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The secrets of secret societies: The case of wine

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Abstract Secret societies have intrigued humanity since earliest times. In this article we explore secret societies in the context of wine and how these institutions might be insightful in formulating marketing strategies. We contrast the characteristics of secret societies with those of existing secret wine societies such as The Wine Society and La Confrérie. Yet while some of these functions and characteristics transfer well, many ‘secret’ wine societies aren’t actually that secret. Some of the characteristics of secret societies are also found in consumer brand communities. Armed with this knowledge, wine marketers can exploit the characteristics of secret societies to target market segments with precision and to gain the benefits of focused distribution opportunities.

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1. The secrecy of wine

President John F. Kennedy (1961) believed that the “very word ‘secrecy’ is repugnant in a free and open society; and we are as a people inherently and historically opposed to secret societies, to secret oaths and to secret proceedings.” Yet secrecy as a marketing tactic lies at the heart of many successful organizational strategies (Hannah, Parent, Pitt, & Berthon, 2014). And secret societies still flourish and continue to fascinate. The fact is that people

love secrets, and marketers know this. Many successful marketing strategies have been grounded in secrecy, as shrewd strategists have exploited the fact that consumers want things more when they are denied the availability of information. Likewise, people are enthralled by the possible existence of secret societies—organizations to which they probably can’t belong, but that conceivably exercise some power that nonetheless engrosses them.

Producers, sellers, and consumers of wine have effectively employed secrecy in their marketing and consumption of the product for decades. Wine neophytes and connoisseurs alike revel in blind tastings in which participants not only attempt to judge the quality of a wine in a seemingly unbiased way, but also try to guess its origin, its cultivar(s), its vintage,

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and if they are really good or really lucky, its brand. Some restaurants encourage wine consumption by selling ‘secret’ or ‘mystery’ wines in covered bottles, and reward purchasers with a free bottle if they are able to correctly identify its country of origin and the varietal or the grapes in the blend. According to [Hugh Johnson \(2005, p. 292\)](#), there is a difficult secret to being able to procure a bottle of Romanée-Conti, the fabled Burgundy:

Allocation is a form of commercial diplomacy used to leverage the value of something coveted to sell what is less coveted. No one can buy a bottle of Romanée-Conti alone—that is, without buying other wines. First you must be on the mailing list, which soon spawns a waiting list to get your name on the mailing list. Then comes an email warning: the offer is tomorrow: drop everything and stand by for the postman.

Given its nature then, it is perhaps not surprising that a large number of secret societies have sprung up around wine. Some are explicitly secret, at least in name, such as the The Secret Sparkling Wine Society and The Secret Sherry Society. Others, although the term ‘secret’ is absent in their titles, bear many of the classic traits of secret societies, including exclusive associations such as La Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin (La Confrérie), The Commanderie de Bordeaux (The Commanderie), The Wine Society (TWS) in the UK, the Commanderie des Costes du Rhône (oddly, based in Philadelphia, not France), and the Opimian Society in Canada. Therefore, wine marketers face the challenge of understanding how these secret wine societies work—after all, the name suggests they might be a secret. Do they display the same characteristics as better-known secret societies such as the Freemasons and the Rosicrucians? Can a good understanding of how secret wine societies work and how members aspire to join and engage in them lead wine marketers to enhanced marketing strategies? These are some of the questions we seek to answer.

We proceed as follows: First, we consider the notion of secrecy and why it appeals to consumers. Second, we discuss so-called secret societies in general and why they have intrigued humanity since the earliest times before briefly describing some of the better known secret wine societies and how they operate. Next, we probe to what extent these wine societies exhibit the common traits of most of the better known secret societies, and explore whether these might be useful to wine marketers in formulating strategies. We conclude with general remarks on secrecy and the notion of secret societies and their relevance to marketing.

2. Why consumers love secrecy

As Hannah et al. (2014, p. 52) noted:

The secret of using secrets in marketing seems to lie in the denial of an offering’s availability: When customers want something, and it isn’t immediately available, they may want it even more; when customers want to know something and the marketer tells them that it is secret and they cannot know it, they may want to know it even more.

This resonates with [Cialdini’s \(1993, p. 238\)](#) Scarcity Principle, which holds that “opportunities seem more valuable to us when their availability is limited.” Secrecy creates scarcity of information and denies its availability to the individual. According to reactance theory ([Brehm, 1966](#); [Brehm & Brehm, 1981](#)), when an individual’s freedom of action is threatened—such as being denied access or entry to a secret society—they do their best to avoid losing any further loss of freedom and attempt to restore whatever freedom has already been lost. The stronger the reactance or the more appealing membership of a secret society is perceived to be, for example, the more likely individuals will be to try to reconstruct their endangered freedoms ([Brehm & Brehm, 1981](#); [Wright, Wadley, Danner, & Phillips, 1992](#)). From a marketing perspective this is very true, especially if marketers can persuade consumers that those freedoms are critical.

Of special importance to the notion of secret societies as a marketing issue is how the existence and sharing of secrets within a social group enhances social interconnection so that consumers then affiliate with the group that has to guard the secret(s). People are fascinated by secret societies for the very reason that they are secret. Not having access to what happens in secret societies makes them mystical, intriguing, and appealing. As [Groucho Marx \(1959, p. 321\)](#) reportedly telegraphed to the Friar’s Club of Beverly Hills to which he belonged: “Please accept my resignation. I don’t want to belong to any club that will accept people like me as a member.” As soon as one is in on the secret, it isn’t a secret anymore and consequently might lose its appeal.

3. The secrets of secret societies. . . And are secret wine societies really that secret?

3.1. Secret societies

The first serious academic study of secrecy and secret societies was undertaken by the sociologist

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