

True Enlightenment: Inspired Teachings From The Gathering

by Rob
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Key learnings from cult brands and thought leaders.

After two days hidden in the majestic Rocky Mountains with some of the world's most prolific and fearless brand leaders, I left [The Gathering](#) inspired and enlightened. The inaugural event finally came to fruition last week as the first-ever celebration of leading brands that have truly transcended the ordinary to attain cult status among consumers.

What made The Gathering a real first of its kind was the fact that leaders behind these cult brands — including **NHL**, **Red Bull**, **GoPro**, **Las Vegas**, **Urban Outfitters** and others — shared their secrets through a series of teaching sessions with a handful of privileged attendees. Many attendees told me they really felt part of something special, like the member of an inner circle. A Society of Cult Brands, maybe?

In fact, so intentionally intimate was The Gathering kept, one could easily find themselves sharing a drink and a candid discussion with senior cult brand executives (as I did), or marketing thought leaders like Chris Malone, author of [The Human Brand](#), or Jordan Berg from [Questus](#), co-producer of [The Naked Brand](#) documentary film.



As the moderator for some of the sessions, I had the extreme privilege of not just meeting these leaders, but learning from them first-hand the secrets to their cult brand success. Like how Gregg Sauter from the [Saskatchewan Roughriders](#) showed how a micro-market football team rebounded from the brink of bankruptcy to become one of the

most revered pro sports brands in the worlds. How David Luner of [FremantleMedia](#) forged brand partnerships to innovate highly coveted broadcast TV brands with fanatical followings, such as **American Idol**, **Got Talent**, **X Factor** and more. And how in just two years, Ethan Song, founder of Montreal-based [Frank & Oak](#) has won millions of highly loyal members across North America by revolutionizing men's fashion retailing without mass advertising.

The brands honoured at The Gathering shared the stories behind some of their boldest decisions that resulted in the most innovative approaches. For me, their teachings were filled with big ideas which, unsurprisingly, collided and intersected, revealing key insights into how cult brands earn true devotion. If you weren't IHere's my key takeaways:

1. The Courage to Challenge Tradition

Each of the brands celebrated at The Gathering has successfully taken the road less travelled; a path defined by bold decisions and risk. This largely comes down to having the courage to challenge trends and traditional thinking, instead of blindly following the status quo, doing what's been done or chasing trends.

Few brands exemplify the reward of courage better than **Las Vegas**. Try to picture the city without the words "What Happens Here Stays Here" running through your mind. When the [Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority](#) launched the strategy a decade ago, it was a risky move. It was the city's first campaign that didn't explicitly feature a product and stakeholders were unsure.

When broadcasters refused to air the ad during the Super Bowl, Cathy Tull, SVP Marketing, seized the opportunity and distributed it anyway, dubbing it "the ad the NFL doesn't want you to see." It sparked a media frenzy and 10 years later, the slogan is iconic.

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Great brands – cult brands – are defined by their bravery. It starts at a brand's core, the way [GoPro](#) revolutionized the digital camera category by turning the lens to face the user, and extends throughout the values it extols. Take [Red Bull](#), a brand that is unafraid to continually challenge the limits of what's possible. Or [Big Rock](#), which is winning the hearts of Canadian beer drinkers by returning the brand to its craft roots and releasing a [perpetual stream of innovative beers](#) that flies in the face of big beer. "We're not in the beer business," Big Rock CEO, Bob Sartor, explained to attendees. "We're in the business of *inspiring* people."

2. Customer Engagement Breeds Brand Loyalty

Cult brands don't merely have customers; they have fans — highly engaged, devoted followings. They achieve this by engaging customers and forging deep, meaningful connections with them by being authentic and sincere.

Every 30 seconds, someone will [upload a video to YouTube](#) and voluntarily credit the footage to **GoPro**. By celebrating that user-generated content on a daily basis, GoPro has established an online community of millions that is tapped into seeing what the camera captures and makes possible.

How does the **Saskatchewan Roughriders** sell more merchandise than the rest of the CFL's teams combined? By quite literally putting fans at the core of its brand, and through its community-ownership model and by constantly engaging fans from the web to the stadium. Their engagement strategy enrolls fans of all ages in [Rider Nation](#), and celebrates their citizenship by featuring them in marketing communications and even on event tickets.

[Engagement](#) takes a variety of forms and looks different from brand to brand. NHL recognizes the emotion integral to the sport of hockey and the power it has to unite people, while Frank & Oak's use of technology to deliver highly personalized selections to its customers gives them a shopping experience they can't get anywhere else. Author Chris

Malone revealed how brands like Panera Bread, Zappos, Starbucks and Dominos express the same warmth and competence as real human beings to win customer loyalty and word-of-mouth advocacy.

The underlying concept beneath all of these approaches is that of creating a meaningful emotional connection with customers.

3. Brand as Business

“Brand as business” is a phrase I’ve borrowed from Denise Lee Yohn, guest keynote speaker at The Gathering and author of *What Great Brands Do*.

Like Cult, Denise also studied the world’s greatest brands to unlock the secrets to their success. She found what unites cult brands is the way they strategically use their brand values to guide every decision and operational element of their business. “Brand building,” she describes, “involves operationalizing the brand as an integral way of managing and growing a business.” It’s not about conveying brand values in marketing communications. It’s about manifesting a fundamental brand concept in ways that employees and customers alike can see, touch and feel.

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Red Bull, which both created (and revolutionized) the energy drink category, is guided by the singular ethos of giving its users “wings.” Each of its business decisions, from the way its development as a lifestyle brand to dropping Felix Baumgartner from the stratosphere, delivers on that promise.

Brian Jennings, Chief Marketing Officer at **NHL**, distilled the brand’s operations into this creed: “We don’t own the game of hockey. We serve it.” This core value has been indoctrinated throughout every level of the brand organization as a tool to guide its team from top to bottom.

Cult brands use their brand platforms to fuel, align and guide every person in the organization and every task they undertake.

Rob Howard

For the past 17 years, I’ve worked with consumer, b-to-b and non-profit brands to strategize and execute effective marketing communications that get results. Now, I help organizations find, acquire and serve customers in new ways that foster deep brand affinity and loyalty, and in ways that deliver measurable results and return on engagement.

