

Culture As Competitive Advantage For Marketers

This article is by [Rob Fields](#), an award-winning marketer who's passionate about helping companies solve the disconnect between their brands, their [business](#) and marketing objectives, and contemporary culture. Follow him on Twitter [@robfields](#).

Business, especially marketing, takes contemporary culture for granted. It gets dismissed simply as the thing everyone's talking about around the watercooler, but it's bigger than what's trendy today. Culture is the one thing that enables marketers to create greater engagement, relevance and grow their business. The failure to acknowledge the importance of culture to brand- and business-building is the same as deciding that you're okay with being at a competitive disadvantage.

When I talk about "culture," I mean the world happening outside the company's walls. It's the thing Wikipedia defines as the way of life for an entire society, including codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, norms of behavior and systems of belief. It's how we make deep and lasting meaning.

But meanings change because culture changes. It surrounds us at all times.

Brands never speak directly to consumers or customers. It's always through the medium of culture. Random House defines a medium as "an intervening substance through which something else is transmitted or carried on." Culture is the medium through which all communications travels, and it's what complicates marketers' efforts. Just as water bends light, culture changes—sometimes slightly, sometimes to a great degree—the direction, impact and meaning of communication. The message can vary greatly depending on who's sending and who's receiving. That's why slang in the wrong hands is cringe-worthy: Even though all of the words may be right, the other codes—context, tone, authenticity, mutual respect, a preexisting relationship, etc.—are not.

Culture contains many things—empathy, purpose, "cool"—that are hard to quantify, won't fit into strategic plans, or don't easily scale. But culture is where you find context and opportunities for engagement and business growth.

We know the best marketing is both art and science, but there's long been an over-emphasis on the science. It's not out of nowhere. In their book, *Cultural Strategy*, Douglas Holt and Douglas Cameron point out "the extraordinary influence of economics, engineering, and psychology on management thinking." What these disciplines have in common is an assumption: Ultimately, a complex world can be simplified, but to do that, it's necessary to filter out cultural context and changes over time.

Understandably, we want to be sure about where and how we're spending company resources, but marketing's quantitative focus comes at a cost. Recently, Gartner analysts Jake Sorofman and Andrew Frank [wrote](#) that marketers' data obsession is cultivating a generation of incomplete marketers. "Marketing leaders must remember that true brand intelligence lives at the intersection of *head* and *heart*, where the *emotional* self meets the *analytical* self." To me, that sounds like a need to understand culture and other intangibles.

Anthropology and sociology, if they're acknowledged at all, are tools of a company's consumer insights and strategy teams. Unfortunately, insights and strategy don't make the ultimate decisions about where marketing dollars are spent, brand managers do. That's why [Newell Rubbermaid NWL +0.07%](#)'s [recent announcement](#) of the re-alignment of its insights teams closer to the marketing dollars, and with the power to override brand management, is something to watch. It's a step towards increasing the importance of contemporary culture as a business driver.

Standard-setting marketers are smart about culture. Red Bull makes compelling content like Stratos because the company so deeply



understands what the drive to seek thrills means to its core audience. Kimberly-Clark KMB +1.06% is leading a much-needed conversation among women and girls on vaginal health via their Generation Know program. Like Dove's Real Beauty campaign, Generation Know surfaced a conversation that was already taking place among women and provided a platform for it. All three are examples of what Forbes contributor Denise Lee Yohn suggests companies have the potential to do well: build brands and businesses by advancing and amplifying movements.

It's not about a brand having its "Oreo moment," "real-time marketing" or brand newsrooms. Being "responsive" isn't the end goal. Rather, it's about being better able to steward your brand. To do so, marketers must shift their mindset about culture, paying attention to both the latest trends and the deeper, abiding values that change more slowly.

The benefit to brands? A better understanding about how the marketplace for their products and services is shifting, when consumer context and assumptions change, and where their opportunities for growth are.