

Repositioning Levi's

Levi's: the company

In San Francisco in 1853, Levi Strauss identified the need for high-strength pants whilst talking to a miner during the California gold rush.[1] In an attempt to fill this need, Levi started making overalls out of tent canvas. From these humble beginnings, the Levi's empire emerged. Twenty years of product refinement led to the invention of riveted apparel and the birth of Levi's Jeans as we know it.[2] [\[Take a look at the history of the Levi Strauss Company for yourself: view the Levi Strauss History.\]](#)[3] Today, Levi's is a global brand providing denim apparel in more than 110 countries that is best known for its high quality and fit.

Levi's attributes its continued success to a continuous quest to satisfy its consumer needs by 'evolv[ing] through a relentless pioneering and innovative spirit that is unparalleled in the apparel industry'.[2] Levi's also believes that maintaining a high level of corporate responsibility is key to its continued success and this has played an integral role in the positioning and development of the brand in order to target the appropriate markets over time. Walter Haas, Levi's CEO from 1958 to 1970, held that 'each of us has a capacity to make business not only a source of economic wealth, but also a force for social and economic justice'.[4]

Marketing strategy: Levi's Go Forth

Prior to 1997, Levi's Jeans' primary target market was the baby boomer generation with advertisements focusing on the durability and other features of the product. However, due to falling sales revenues and market share, Levi's undertook market research and identified the need to take on a repositioning and rebranding initiative. In this initiative, Levi's aim was to refocus its target market toward the younger generation. The new repositioning focus had an emphasis upon both style and Levi's position as the original maker of jeans.[5]

In August 2011, Levi's took its revised marketing strategy to a new level with a globally consistent repositioning campaign. Still focused on the younger demographic, Levi has developed its positioning strategy to bring it fully in line with not only its underlying corporate values—empathy, originality, integrity and courage—but more particularly with its new target market. The 'Go Forth' repositioning idea was to create a strong emotional connection with the next

generation target market that associated with Levi's jeans around the world with a focus on 'now is our time'. [[Take a look at the 'Now is our time' press release link.](#)][6]

The message Levi's wished to convey was one of strong social responsibility, a 'pioneering spirit' and having the courage to stand by your convictions and be an advocate of positive change, even when it requires you to challenge authority and accepted practice.[7] Based upon sound research, the corporate repositioning strategy culminated in the 'Go Forth' campaign. [[Take the time now to see details of a press release about the 'Go Forth' campaign for yourself.](#)][8]

The Go Forth campaign employs specific imagery and phrases designed to stir emotions of revolutionist romanticism, excitement, passion and freedom, where it is arguably lacking or misdirected in today's youth culture. [[See an example of the 'Go Forth' promotion video.](#)][9] This was Levi's first attempt at positioning using a global video. The intent was to then turn these powerful emotions into a catalyst for positive social change by raising awareness of organisations set up by 'pioneers' who are taking action toward prominent social issues such as the AIDS epidemic in Africa.[10]

While the Go Forth campaign is an admirable undertaking, how does it relate to selling jeans? As we see below, the majority of promotional material related to the campaign includes people wearing Levi's jeans and the Levi's logo. The campaign strategy attempts, through a form of subliminal messaging, to create a strong emotional association with Levi's jeans. This is in contrast to the norm of taking a direct selling line and could be construed as being in line with Levi's desired image of being a pioneer.[11]

Levi's: advocate for change or promoter of chaos?

Levi's legacy: a guide to anarchy

In August 2011, as part of the Go Forth marketing campaign, Levi's aired a television advertisement in many countries that depicted scenes of adolescents marching through the streets and an individual confronting riot police with the voiceover stating 'you're marvellous' and ending with a screenshot of the words 'Go Forth'. This campaign was launched soon after the London riots. [Take a look at how the Guardian press release viewed it.] An article in the *Guardian* in August 2011 suggests that the advertisement promotes young people engaging in disorderly conduct, essentially anarchy. Through selectively quoting, the voiceover said 'Your

life is your life, don't let it be clubbed into dank submission' and taking the comment of public relations expert Mark Borkowsky it suggests that Levi's associates itself with 'gangster-type behaviour'.

In addition to this, an article appeared on theblaze.com (2011)[12] that took an even more negative stance against the advertisement. This article went so far as to say that the advertisement 'showed young people revelling in rioting' and 'a young man... taunting riot police'. [12] The article goes on to outline an earlier interview with Robert Hanson, president of Levi's, who essentially stated that 'that the company couldn't help but see a correlation between unrest by young people across the globe and its 'Go Forth' campaign'. [12] [\[Have a look at the article from The Blaze for yourself.\]](#) All of this paints a bleak picture of Levi's intentions and literally brands the company as being a promoter of anarchy and social unrest. Is Levi's truly an 'evil' corporation chasing profits through the creation of chaos? Or is this just another case of media spin with journalists taking selective information from the Levi marketing campaign and blowing things out of proportion?

