CHAPTER 1

What Is an Iconic Brand?

FROM NELSON MANDELA TO RONALD REAGAN, from Steve Jobs to Sam Walton, from Oprah Winfrey to Martha Stewart, from Michael Jordan to Muhammad Ali, from Andy Warhol to Bruce Springsteen, from John Wayne to Woody Allen, cultural icons dominate our world. These icons can be fictional characters as well as real people: Li'l Abner, Archie Bunker, Superman, and Rambo have all been American icons. Moreover, cultural icons needn't be human. Companies like Disney and Apple, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) like Greenpeace and Amnesty International, and universities like Harvard and Oxford have been cultural icons. Objects can also fit the bill. For example, the Jeep, the Zippo lighter, and Coke became cultural icons during World War II. Places often become cultural icons as well, consider Paris, Harlem, the Statue of Liberty, and Silicon Valley.

People identify strongly with cultural icons and often rely on these symbols in their everyday lives. Icons serve as society's foundational compass points—anchors of meaning continually referenced in entertainment, journalism, politics, and advertising.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a cultural icon as "a person or thing regarded as a *representative symbol,* especially of a culture or a movement; a person or an institution considered worthy of admiration or respect [italics added]."[1] More generally, cultural icons are exemplary symbols that people accept as a shorthand to represent important ideas.

The crux of iconicity is that the person or the thing is widely regarded as the most compelling symbol of a set of ideas or values that a society deems important. James Dean was the quintessential 1950s American rebel. More than anyone else, he represented the idea that men should live an autonomous life, following their own whims rather than succumbing to the postwar nuclear plan of corporate work and suburban family.

The dictionary provides a useful definition but not an explanation. How do we come to accept cultural icons as symbols for valued ideals? To address this question, we must first acknowledge where icons originate and then isolate what these icons do exactly to earn their hallowed place in society.

Cultural icons are as old as civilization, but their mode of production has changed dramatically since the mid–nineteenth century. In premodern times, icons (mostly religious) gradually diffused through oral storytelling traditions and scarce written documents. With modern mass communications beginning with books, magazines, and newspapers in the nineteenth century, then films in the 1930s, and television in the 1950s, we increasingly inhabit a world in which the circulation of cultural icons has become a central economic activity. The market gravitates to produce what people value most. Today, the culture industries—such as film, music, television, journalism, magazines, sports, books, advertising, and public relations—are bent on cultivating and monetizing these icons.

What separates a cultural icon from the massive volumes of cultural content that these industries produce? Outside of the business school, the academic disciplines that study mass culture—anthropology, sociology, history, mass communications, and film criticism—have analyzed why cultural icons take on such intensive and pervasive meaning in society. These studies consistently indicate that icons come to represent a particular kind of story—an *identity myth*—that their consumers use to address identity desires and anxieties. Icons have extraordinary value because they carry a heavy symbolic load for their most enthusiastic consumers. Icons perform the particular myth society especially needs at a given historical moment, and they perform it charismatically. James Dean's film work, personal life, sense of style, and untimely death in a car crash all contributed to an enigmatic story about pushing against society's mores.

My research demonstrates that many of the world's most valuable brands have developed according to similar principles. Since not all brands can become icons, let me first circumscribe the kinds of brands that I'll cover in this book.

What Is a Brand?

Consider a new product that a company has just introduced.[2] Although the product has a name, a trademarked logo, unique packaging, and per-

haps other unique design features—all aspects that we intuitively think of as the brand—the brand does not yet truly exist. Names, logos, and designs are the material markers of the brand. Because the product does not yet have a history, however, these markers are empty. They are devoid of meaning. Now, think of famous brands. They have markers, also: a name (McDonald's, IBM), a logo (the Nike swoosh, the Travelers umbrella), a distinctive product design feature (Harley's engine sound), or any other design element that is uniquely associated with the product. The difference is that these markers have been filled with customer experiences. Advertisements, films, and sporting events use the brand as a prop. Magazines and newspaper articles evaluate the brand, and people talk about the brand in conversation. Over time, ideas about the product accumulate and fill the brand markers with meaning. A brand is formed.

A brand emerges as various "authors" tell stories that involve the brand. Four primary types of authors are involved: companies, the culture industries, intermediaries (such as critics and retail salespeople), and customers (particularly when they form communities). The relative influence of these authors varies considerably across product categories.

