perspectives on mythology. It struck us that this mythic sensibility was really the source of Gucci's magic. But this mythic, magical quality was not explicitly addressed in any of our existing brand models, so we decided to create a new model that merged brain science with principles of mythology. We wanted to tap into Joseph Campbell's notion that 'Mythology explains the universe and your place in it'.⁶

Joseph Campbell devoted his life to the study of mythology around the world, and he saw a common role for mythology in ancient times as well as today. It seemed to

us that just as ‘Mythology explains the universe and your place in it’, perhaps mythic status brands do the same in today’s society. Perhaps they offer more than just status. Campbell said that ‘One of the basic functions of myth is to help each individual through the journey of life, providing a sort of travel guide or map to reach “bliss” (fulfillment)’. Great brands do just this: they promise fulfillment and transformation.

According to Margaret Atwood, who contributed to modern mythology with her book, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, ‘myth can be understood as a map of the human psyche’. Mythology tells us about our greatest fears and desires. We certainly know that the brands a consumer chooses tell us about their psyches too – their desires and their fears are exposed if you know how to interpret the badges in which they cloak themselves. Ultimately, in a myth, people can put themselves in the sandals of the gods, and feel transcendent – and transformed.

So, like mythology, mythic status brands promise to help a person find their place in society and to enhance it through some

sort of *transformation*. People perceive their personal reality differently because they use brands to tell others who they are and where they fit in society. More importantly, they use (some) brands to change the way they see themselves. While the idea of status led us to mythology, we found that in fact, mythology (and mythic brands) provide three great benefits, only one of which is status. The second is the transformation into something more ‘god-like’, and the third is the idea that one can suspend logic and believe in some magical quality in life (see Figure 3).

Plato discussed the distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, or story and philosophy, mythology and logic.⁷ Logic is used to tell a dispassionate tale that is heavily reliant on facts. *Mythos* relies less on facts and more on feelings – those great desires and fears that Atwood references. An emphasis on *mythos* reflects the learning in brain science indicating that decisions are made in areas of the brain responsible for emotions. If we can make connections in these parts of the brain we are more likely to win over consumers. It is interesting that in price-sensitive categories, *logos* rules.

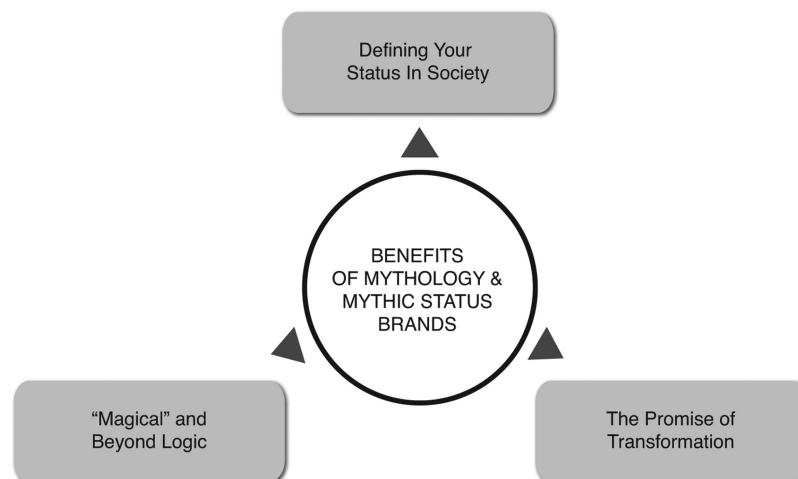


Figure 3 The three benefits of mythology and mythic status brands

But when we ask for irrational loyalty from a consumer, as the best brands do, then we are asking them to connect with the mythology of the brand – to respond to feelings more than logic and buy into a promise that is in some ways incredulous or magical . . . like the idea that a fashion brand can make you into something more than you are today.

Ultimately, mythic status brands make this ‘magic’ work, and in today’s world, people crave myths. Western culture has become almost entirely *logos*-driven, and people want some magic back. They want to believe in an alternative truth about themselves; they want to believe in transformation – browsing the self-help section of any bookshop will dispel any doubts about this. While it is true that mythic status brands rarely have a real product that lives up to their mythic qualities, this does not matter as much as it would for much less expensive brands positioned around the functional attributes and benefits (*logos*) of products.

