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Profit from poetry: Bards, brands, and burnished bottom lines

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Abstract A poet, Wallace Stevens once said, makes silk dresses out of worms. What the great American modernist didn't reveal is the *brand* of silk dresses that worms weave so well. This article takes up where Stevens left off. It identifies the ways in which corporations can profit from poetry. It examines the fractious yet fruitful relationship between bards and brands. It notes the business background of several big, brand-name poets. And, illuminated by a recent instance of haiku hacktivism, it argues that poetry is an apt metaphor for branding in today's texting, tweeting, crowdsourced, co-created, there's-an-app-for-that world. Despite Stevens' subsequent contention that money is a kind of poetry, the article concludes that marketing's case is stronger still.

1. Introduction

The first victim of
Retail customer service
Is sincerity

Haiku have their place, most lovers of poetry agree. However, that place is rarely the grocery store, or in brands of freshly-baked cookies. Yet haiku are what customers of Sainsbury's confectionary found when they opened their packets of Taste the Difference (Williams, 2014). A disgruntled employee of the British supermarket chain, who toiled in an in-store bakery, relieved the tedium of his occupation by penning a selection of poems and slipping them into the packages:

Enjoy your cookies
Every bite is a minute
I'll never get back

Understandably surprised by the free gifts inside, some consumers of Taste the Difference were worried about contamination; some were amused by the bored baker's world-weary words of wisdom; some wrote about their Sainsbury experience on social media. Their posts were picked up by newspapers and television, the poems were reprinted and parsed for metrical precision, and the "haiku hacktivist" was tracked down by Sainsbury's thought police then reprimanded for damaging the brand:

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Taste the Difference
I can't taste the difference
Maybe it's my fault

If Sainsbury's reaction is in any way representative, it's clear that retailing and rhyming don't mix. As *The Economist* (2011, p. 70) observed about the chasm between culture and commerce, "businesspeople seldom take the arts seriously. . .many assume that artists are a bunch of pretentious wastrels." Literary types, conversely, have little or no time for corporate fat-cats, much less bottom line-minded bean counters (Timberg, 2015). Granted, the so-called Great Divide (Huyssen, 1986) between art and mart has diminished of late, as self-employed artists become more marketing savvy and businesspeople appreciate what creative types bring to the table (Aspden, 2012). But more than a modicum of mutual suspicion remains (Morgan, Lange, & Buswick, 2010; Sherry & Schouten, 2002). For many brand managers and marketing researchers, poetry is less of a treat than a threat. They can't taste the difference that bards add to brands.

This article places a plea for poetry among the cookies of marketing understanding. It goes beyond the standard therapeutic claim that great art is good for business—poems edify, enlighten, elevate, educate, etc. (Coleman, 2012)—by contending that poetry is profitable too. It posits that the arts in general and poetry in particular are more than mere icing on the cake of commerce, something that's nice but unnecessary (Prendergast, 2009). It shows that verse is a source of competitive branding advantage in a world of sound-bites, text messages, and elevator pitches, many of which, Johnson (2011, p. 22) claims, "feature the formal traits of poetry: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, structural parallelism."

We begin with brief definitions of our key terms, noting several salient parallels between the two; then consider poetry from a branding perspective, arguing that bards are brands, as are iconic odes, epics, and ballads. We continue with the contention that poetry is not only a powerful metaphor for brand management, but that it is superior to established concepts predicated on pyramids, prisms, and positioning. The prospects for, and problems facing, our Brands-Are-Poems premise are thereafter considered in a conciliatory conclusion, which reiterates that poetry is profitable in *literal*, *figurative*, and *instrumental* senses.

2. The broadening of branding

Brands, like most components of marketing, have been defined in all sorts of different ways. A brand is a promise, Geller (2012) says. A brand is a relationship, Schultz and Schultz (2004) proclaim. A brand is a corner of someone's mind, according to Hegarty (2011). A brand is a set of ideas that people live by (Grant, 1999), any label that carries meaning and associations (Kotler, 2003), and a set of symbolic values which form a chain of associations (Anker, Kappel, Eadie, & Sandøe, 2012). Brands, in short, are hard to grasp. Like bars of soap in the bath, they are slippery when wet.

Rather drier is the official definition of the American Marketing Association. A brand, the AMA intones, is "a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (de Chernatony, 2001, p. 21). Little wonder some observers try to come up with something more punchy, more pungent, more poetic. A brand is a mark of distinction (Thompson, 2010). A brand is the packaging of emotion (Davis, 2006). A brand is a commodity with personality (Olins, 2003). A brand is a product so desired that a customer will leave a supermarket if it isn't in stock and go elsewhere instead (Hall, 2012).

Irrespective of which definition is adopted, three things are clear. The first of these is branding's ever-broadening scope (Moore & Reid, 2008). When our modern understanding of branding emerged in the late 19th century, the word was largely associated with fast moving consumer goods (Heinz, Wrigley's, Lipton, et al.), as well as luxury items like jewelry (Tiffany), furniture (Roycroft), motor cars (Mercedes-Benz), and haute couture (Charles Frederick Worth). Nowadays, just about everything is regarded as a brand or considered brandable: political parties, police forces, public libraries, utility suppliers, university colleges, charitable organizations, sports stars, rock stars, movie stars, towns, cities, regions, nations, and any number of professional service providers from doctors to divorce lawyers (Bastos & Levy, 2012). Even the physical sciences haven't escaped:

> After the Second World War, science was given a makeover. It was turned into a brand—in the same way that Coca-Cola, Apple Computers, Disney and McDonald's are brands. . . .The creation and protection of this brand—the perpetuation of the myth of the rational, logical scientist who follows a clearly understood scientific method—has colored everything in science. It affects the way it is done, the way we teach it, the way we fund it, its presentation in the media. (Brooks, 2011, p. 2)

The second salient point is that our understanding of branding has shifted through time. As Heding,