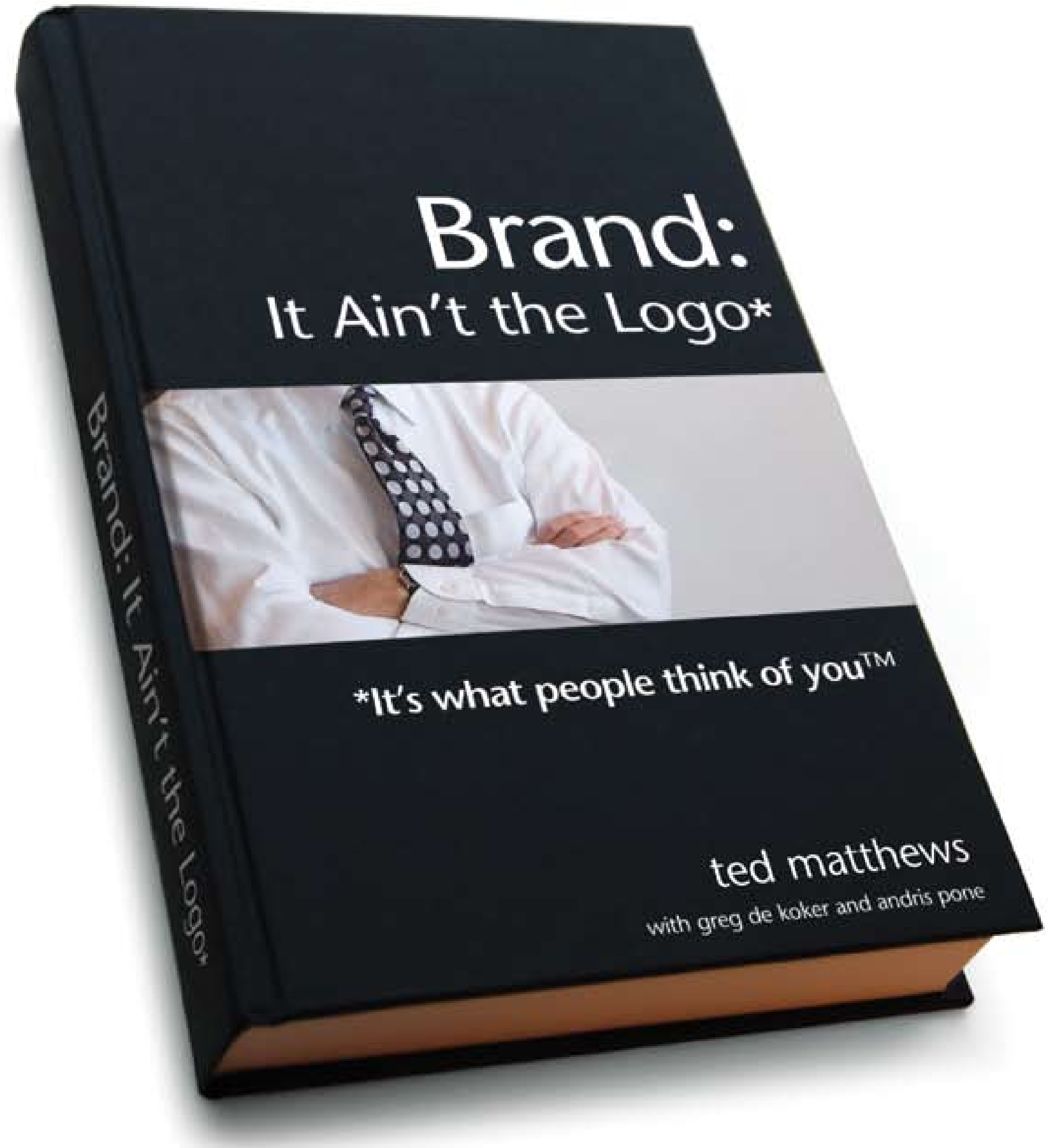

Friends in High Places

In an excerpt from their new book, branding experts TED MATTHEWS, GREG DE KOKER and ANDRIS PONE challenge marketers to stick to the tried and true and resist the siren call of cool new creative

The enemies of brand consistency lurk everywhere. Worst are "old friends." These are the people inside the organization who are so tired of their own messaging, they assume everyone else is too. Old friends will agree to any new brand message ideas that come along, just to get away from their same old brand position or incessant jingle. They're the people at Coca-Cola who are sick and tired of giving (or receiving) another red T-shirt, or the folks at Energizer who'd just as soon blow up that bunny as hear his incessantly beating drums.

MARINELAND: THE JOY OF REPETITION

For a model of brand consistency, look to Marineland in Niagara Falls, Ont., which only operates from May to October each year. For generations of people living in southwestern Ontario and northwestern New York, a visit to the park is an annual summertime ritual. And for as many springs as anyone can recall, Marineland has run television and radio ads with an unforgettable musical jingle.