Brand stories have plots and characters, and they rely heavily on metaphor to communicate and to spur our imaginations. As these stories collide in everyday social life, conventions eventually form. Sometimes a single common story emerges as a consensus view. Most often, though, several different stories circulate widely in society. A brand emerges when these collective understandings become firmly established.
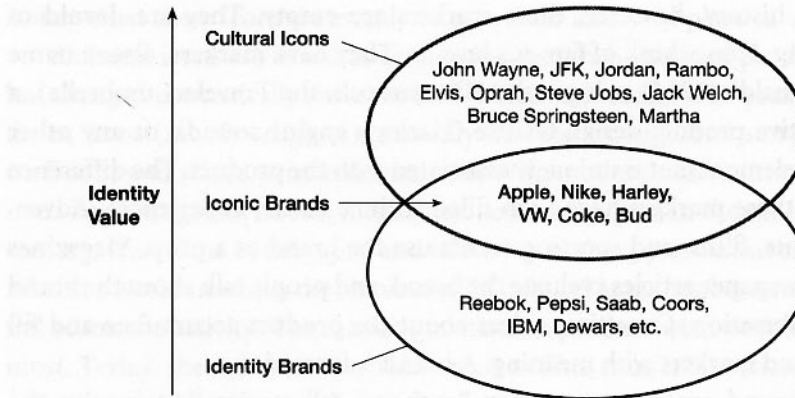
Marketers often like to think of brands as a psychological phenomenon which stems from the perceptions of individual consumers. But what makes a brand powerful is the collective nature of these perceptions; the stories have become conventional and so are continually reinforced because they are treated as truths in everyday interactions.[3]

Identity Value and Iconic Brands

Customers value some products as much for what they symbolize as for what they do. For brands like Coke, Budweiser, Nike, and Jack Daniel's, customers value the brand's stories largely for their *identity value*. Acting as vessels of self-expression, the brands are imbued with stories that consumers find valuable in constructing their identities. Consumers flock to brands

FIGURE 1-1

Iconic Brands Are Brands That Have Become Cultural Icons

Cultural Icons

Identity Value

Iconic Brands

Identity Brands

John Wayne, JFK, Jordan, Rambo,
Elvis, Oprah, Steve Jobs, Jack Welch,
Bruce Springsteen, Martha

Apple, Nike, Harley,
VW, Coke, Bud

Reebok, Pepsi, Saab, Coors,
IBM, Dewars, etc.

that embody the ideals they admire, brands that help them express who they want to be. The most successful of these brands become *iconic brands*. Joining the pantheon of cultural icons, they become consensus expressions of particular values held dear by some members of a society (figure 1-1).

Identity value usually matters less for brands in low-involvement, business-to-business, critical service delivery, and highly technical categories. But even in these cases, identity value can play a crucial role in the brand's success, as Ogilvy & Mather's global advertising campaign for IBM and Richard Branson's public relations efforts for Virgin Airways have demonstrated.

Conventional branding models largely ignore how brands buttress consumer identities. Managers typically view identity value superficially as *badging*, that is, the idea that consumers use brands as status symbols to earn the admiration of their peers. And consultants and academics routinely invoke one-size-fits-all models that lump together all types of brands into a single framework.[4] These analysts group brands like Levi's and Chanel, which are driven by identity value, with brands like Clorox and Southwest Airlines, which consumers value for entirely different reasons (such as perceived quality and reliability). This lack of specification is a mistake. Identity brands create customer value differently than do other types of brands, so they must be managed differently as well.

Which Products Need Cultural Branding?

In this book, I develop a new branding model—*cultural branding*—which I derive from the best-in-class identity brands, the brands that have spun such compelling myths that they have become cultural icons. We needn't limit these principles to the most obvious kinds of identity brands, however. Cultural branding applies particularly to categories in which people tend to value products as a means of self-expression, such as clothing, home decor, beauty, leisure, entertainment, automotive, food, and beverage. Marketers usually refer to these categories as lifestyle, image, badge, or ego-expressive products. In these groups, competition to create advantages derived from other bases of customer value (quality reputation, trust, distinctive benefits) is fierce and typically limited to incremental and often momentary gains. But competitors cannot easily replicate the brand's myth embedded in these products. The ability to build valued myths into the product often distinguishes success from mediocrity in these lifestyle categories.[5]

Cultural branding also applies to other marketed entities that people rely on to express their identity. The most obvious examples are other *culture industry products*, such as film and television stars, musicians, heroes in novels and on screen, and even cartoon characters. In addition, NGOs, tourist destinations, other places (nations, cities, neighborhoods), social movements, and politicians are all prime candidates for cultural branding.