Our journey with Gucci led us to construct a model for a special kind of brand, but it is broadly applicable beyond fashion. Any brand that is in a badge category (including a retail brand) can differentiate itself by applying this model to gain a deeper connection with its target group.

We define a mythic status brand as follows:

‘A mythic status brand promises to help a consumer define a new reality. It helps us define ourselves (externally and internally), but more importantly, it promises to transform us so we can realise our greatest desires and avoid our greatest fears.’

The mythic status brand model graphically reflects this definition (see Figure 4). On the lowest rung of the ladder is

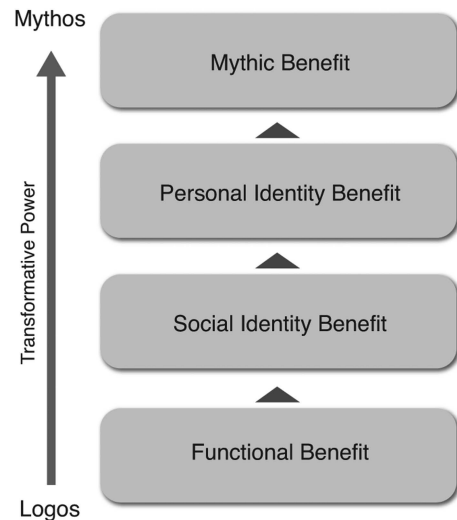


Figure 4 The Tait Subler Mythic Status Brand Model

the *logos* piece – the functional benefit. The next rung up is where status plays an incredibly important role, through the social identity benefit, which articulates how the consumer wants to be perceived by others. This is the classic archetype.

The rung above this on the ladder is what we call the *personal identity benefit*. This is a clear articulation of how the brand will make the consumer feel about herself when she is alone, looking in the mirror or just experiencing the brand. This level is much more important in that it promises to really change who a person *is*, not just to disguise her, as the social benefit does.

Finally, on the top rung of the ladder is the mythic benefit. This is where a true mythic status brand pulls away from typical badge brands. It audaciously promises to address a consumer’s deepest fears and aspirations – it helps them be more ‘god-like’. As one moves up the ladder, the transformative power grows and the reliance on facts diminishes. This is one of the reasons why Gucci advertisements contain so little text.

APPLYING THE MYTHIC STATUS BRAND TO GUCCI

Tom Ford epitomised the celebrity designer during his time at Gucci. His tuxedo shirt undone nearly to his midriff, he swaggered confidently as the beloved star of the fashion press in the 1990s and early 2000s. Indeed, his talent and keen marketing sensibility gave Gucci a new lease on life and led to a peak in sales for the brand in 2000. The brand's positioning during the Tom Ford era was based on sexy clothing and accessories and a jet-setter badge embodied by Tom Ford himself. Young men who were devotees of the brand would come to our focus groups in Japan wearing his trademark tuxedo shirt look. They aspired to be Tom Ford himself.

Clearly, the brand had been successful based on the talents of Tom Ford, but when we looked at it in the context of our Mythic Status Brand Model, we could see that it did not really get beyond the social identity benefit level (see Figure 5). The model provided a new lens through which

to view the brand and that lens highlighted an opportunity perhaps to focus and re-energise the brand, as well as to differentiate it better from competitors.

Extensive qualitative research was done through focus groups around the world. This research used a variety of projective and enabling techniques, but the mythic status brand model helped to structure the methodology as we spent time exploring Gucci, its competitors and an 'ideal designer fashion brand' on each level of the model. Perhaps the most surprising discovery was the degree to which Gucci loyalists associated the brand with hard work and earning power. The social identity benefit that Gucci provides for its loyalists is a portrait of an assertive attitude – someone that makes an impact on the world around her. Strong, capable and sexy, she exerts power in a sensual manner. The women (and men to a lesser degree) who still loved Gucci wanted to be seen to be what we called 'high impact achievers'. The high impact achiever has an intimate