If owning mind share is tough enough with year-round contact, it's extremely difficult for seasonal brands that disappear for months at a time. So wouldn't it seem sensible to exercise consistency in the use of creative, as Marineland has done to such great effect? Of course. But it's tougher than you might think. Imagine telling someone in the Niagara Falls area that you work at Marineland. You know what's coming next–some comment about the jingle. You might even be treated to a few off-key bars. Truth is, you can't escape the darn thing. And you assume everybody's just as ready for a change as you are.

Brands that got it right...

PHOTO: NIELSEN MEDIA RESEARCH

MARINELAND: Sticking with the same jingle year in and year out has made a trip to the theme park a summertime ritual for families

MAYTAG: The washing machine company has resisted doing away with its dependable, lonely repairman for over 40 years

TOSHIBA: Fired Chiat Day after agency wanted to tinker with its hugely successful "I can't believe I checked my notebook!" campaign

Wrong. Consumers are over-burdened with commercial messages. They're highly receptive to a friendly, familiar reminder–be it another red Coke T-shirt, the Energizer Bunny or the Marineland jingle.

"FRIENDS" OF CANADIAN TIRE

Even more entrenched than the Marineland jingle was Canadian Tire's brilliant "Give like Santa, save like Scrooge" campaign that ran like clockwork every Christmas for eons all across Canada, on TV and in print. I was flabbergasted when Canadian Tire killed it. It was a bona fide Christmas tradition and bought the brand instant, positive mind share for the calendar's most profitable shopping season. Funny, they'd just hired a new ad agency from Chicago.

If old friends are a brand's worst enemy, who are the next worst? That's right: "new friends." Together, old friends and new friends conspire to destroy consistency, your most powerful brand-building tool. They're an especially virulent problem as your firm grows. As more and more people make decisions that affect your brand, it becomes tougher to be consistent because the new blood in your organization–an unholy alliance of new staff and outside creative suppliers–is chomping at the bit to make its mark. Old friends–those longtime employees so bored with your brand message that they're dying for a change–are easy prey for the new friends and eager to act as accomplices.

AD AGENCIES AND THEIR CREATIVES LIKE TO THINK THAT NEW IDEAS ARE THEIR REASON FOR BEING, when in truth, new ideas are their fundamental problem

SLEEMAN'S SLIPPERY SLOPE

New friends contributed mightily to the downward slide and, in 2006, the sale of Canada's third-largest brewer, Sleeman Breweries of Guelph, Ont.

From the start, Sleeman's brand was very different from Molson and Labatt, owners of almost 100% market share when Sleeman was relaunched during the late 1980s by John Sleeman (after he was given the original recipes that his family had used to brew beer in the 1800s and early 1900s). While the goliaths were selling an array of indistinguishable beers by bouncing from one bikini-driven message to another, Sleeman stayed consistent. Radio spots featured John Sleeman himself talking about his family's brewing heritage and his beer's premium quality. This laser-like focus earned Sleeman a crystal-clear position and customers happy to fork over premium prices compared to the major brewers. Sleeman steadily cut into the big boys' market share, grabbing in the area of 10%, a truly astounding figure.

But then John got busy with his success and the demands of an initial public offering. At about the same time I noticed that the brand position was changing. Instead of talking about heritage and quality, Sleeman was rolling out a bunch of clichéd ads chockablock with deck parties and bodacious babes.

I sent John an e-mail to ask what was going on. He replied that his new marketing friends inside the business knew what they were doing, thank you very much. They were going with deck parties and babes because Sleeman's branding came across as too "old" for the younger generation of beer drinkers they wanted to attract.

But wait: Weren't the original drinkers of Sleeman products, when the beer was introduced in the late '80s, young themselves? Yes they were. The heritage and quality appeals worked then, and there's no reason to believe they wouldn't work again with another generation of young drinkers.

In 2006, John Sleeman announced a profit warning and lowered his premium prices in lockstep with the emergent buck-a-beer brands. Shortly thereafter the company was sold to Sapporo Breweries of Japan, becoming the third and final major Canadian brewery laid to rest in foreign hands.

I'm happy to say that it appears Sapporo appreciates the value of consistency. My optimism comes from a recent chance encounter. I was out for lunch and received a tap on the shoulder from none other than John Sleeman. I was deeply gratified by his words: "Ted," he said, "you were right.

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...And brands that got it wrong

CANADIAN TIRE: Like Marineland, the Scrooge campaign was an annual ritual that shouldn't have been killed

SLEEMAN: Upstart brewer made a name for itself by selling quality and tradition, but couldn't resist throwing babes into its ads

1-800-GOT-JUNK: Successfully positioned household junk removal as being good for the soul, then threw it all away with an ad about rats

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We are reviving our premium position with our next set of ads. We're going to be talking about quality and great-great-grandpa again!" Right on John.

MAYTAG'S DEPENDABLE PITCHMAN

Sapporo and John Sleeman may have a soulmate in Maytag, a company that's had the discipline to stay consistent for 40 years and counting. Since the late 1960s, the venerable manufacturer of washing machines has challenged a single advertising agency–Leo Burnett USA–to create fresh and relevant situations for Ol' Lonely, the Maytag Man.