Despite their distinguishing characteristics, no hard and fast line separates products susceptible to cultural branding. Generally, managers can apply the lessons of cultural branding to any market offering that people regularly use, or else idealize as a means to improve their lives.

While not all brands should mimic Nike or Budweiser, most consumer brands need a cultural strategy as part of their branding tool kits. Often enough, brands require hybrid strategies. For instance, in the auto industry, successful makes like BMW combine a conventional focus on benefits and quality reputation with cultural branding. For fashion industry brands, such as Polo, Levi's, and Diesel, the challenge is to combine cultural branding with the viral techniques typical of that industry. In this book, however, I set aside the question of hybrid branding models and focus on how cultural branding works.

This benign neglect of identity brands directly results from the dominating influence of psychology and economics, which have shaped our basic assumptions regarding how brands work. Models derived from these disciplines have helped managers understand important aspects of brands—how brands build reputations for quality and how brands come to own certain category benefits, for instance. But this disciplinary focus has also seriously handicapped managers' understanding of how brands work as symbols. Iconic brands become immensely valuable because they function much like the cultural icons noted at the beginning of this chapter. If managers want to build an iconic brand, then they must use a distinctive kind of strategy.

Axioms of Cultural Branding

To explain how iconic brands evolve and are sustained over time, I draw on my academic training in socio-cultural analysis. I conducted systematic historical research on six American iconic brands. From this research, I discovered that these brands have followed a set of tacit principles—the *cultural branding model*—that are entirely different from the principles found in conventional branding frameworks.

This model hinges on several key axioms, which I outline here and in chapter 2. In the rest of the book I build on these axioms to detail the strategic principles of cultural branding (figure 1-2).[6]

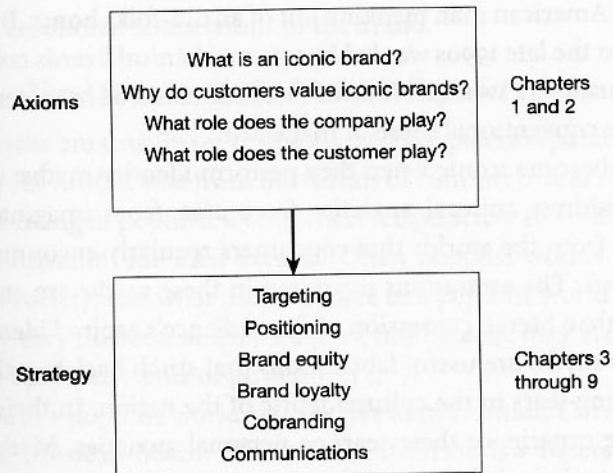### *Iconic Brands Address Acute Contradictions in Society*

Iconic brands provide extraordinary identity value because they address the collective anxieties and desires of a nation.[7] We experience our identities—our self-understanding and aspirations—as intensely personal quests. But when scholars examine consumer identities in the aggregate, they find that desires and anxieties linked to identity are widely shared across a large fraction of a nation's citizens. These similarities result because people are constructing their identities in response to the same historical changes that influence the entire nation.

For example, Budweiser became the most desirable beer in the 1980s because the brand addressed one of the most acute contradictions of the day. Working men were motivated by Ronald Reagan's battle cry as he invoked America's frontier myth to restore the country's economic might.

FIGURE 1-2

Cultural Branding Principles

Axioms	What is an iconic brand? Why do customers value iconic brands? What role does the company play? What role does the customer play?	Chapters 1 and 2

Strategy	Targeting Positioning Brand equity Brand loyalty Cobranding Communications	Chapters 3 through 9

The country's economic and political meltdown in the 1970s, along with the increasing independence of women, had left them feeling emasculated. Reagan's call to arms gave these workers hope that they would soon regain their lost manhood. These same men, however, were beginning to realize that their vocations as skilled manual laborers, their primary source of masculine identity, were becoming obsolete as these jobs were replaced by technology and outsourced overseas. Budweiser targeted this acute tension between the revived American ideals of manhood and the economic realities that made these ideals nearly unattainable for many men.

