What does the BERA data tell us about the chances of revitalizing a brand that has lost its way?

Based on our data a brand has about a 1 in 10 chance to getting back to love. It’s based on investment, distribution changes, new partnerships that create energy and other factors of course, but the two most critical drivers for success are in a brand’s ability to regain perceived competitive uniqueness and true meaning from the customer perspective. We’ve all witnessed this with brands, where they’ve had a connection for many years – and then they don’t innovate, don’t invest and as a result they lose their relevance, caché and bond with the target.

The entire British motorcycle industry was destroyed in the 70s by the Japanese - specifically Honda, with the 550-four and the 750-four models. The Japanese machine’s breathtaking performance and rock solid reliability just eclipsed brands like Triumph and Norton. And remember that these British brands were revered, highly loved – but they simply lost their competitive uniqueness, not just in pricing, but in product design as well. Interestingly, over the last ten years, Triumph has made a massive comeback. Why? Because John Bloor completely rebuilt the product, fixed the quality problem with a superior triple engine, set very competitive pricing and completely revitalized their distribution strategy in North America. It’s the number one growing motorcycle brand in North America. Tapping into the brand’s legacy connection with Steve McQueen hasn’t hurt.

So how is BERA relevant to all this?

Well the key is to have your finger on the pulse with your brand or portfolio of brands all the time. We know on a weekly basis what is driving connection or dissonance within the marketing 5P mix – and that’s a great place to start. We have the ability to test product innovation and promotional strategy at any given time – and see what the impact is going to be in regards to attitudinal data about the brand. As a brand manager or Chief Marketing Officer, if you’re looking at potential partnerships or associations to power a brand’s relevance, then wouldn’t you want to look at alternative associations – and then determine
which ones have the best odds for success? What are the changes that are going to heighten meaningfulness and perceived competitive uniqueness – and then being able to quantify this increase and connection – and then model out market share and sales impact. Remember this is all based on us talking to 20,000 Americans on a weekly basis. There is so much choice in the market today for the consumer and so much immediate access and distribution – so the small nuances of product positioning is pretty critical. It’s fluid, changing all the time, and marketers need to be on top of that and the financial implications.

How important is the BERA data in making strategic choices?

What I am saying is that we are providing the data to better inform decisions, and then engaging the resources go in and validate alternatives - by customer segment. Great brand stewards have always used the data, the customer intelligence, and then combined this with intuition or gut. But what BERA does is allow you to look at the total brandscape – look at the position and performance and connection of other brands both within your category and outside it. It is this agnostic view where I think we often really learn, because it creates a paradigm shift. It gets us to look at things in new ways. This is what excites me the most about BERA.

Take Old Spice as an example. This is a brand where before and after awareness scores go from 60 to 85, meaningfulness scores go from a pre score of 54 to 80 and get this competitive uniqueness scores move from 25 to 74. This is a brand that some might say is in a ‘boring category’. Well I can’t remember who said it, that said, ‘there are no boring categories, just boring brands.’ And I think Old Spice bears this out beautifully. And BERA helps explain what it was they did. There is a huge amount of learning here for the whole packaged goods industry. Was there some luck in communication going viral? Of course. Was there some great ideas and planning and risk around this planned revitalization? Yes. So, like it has always been, it’s the blend of art and science. I’m not saying we can quantify everything, but we can quantify a lot and we can do it in real time.

What are some of your favorite revitalization stories or examples?

Well there are dozens that have happened over the past 10 years. In some ways revitalizations are the most exciting case studies of all, because you had an entity that really meant something and then it either runs out of gas, or off the road. Tiger Woods as a brand is going to be very interesting to watch. He was at ‘love’ and as we all know went into ‘divorce’ both with his marriage and his BERA score. But he’s digging himself out of the basement. Maybe he will become the ultimate comeback kid. Our data says that he is up about 40 BERA points over the last 6 months. So it will be interesting to see where that one ends up. We’ll see. He is going to have to do something
pretty remarkable to get back to ‘love’ again. But he has opened the emotive door – he’s showing people that in the end he’s human. This was perhaps best illustrated when he won recently at the Bridgestone Invitational and carried his four-year-old son, Charlie onto the course and gave him a huge hug in front of the crowd. That’s the beginning of the revitalization, the re-creating of the emotional bond that reignites brand connection. So he’s working his way back for sure.

