

TOM

Plaid is the New Black & White

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If you took all the girls I knew
When I was single
And brought them all together for one night
I know they'd never match
my sweet imagination
everything looks worse in black and white

— Paul Simon, *Kodachrome*

On the evening of November 16, 2006, three-time Super Bowl champion Emmitt Smith was crowned the champion of ABC's "Dancing with the Stars." Emmitt Smith, hall-of-famer. Emmitt Smith, an imposing 200 lb. man and the NFL's all-time leading rusher. Emmitt Smith, real estate executive, wins a silly reality-TV dance contest. About four weeks later, first-term Senator Barack Obama appeared on ESPN's "Monday Night Football." Obama's hometown Chicago Bears were playing the St. Louis Rams. As the program opened, the camera focused on a very presidential-looking Obama sitting at his desk in his Washington office.

"I'm here tonight to answer some questions about a very important contest that's been weighing on the minds of the American people," he began. "A contest about the future . . . a contest that will ultimately be decided in America's heartland. Tonight, I'd like to put all the doubts to rest. I'd like to announce to my hometown of Chicago and all of America that I am ready"—and he paused to put on a Chicago cap—"for the Bears to go all the way, baby." He then sang the Monday Night Football theme song, albeit a little off key. What do those two "marketing events" have in common? They're inimitable examples of plaid branding.

What is Plaid Branding?

In simpler times with fewer products and top-down control of communication, you would have never witnessed serious businesspeople and politicians wearing plaid, dancing, or performing comedic drama on national television. Rational, black and white branding was de rigueur: marketers discovered unfilled

competitive niches, developed dogmatic comparative slogans, and invested heavily in mass market advertising, all in an attempt to “burn” their positions into their prospects’ minds. “We try harder.” “Quality is job one.” “You’re in good hands.” “A chicken in every pot. A car in every garage.” It was a pretty basic era, comprised of naïve people who responded to a pretty basic branding process: shape perceptions through reach and frequency.

Today’s is a much different world. We buy our chickens in a bucket, on a bun, as a fajita, from General Tso, free-range, frozen, fresh, or fried. And don’t even get me started on cars, trucks, vans, SUV’s, gas, diesel, electric, hybrid, et al. The amount of vehicle choice is approaching Starbucks-like proportions. The marketplace is teeming with products and services all making similar comparative and superlative claims. Take a close look at some of today’s most effective marketing and see if you can discover their unique “positions” (a.k.a. overt benefits). From Apple’s information bereft advertising and packaging, to AFLAC’s duck and Geico’s cavemen, to Starbucks’ choice of furniture and fixtures, marketing has changed. And for a very simple reason.

Form Follows Function

Marketing is evolving to solve a very different marketplace task. The marketplace is no longer merely a means to an end, where we compare, contrast, and attempt to optimize our purchases and get on with our lives. It is now a major *part* of our lives; a primary source of entertainment, good times, learning, social interaction, and, ultimately, identity creation. We expect the marketplace to surprise and delight us, and we want our choices to reflect favorably on our various, and eclectic, senses of selves; i.e. father, executive, runner, libertarian, wine connoisseur, poker player, bass fisherman, Bears fan, etc. Instead of being directed, we want to discover, uncover, and intuit the role a product or service might play in helping us become more of who we want to become. Hence, plaid branding.

Plaid branding is where marketers are astutely aware that rational man is a myth, and that we live in a skeptical, postmodern marketplace. A marketplace that bores easily, trusts little, and is sick to death of authoritative messages, no matter how subtle. Plaid branding is about formality, serious-mindedness, and rationalism giving way to humor, irony and emotion. Plaid branding is where the emphasis shifts from conveying semantic information—logical, structured and precise—to aesthetic information—emotional, untidy, and equivocal. I’ll say it again (and probably again): You’re wasting money today trying to impress people or pound one big brand idea into their heads. It’s *unimpressive*, tedious and, frankly, it appears desperate.

Today, you should be like Emmitt and Barak and employ plaid branding, and *spread* (which is the root of the word “plaid”) a variety of colorful brand ideas through as many communications vehicles as possible; ideas that convey your brand’s quirky, spin-free and very human nature. Ideas that seduce, not sell. Ideas that communicate, “I’m like you,” not “You need me.” Don’t be a positioning conformist and speak to their minds, be daring and tickle their emotions. Don’t pander or push, play hard to get. Entice people to discover, dig deep, question, construct and share. Give up the desire to control the marketplace waves and, instead, hang loose and learn to surf. Dump the cookie-cutter, black and white mass marketing approach, and . . . [insert “Monday Night Football” theme song] . . . go plaid, baby!

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