Iconic Brands Perform Identity Myths That Address These Desires and Anxieties

Most iconic brands have been built through the mass media, usually with television advertising. For decades, managers have assumed that they can build identity brands by associating the brand with aspirational figures: the good-looking, wealthy, and charming guy who happens to drink Heineken, wear Tommy Bahama, or drive a Mercedes. While many so-so brands employ these sorts of straightforward status appeals, iconic brands do not.

Consider three iconic brands that I will discuss later in the book. One of Mountain Dew's breakthrough ads featured the Vegas crooner Mel Torme leaping off a casino. For Volkswagen, a seminal spot featured a hobbling old African American man breaking out of an old-folks home. Budweiser's comeback in the late 1990s was led by two mechanical lizards commiserating on a branch in a swamp. None of these ads could be considered aspirational in the conventional sense of that word.

Brands become iconic when they perform identity myths: simple fictions that address cultural anxieties from afar, from imaginary worlds rather than from the worlds that consumers regularly encounter in their everyday lives. The aspirations expressed in these myths are an imaginative, rather than literal, expression of the audience's aspired identity.

Identity myths are useful fabrications that stitch back together otherwise damaging tears in the cultural fabric of the nation. In their everyday lives, people experience these tears as personal anxieties. Myths smooth over these tensions, helping people create purpose in their lives and cement their desired identity in place when it is under stress.

Academic research has demonstrated that the extraordinary appeal of the most successful cultural products has been due to their mythic qualities—from Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches dime novels of the nineteenth century, to Shirley Temple's depression-era films, to John Wayne's post-war Westerns, to Harlequin romance novels, to the action-adventure films of Willis, Schwartzenegger, and Stallone.[8] Iconic brands work the same way.

Identity Myths Reside in the Brand, Which Consumers Experience and Share Via Ritual Action

Over time, as the brand performs its myth, the audience eventually perceives that the myth resides in the brand's markers (e.g., its name, logo, and design elements). The brand becomes a symbol, a material embodiment of the myth. So as customers drink, drive, or wear the product, they experience a bit of the myth. This is a modern secular example of the rituals that anthropologists have documented in every human society. But rather than religious myth, in modern societies the most influential myths address people's identities.

Customers use iconic brands as symbolic salves. They grab hold of the myth as they use the product as a means to lessen their identity burdens.

Great myths provide their consumers with little epiphanies—moments of recognition that put images, sounds, and feelings on barely perceptible desires. Customers who make use of the brand's myth for their identities forge tight emotional connections to the brand.

These Identity Myths Are Set in Populist Worlds

Identity myths are usually set in *populist worlds:* places separated not only from everyday life but also from the realms of commerce and elite control. The people living in populist worlds share a distinctive ethos that provides intrinsic motivation for their actions. Often populist worlds exist at the margins of society. But what unites people in a populist world is that they act the way they do because they want to, not because they are being paid or because they seek status or power.

Marlboro's populist world was the Western frontier, Corona beer relied on the Mexican beach, Harley drew from outlaw bikers, Nike borrowed from the African American ghetto, and Mountain Dew sifted from rural Appalachia. The myths performed by iconic brands draw from populist worlds as source materials to create credibility that the myth has authenticity, that it is grounded in the lives of real people whose lives are guided by these beliefs.

Iconic Brands Perform as Activists, Leading Culture

Iconic brands function like cultural activists, encouraging people to think differently about themselves. The most powerful iconic brands are prescient, addressing the leading edges of cultural change. These brands don't simply evoke benefits, personalities, or emotions. Rather, their myths prod people to reconsider accepted ideas about themselves. The value of a particular myth resides not in the myth itself, but in its alignment with society's incipient identity desires.

Easy Rider became an iconic film when it was released in 1969 because this "hippie-fied" Western provided young American men with a seductive new recipe for manhood at a time when the masculine models of the postwar era were in shambles. Five years earlier, the film would have been incomprehensible; five years later, it would have been redundant. Likewise, the identity value created by a brand's myth depends entirely on how well it fits a particular historical context.

Iconic Brands Rely on Breakthrough Performances, Rather Than Consistent Communications

Iconic brands become tremendously desirable as the result of a few masterful performances rather than a bevy of consistent communiqués. These brands typically use commercial media to weave their stories into the culture. In the main, most communications are forgettable. Even for companies with extraordinary track records, like Nike, the brand's performances usually work as filler, as incremental extensions of previous ideas.