Now let’s compare Tiger to Tom Hanks, who is the highest ranked celebrity of all in the BERA data. Tom just sits up there at the top of the ‘love’ curve. Hanks has made some very good choices in the films that he’s done, from Forrest Gump to Cloud Atlas. He’s maintained his relevancy through all this – with films that make us think a lot about connections, emotional issues and the meaning of life. He has managed his career in a remarkable fashion, he’s stayed married….he’s done lots of things right. He is highly likeable… he’s highly reliable, and he continues to give us these little delightful surprises every couple of years. Tiger gave us surprises, but they weren’t delightful.

In regards to other product brands, look at Converse becoming the rocker’s de riguer footwear – built off a huge amount of residual equity, look at what Tom Ford injected into Gucci, regaining the brand’s cachet, competitive uniqueness and associated pricing power. Lacoste has made a significant leap, reconnecting in a big way as a prestige brand with a younger audience.

Burberry is another great example. Burberry reinvented itself by combining the traditional with the digital; to deliver superior customer experience, Burberry prioritized its own branded boutique outlets over multi-brand stores. The new boutiques were re-styled to combine the traditional Burberry designs and classical British style with modern technology, such as touch screens, iPod docking stations and the like - a mix that resonated well with today’s luxury shoppers who value tradition, but at the same time embrace modern technology and lifestyle. Again, it’s all about creating some excitement while at the same time, maintaining very strong ongoing relevance.

If you were charged with regaining relevance for a brand, where would you start and what would you do?

I can tell you what I wouldn’t do – and that is to look for a communication solution. I think that’s still the default position and starting point for far too many brands – when it’s not the solution at all. With BERA we find many brands where the brand is actually talking too much and not listening enough – in other words, too much communication. The talk, listen balance ratio is so critical, and quite frankly this is the beauty of social media – it’s really just research, early warning signals, looked upon almost as a barometer of the brand– which BERA does in a much more robust fashion. Social media is an important piece but it’s just one piece.

The key is to look at a brand in a much more holistic and complete fashion. By looking at the 5 marketing levers BERA tells us what’s resonating and what’s not. There are many cases of clients doing great communication but then the actual buying interaction experience is weak. And then there are others where all parts of the experience are stellar. Look at the Nike fuel band for example. The design is gorgeous - most people that have seen mine say, ‘what a cool watch’ having no idea of
all the features that it provides — but it started in very innovative functional design to capture total user movement. The invitation — the ads are cool, the packaging is beautiful, the activation of first time use is seamless and then the customized tracking tools, measuring individual performance and activity is a great experience, regardless of whether you are tracking it with your iPhone or your computer. And as a user, you get to see a total community of fuel band users — and how they are all doing on their individual goals. Nike understood that it’s not just an activity measuring device, but rather a conduit to a whole active lifestyle, and doing that with a community of like-minded people. So it’s a shared experience — the value added of the fuel band software as a user is a remarkable piece of post purchase reaffirmation of what a great product it is. And you get all of this for about a hundred and fifty bucks. I think that’s pretty remarkable value.

So a product or service revitalization strategy needs to be anchored in differentiation and value creation — and at every part of the product design and interaction. Seth Godin defines brands as a ‘collection of expectations.’ I love that — because everything is being measured by what the consumer expects. And that means expectations at every single angle. The great brands are the ones that add intuitive value — they do a lot of thinking for the target — about every angle of what the service could or should deliver — it’s that anticipatory understanding of the total product or service experience potential and then pushing the boundaries of that. That’s what consumers want. Consumers love when brands over-deliver because they know the attention to detail and discipline that this takes. Being truly great is not easy — and yet the brands that are — are generally very well rewarded by the market. And that’s why 96% of the most loved brands in the BERA study are beating the S&P 500. Because brands that are at love are rewarded by the markets.

In BERA we have three parts — measure, manage and maximize. The first piece is getting a very good ongoing grasp on where the brand is connecting or resonating and where it’s not. So it’s about identifying existing strengths or power and differentiation that can be further leveraged — you know, defining where are the brand is winning and losing. For a brand that needs revitalization this would include looking at all the latent equity that might well have powered the brand in the first place — so how do you reignite this? Is it still relevant? If not, can we make it relevant?

Then manage is all about looking at the various levers that can be pulled, and testing those scenarios with insight communities — so creating the discipline for ongoing evolution and innovation around product re-design and ongoing improvement — whether that’s communication, the service experience, partnerships, packaging innovation etc.

Lastly maximize is about putting that all into market with the right allocation of resources, gauging consumer feedback and engagement — the collaboration with them, the listening part, using their individual ownership of the brand to make it better. Our excitement as a company is in our ability or capabilities of facilitating and then studying that ongoing dialogue. That’s what gets me up everyday, charging to the office, and it’s what keeps me so excited about what we’re doing with our BERA clients.