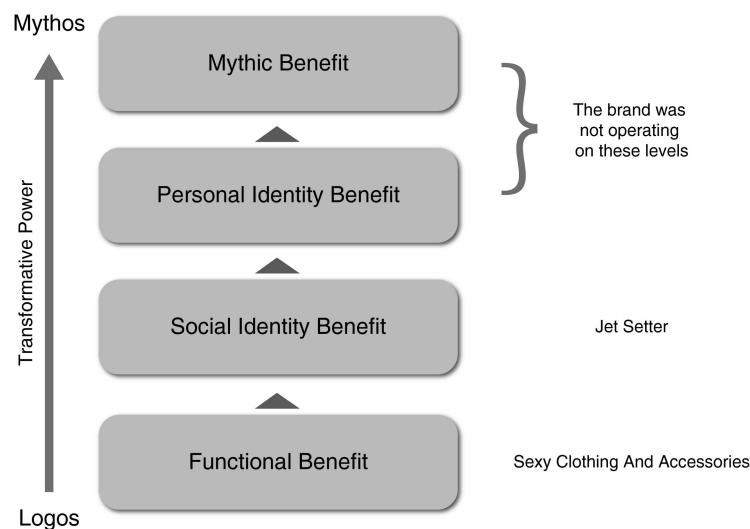


Figure 5 Gucci was not defined in an optimal way in the new model

relationship with her own power, and she knows how to leverage it personally as well as professionally. She wants a feeling of credibility and competence from her appearance that fully leverages her special charisma – her sensual power.

This high impact achiever was a very different ‘type’ than Gucci had previously thought of as their target or their target’s aspiration. This person was definitely not the Paris Hilton-esque jet-setter that seemed to be featured in Tom Ford’s Gucci. The high impact achiever does not fly around the world to party at luxurious poolsides. Rather, she flies around the world – and makes something important *happen* when she lands.

At the personal identity level of the model, we found that Gucci was alone in the category in providing a feeling of being *powerful*. Other brands could also make you feel sexy or attractive or fashion-smart. But ‘power’ was a word associated only with Gucci. When a woman wears the brand, she really does feel as if she has

more *sensual power* – she is transformed to some degree.

All this was interesting and useful, but to really make Gucci into a mythic status brand, it was essential to know about this high impact achiever’s deepest fears. How could the brand help to address those fears? Her greatest fear is actually quite obvious once it surfaces. She fears being ignored (not making an impact) and her worst nightmare is to be forgotten. This woman wants to be noticed entering the room, but through her sensual power that combines physical and intellectual impact, she hopes to also be remembered and discussed long after she leaves. To be forgotten is to have failed. But to be remembered, to make a lasting impression, would give her a mythic benefit – she would be *immortalised* through others’ memories of her.

We could apply our insights at every level of the Mythic Status Brand Model to help craft a brand theme (see Figure 6). Building from the mythic benefit, we ended up with

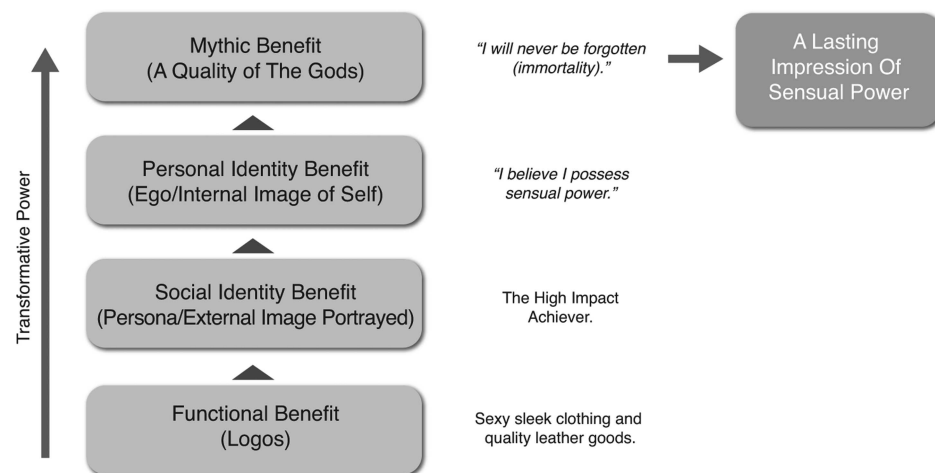


Figure 6 How the Mythic Status Brand Model was used to create the Gucci brand theme

a simple articulation of the brand theme: *a lasting impression of sensual power*.