Maytag's stick-to-it-iveness has earned it the key "dependability" position in virtually every mind in America. That's an exceptional accomplishment in a category where the average person might purchase only two washing machines in a lifetime.

To fully appreciate the magnitude of Maytag's achievement, understand this: Ad agencies and their creatives like to think that new ideas are their reason for being, when in truth, new ideas are their fundamental problem.

In exchange for creating new ads–the exact opposite of consistent brand messaging–creatives are rewarded with pay raises, bonuses, promotions and new job offers. They are celebrated and even worshipped by the mutual appreciation society that is the advertising industry for creating that which has never been seen. This is an industry that congratulates itself at a glitzy awards show in Cannes, for heaven's sake. And you'll never win an award for working with an old idea, even if it does serve the brand well.

New-happy creatives may or may not realize that coming up with something *fresh* (like Burnett has continually done for the Maytag Man) is actually a lot harder than dreaming up something *new*. Being fresh requires that you always work in a single, unchanging context: what the brand actually stands for. New, on the other hand, means the freedom to start over on a clean canvas every time.

SEND IN THE RATS

1-800-Got-Junk, billed as the world's largest junk removal service, got that way by positioning junk removal as an issue of emotional health for household-running women. Junk zeroed in on the great feeling of organization and order these ladies get from cleaning out their nasty basement or embarrassing backyard.

Junk's compelling position allowed them to set and surpass some very lofty goals. They made it an objective to appear on *Oprah*, a direct channel to millions of North American women, in their first two years of business. They did it inside of one. Next was an appearance on the *Dr. Phil* show. On both occasions the theme of discussion was how cleaning up your living space is part of setting your life in order.

THE SUREST PATH TO LOWER EXPENSES, higher revenue and increased brand equity is to simply be consistent

With all of this success, I assumed that Junk would be one outfit capable of resisting the temptations of new creative friends. One day I received a call from the leadership of their Toronto franchise, who wanted my opinion on an ad campaign a new agency was pitching them. The agency was proposing a "funny" TV spot in which rats–yes, rats–were being thrown out of the company's distinctive blue trucks onto suburban front lawns. The ad cuts to housewives screaming in horror at the rat invasion. The positioning statement for the campaign? "Call us before we send you rats."

It was a campaign that threatened to take all the brand equity 1-800-Got-Junk earned from talk show appearances and throw it not on the lawn, but on the proverbial junk pile. It's a potent illustration of new friends' compulsion to always do something new. I thought to myself: Thank goodness the Junk boys checked with me before rolling over for some creatives itching to make their mark.

But my relief was misplaced when I noticed that the rats ad not only went ahead, but won an award at one of the ad industry's many festivals of self-congratulation–persuasive evidence that the new Junk advertising diverts from what was a hugely effective brand message. I could summarize the discipline of brand consistency in the form of a question to the Junk people: "If it ain't broke, why 'fix' it?"

TOSHIBA GETS TOUGH

Years ago, Toshiba positioned their computer notebooks as the tough ones that could take the bumps of everyday life and still be counted on to work. Chiat Day, the hot creative shop of the time, came up with a brilliant TV campaign called "I can't believe I checked my notebook!" The 30-second story featured a hapless business traveller who inadvertently checks his notebook at the airline counter, only to realize his mistake at 30,000 feet. After a fretful flight he is rewarded when his Toshiba notebook boots up following a tough trip through the baggage handling system.

So successful was the ad that Toshiba began to gain on IBM's market share. Toshiba management asked its agency Chiat Day, for the next ad in the series. But those hotshots refused to do a mere sequel. Toshiba fired them and hired my firm to create the sequel–"Follow that cab!"–in which our same hero chases down his notebook after placing it on the trunk of an airport taxi. The commercial leveraged the equity of the first ad and helped drive Toshiba to market share leadership.

So why wasn't there a third ad in the series, and a fourth? Why isn't the Toshiba campaign still running today, like the Maytag Man? You guessed it–because old friends at Toshiba, to the detriment of their brand, were evidently bored stiff by their own messaging.

One of the best things about proper brand discipline is that it's one of the few business realms in which, if you want to succeed, you never have to do anything completely new. The surest path to lower expenses, higher revenue and increased brand equity is to simply be consistent.

Keep your messaging consistent from period to period, year to year. Enjoy the enormous savings in man hours and production costs that come from avoiding constant, costly and unnecessary retoolings. Then enjoy the biggest bonus of all–more time to build brand equity by focusing on the core issues of your business.

Remember this rule of thumb: Just when people inside your organization are getting bored of your brand message, that's the moment at which your target market is just beginning to notice.

It's a truism that underscores how important it is to control your brand's friends, old and new. Communicate to those folks who seem to be itching for a change that brand consistency is good not just for the business, but for them. Tell them that the way to make a mark is not by changing the brand message but by helping solidify it. Challenge your creative suppliers to do fresh, not new. And say a polite goodbye to the ones trying to sell you change for its own sake. M

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