

What's your brand's backstory?

Consumers love backstories, so marketers should use them powerfully

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The recent news about Air India, and the Tata group being declared the winners of the airline bid, brought to mind many interesting stories. Amongst them was the tale of how Maharajah, the loveable symbol of Air India, had been first created in the 1940s. He was created by Bobby Kooka, the then commercial director of Air India, and Umesh Rao, of the advertising agency, J Walter Thompson.

Maharajah and Milk

The Maharajah came to life in the first booking office of the airline, located in Mumbai, born as "an oriental potentate, sitting on a magic carpet, smoking a bubble hookah". He would go on to win millions of hearts across the world — with his round face, an outsized moustache, striped turban and long nose. He soon appeared in many avatars: as a lover boy in Paris, a sumo wrestler in Tokyo, a Romeo in Rome, and a guru of transcendental meditation in Rishikesh. Until today, the story of Air India is closely interwoven with that of the Maharajah, and there is so much interest in how he was created and constantly reinvented.

This is a brand backstory, because it is the tale of what lies behind the Air India Maharajah. Similarly, the backstory of Amul, another legendary Indian brand, is well known. This is the tale of how milk farmers initially came together in Gujarat, to form Amul (an acronym for Anand Milk Union Limited), and then built it into a very successful dairy cooperative society. It is also the story of Dr Verghese Kur-

Utterly butterly: The Amul girl



ien, the legendary leader who spearheaded this unique enterprise, and how he navigated the challenges of creating one of India's most loved consumer brands. Undoubtedly, this backstory strengthens Amul's appeal to millions of Indian consumers.

Backstories everywhere

Many brands have similarly appealing backstories. For instance, there is the inspiring story of Lever Brothers (which has now evolved into Unilever) and how household bars of soap were first created by William Hesketh Lever, an English grocer. Or the story of Body Shop, and what inspired its founder, Anita Roddick to establish a brand that was ethically sourced, cruelty free and, importantly, "never tested on animals".

If marketers dig deep into brands, they will come up with backstories that are meaningful and interesting, which they can then showcase impactfully to their consumers. Think of Indian brands from diverse categories, such as Dabur, Parachute, Taj Hotels and Godrej. Their backstories may emerge from their foundation and evolution, origin stories of their products or services, from their legendary leaders, from their supply chains, or from their consumer lore.

Why backstories appeal

These backstories are authentic, unlike conventional advertising which often uses fictional storylines to put forward emotively appealing narratives. Consumers love and trust such real-life backstories, because they are the truth. They provide people an inside view of what has truly gone into the creation of the brand which they consume, or wish to use. In



contrast, consumers are increasingly skeptical of fictional advertising narratives, because they are unsure of whether to trust them.

Backstories also bring to consumers the "why" of the brand, in a relatable way. Why was this brand created, what problem does it solve, what purpose does it serve? Many companies and brands have mission statements which try to express all this, but these statements are generally bland, and often viewed as self-serving corporate jargon. On the other hand, true stories derived from the brand's origin, or supply chain, or consumer universe, are likely to resonate far better with people like you and me. If consumers like the "why" of a brand, they are more likely to buy it, and stay with it for the long-term. Meaningful backstories can therefore be a powerful lever to build consumer loyalty.

Most importantly, real backstories can be very engaging. There is drama in the challenges encountered by the brand, and how these were overcome. Equally, there is drama in compelling consumer stories, of people who have been brilliantly served by the brand. Many backstories are tales of human striving and achievement, which typically resonate very well with all of us.

For all these reasons and more, marketers should consider mining and powerfully leveraging the backstories of their brands. If you dig deep enough, every brand has a captivating backstory, and many brands have several of them. These stories can be a rich source of wonderful and enduring content, which in turn can help create wonderful new facets of the brand in consumers' minds.

The author is Brand Custodian at Tata Sons. These are his personal views.