In this case we were simultaneously developing a new type of brand model and a strategic recommendation, so the model could not help to give the clients a frame of reference throughout. In our recommendation we chose not to expose all the brand model work, but rather focused on the insights and the answer. But this thinking was clearly driven by the Mythic Status Brand Model and it led directly to the brand theme articulation.

THE IMPACT ON GUCCI

To Mark Lee's credit, once he bought into the brand theme, he was vigilant in its application to fashion design and retail stores, and he was among the best we have seen at rallying his people behind the idea. His new lead designer, Frida Giannini, seemed to embrace fully the brand theme and targeting idea. She was soon quoted in *TIME* magazine's Fall 2005 online Style and Design section espousing a design vision for the brand that reflected the brand theme: 'The Gucci woman enjoys life, is successful in her job and leaves a lasting impression'.⁸ In fact, she directly applied the idea of 'lasting impression' to her designs by creating modern interpretations of some of Gucci's own lasting icons from the past. Frida Giannini showed incredible talent doing this, as demonstrated by her beautiful updated rendition of the scarves originally made for Princess Grace of Monaco, and of other iconic fashion items like the Jackie O bag. Not only were the designs noticeable, they were a reinforcement of the long-lasting impact of the brand in popular culture. In the ephemeral world of fashion, Gucci's focus on this idea of a *lasting impression* was

noted as a unique and powerful design theme.

From an assortment perspective, merchants drove toward a greater focus on suits for women and men that leveraged the desire among the newly defined target to leverage their sensual power in a work context. New retail stores were designed, and we were asked to brief the architects as part of the process. From a layout perspective, the lower-priced GG logo items that had usually been right at the front were de-emphasised, and the sensual leather products were given more prominence as part of Gucci's unique history in leather. Overall, the store's redesign was an effort to create a Gucci brand experience and less of a celebration of the singular aesthetic of its previous designer and creative leader.

The brand theme became a critical filter for decisions large and small. At least for a time, it made the brand the core organising principle for the business. As Jessica Dennis, their worldwide advertising and marketing director said in 2006, 'Our brand theme has become an important point of reference for everything we do.'

The embrace of the new brand theme and new conceptualisation of the target, together with any number of smart and artistic executional moves in alignment with the brand strategy, correlated with a period of extraordinary success for Gucci. In 2005, sales records were smashed and profits spiked 40 per cent by the first half of 2006. Perhaps the best evaluation of the brand's contribution comes from the *Bloomberg Businessweek* rankings of global brand valuation (where the brand's valuation is calculated based on Interbrand's methodologies). Gucci jumped 20 spots on the list and the estimated value of the brand increased by US\$4bn between 2004 and 2011.⁹ To clarify the context, the value of Gucci was greater than Lexus and Starbucks combined

in 2011. Mark Lee went on to be named CEO of the Gucci brand and has since taken the top post at Barneys New York.

WHAT IS THE POINT?

With all the technological changes buffeting marketers, it seems that message delivery and tactics have taken over much of the conversation around brands in the past few years. This is fair and is to be expected. Nevertheless, there are other opportunities for marketers to better and more powerfully differentiate their brands. Insights into brain science and their application to powerful brand models can change the way market research is conducted, and can impact the essence of a brand in profound ways.

In these difficult economic times, many organisations have wrung out inefficiencies, cut costs and picked all the low-hanging fruit. Now it is time to grow the topline in a profitable way. A focus on a better brand strategy will generate that topline growth. The Gucci example demonstrates that tools like the Mythic Status Brand Model build on brain science but are far more than just

academic theory – they help brands to create more profound, distinctive connections with their consumers. And those deeper connections drive profitable growth.

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