Levi's Legacy: catalyst of vicissitude

By attempting to reposition its brand and target a younger customer group through the Go Forth campaign, Levi's has attempted to position itself as a pioneer and advocate of freedom and change. Levi's holds that its Legacy advertisement is 'an emotional journey into the lives of young people expressing its hopes and dreams for a better world in meaningful ways'. [7]

The advertisement is intended to show pioneering youth creating positive change in a world where the norm is to ignore major social issues that are geographically distant. The riot images in the piece signify the seeking of freedom and justice, standing by convictions for positive social change even when challenged by authority. The riot images only make up a small portion of a series of images aimed at creating the strong emotional responses outlined earlier. [7]

Levi's stated intention with the Legacy advertisement, as with the Go Forth campaign as a whole, is aimed at promoting positive change, being a catalyst of vicissitude. This is reflective of the company's underlying values as shown in the following excerpt from the Levi Strauss website [7]:

We are the embodiment of the energy and events of our time, inspiring people from all walks of life with a pioneering spirit. Generations have worn Levi's® jeans, turning them into a symbol of freedom and self-expression in the face of adversity, challenge and social change.

The voiceover of the Legacy advert is a recital of Charles Bukowski's poem 'The Laughing Heart', which delivers an emotionally empowering message. The advertisement closes with the statement 'Now is our time', to invoke a sense of social responsibility, and the final action-provoking 'Go Forth'. All in all, the advertisement is intended to have a positive influence in relation to social change rather than to incite riots, anarchy and social unrest.[7]

Cultural impacts on global campaigns

A copious quantity of research, largely led by Geert Hofstede, shows that cultural factors vary significantly between countries and that this influences the perspectives of individuals within the relevant culture when it comes to repositioning a company's products.[13] [[Take a look at Geert Hofstede's website to learn more.](#)] This can have a massive impact on the effectiveness of a marketing campaign which is applied globally. It can make it difficult to implement a standard campaign in all countries and can even lead to unfortunate misinterpretations that can damage brand credibility. The important repositioning lesson for companies such as Levi's in trying to move its product image within a variety of markets is that this can lead to a need for more complex marketing strategies to target each culture separately.

In the case of the Levi's Legacy promotion, a standard advertisement was applied to more than 25 countries without respect to cultural differences. In particular, the sensitivity of the American people to the use of radical imagery to promote social change was not considered when attempting to reach the target audience. This ultimately resulted in the advertisement being viewed as controversial and it was condemned by some segments of the American market.[14] [[Read what the San Francisco Business Times had to say.](#)]

Effective communication

There are a number of elements integral to the effective communication of a message, including encoding the message correctly so that it is communicated clearly and cannot be misinterpreted by the receiver. Noise must also be taken into

consideration, in terms of its effect on the context of the message.[15] If these factors relating to effective communication are not developed correctly it can lead to a situation where the message is misinterpreted by the target audience, potentially in a negative, brand-damaging way. This can have a huge impact upon future success.

The visual and audio elements used in Levi's Legacy marketing campaign, while high-impact and creating an emotional response, are perhaps slightly ambiguous. This has contributed to the misinterpretation of the message being sent to the consumer, as promoting anarchy rather than positive social change. The message has not been encoded in a way that presents a clear meaning to the target audience. The other major factor contributing to the marketing campaign's misinterpretation is the inclusion of riot imagery: while this may have been effective in promoting the idea of fighting for what is right; the inclusion of this material just after the London riots offended some individuals. While, for this reasons, the advertisement was not aired in the UK, there was still a negative association in other countries, such as America, where it was aired.

Effective brand development in line with repositioning

Experience branding, that is, focusing on a shared idea, association or emotion with the customer, is one of the most effective forms of branding in existence.[16],[17] This form of branding creates high levels of customer loyalty through the development of an emotive experience with the customer, either directly with the brand product/service or in some way associated with the brand name. Neuroscience is extremely useful in consumer behaviour research, enabling interpretation and understanding by mapping viewers' physiological reactions to ads and brands, prior to their release across the various global markets, thus avoiding consumer misinterpretation prior to product release.

Both Levi's Legacy and Go Forth campaigns are well developed campaigns designed to rebuild and reposition Levi's image as an experience brand. It achieves this through creating positive emotional associations to the Levi's brand and product through the use of inspirational imagery and empowering scripts designed to instigate social change with its youth market. However, the slightly ambiguous nature of the Legacy repositioning strategy may have resulted in the campaign not being as effective as it could have been with a more clearly stated message.

Conclusions

The misinterpretation of Levi's Legacy as promoting anarchy and social revolt among the targeted younger generations is perhaps simply attributable to media spin. However, it cannot be denied that the marketing campaign has been seen as being somewhat ambiguous in the delivery of its message and contains elements that could be construed as inappropriate or offensive in light of the London riots. The Go Forth marketing campaign, on the other hand, had the necessary elements to reposition and rebrand Levi's as an experience brand and to create extensive customer loyalty in the youth market through powerful emotional association. The heavy focus on positive social change through inspiration and social 'pioneers' could create positive outcomes for Levi's if implemented correctly.

Questions

1. *Is the Levi's Legacy marketing campaign effective in communicating the intended message of inspiration and positive change in terms of its repositioning? Discuss.*
2. *Are the Legacy marketing campaign and advertisements effective in targeting their intended market segment (the younger generations)? Discuss the elements that contribute to your conclusion.*
3. *In what way could Levi's improve the Legacy marketing campaign to more effectively communicate its intended message?*
4. *Considering cultural differences, is a standardised marketing campaign for Levi's repositioning appropriate on a global scale? If not, what options may be more appropriate or effective?*
5. *Discuss, in terms of Levi's advertising campaign, both sides of the argument (pro and con) for using neuroscience in communication research.*

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