What gels in the collective imagination of the country, what turns the brand into an icon, is a handful of great performances. When Coke took a hillside full of beautiful young people and taught the world to sing in 1971, Americans understood that they must come together to overcome the divisive war effort. And when a nagging beeper rattling on a beachside table got flung into the water like a skipping rock, Corona precisely captured people's exasperation with the nonstop stress of the dual-income, late-hours work life of the 1990s. People forget the vast majority of ads within weeks after they are broadcast. What lingers, years and even decades later, are the few great performances, those that get the myth just right.

Iconic Brands Enjoy a Cultural Halo Effect

When a brand delivers a powerful myth that customers find useful in cementing their identities, this identity value casts a halo on other aspects of the brand. Great myths enhance the brand's quality reputation, distinctive benefits, and status value. For example, when Budweiser's "Lizards" ad campaign embedded in Budweiser a captivating new myth, Bud drinkers reported that the beer tasted much better.

Organization of the Book

In chapter 2, I develop these axioms further by comparing them to the taken-for-granted assumptions that undergird today's three predominant models—what I call the mind-share, emotional, and viral branding models. Chapter 2 charts for the reader a path from today's entrenched conventions about how branding works to the unfamiliar world of cultural

Glossary of Key Terms

brand genealogy: a historical method for understanding how brands create identity value (see appendix)

cultural branding: the set of axioms and strategic principles that guide the building of brands into cultural icons

cultural halo effect: the positive impact of high levels of identity value on conventional brand metrics, such as perceived quality and association with key category benefits

cultural icon: a person or thing regarded as a symbol, especially of a culture or movement; a person, institution, and so forth, considered worthy of admiration or respect

genealogical mind-set: the managerial worldview necessary for the management of identity brands

iconic brand: an identity brand that approaches the identity value of a cultural icon

identity myth: a simple story that resolves cultural contradictions; a prerequisite for an icon

identity value: the aspect of a brand's value that derives from the brand's contributions to self-expression

identity brand: a brand whose value to consumers (and, thus, its brand equity) derives primarily from identity value

populist worlds: autonomous places where people's actions are perceived to be guided by intrinsic values, not by money or power; populist worlds serve as the cultural raw materials from which identity myths are constructed

ritual action: the process through which the consumers of an icon experience the identity myth that the icon contains

branding. Along the way, I also respond to the counterarguments that necessarily arise when one challenges the status quo. I use three short brand genealogies—of Coke, Corona, and Snapple—to make these comparisons.

The remainder of the book develops the implications for brand strategy that flow from these axioms (figure 1-2). To do so, I reverse-engineer the strategic principles that led to the successes of five brands: Mountain Dew, Volkswagen, Budweiser, ESPN, and Harley-Davidson. I relied on detective work because cultural branding has been until now a tacit practice. Working against brand strategies that told them to do something quite different, ad agency creatives have employed in-the-trenches gut feel, which has occasionally produced iconic brands. In this book, I analyze these subterranean practices and organize them into a systematic model of how iconic brands form.

In chapter 3, I tackle the first stage of any brand strategy: segmentation and targeting. I use a case study of Mountain Dew to demonstrate that iconic brands operate not in product markets, but in myth markets. In chapter 4, I use Volkswagen as a case to develop a cultural approach to the conventional positioning statement, what I call the cultural brief. I use Budweiser in chapter 5 to present a cultural view of brand equity, which arises from the brand's cultural and political authority.

Chapter 6 outlines an ethnographic study of ESPN consumers to describe the three constituencies of an iconic brand, and the distinctive network model of brand loyalty that holds such brands together. Chapter 7 uses Harley-Davidson to develop how the brand's coauthors—the culture industries and the populist world—can contribute to the brand's myth. Along the way, I demonstrate that the conventional explanations for Harley's success are incorrect. Chapter 8 revisits Mountain Dew and Budweiser to dig into the nitty-gritty of managing a brand's myth on an ongoing basis. Finally, chapter 9 lays out an agenda for firms that want to build successful iconic brands.

The overarching goal throughout is to socialize readers into the genealogical mind-set—a view of brands as historical entities whose meaning and value depends on how the brand's myth addresses a particular tension in society. Toward this end, the book consists of a series of detailed historical case studies, all of which rely on brand genealogies, a new method that I developed for this research and describe in the appendix.