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Zumba's Success Arose from Long-Term Trends

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How do some brands manage to resonate so strongly with the public that they seem to get woven into the fibers of culture? How do their taglines become rallying cries for change (“Where’s the beef?”), their brand names become verbs (“to google” stands for “to search online”), and their products create completely new lifestyles (Apple iPad)?

These brands create their own cultural movements or advance emerging ones in ways that position themselves as the arbiters of popular culture. That’s why they outlast fads like cronuts, Silly Bandz, and Angry Birds. They establish meaningful, lasting connections between their products, people, and the world around them. They decipher where society is going in the long term and figure out how their brand adds value to that direction.

Zumba, the fitness dance movement, has achieved this level of cultural significance. Founded a little over a decade ago, the organization reports more than 15 million weekly participants in over 200,000 locations across more than 180 countries, and its social networks enjoy a combined following of 7.5 million. As the company releases a constant stream of videos, conferences, apparel, equipment, and music, the brand has become a phenomenon.

When Zumba launched, the concept tapped into several emerging trends that together created the right conditions for it: increasing Latin influence on mainstream American culture, emerging social networks, and growing awareness of physical activity’s importance to health. Instead of following a single trend, the brand thrived on several complementary developments and so was able to lead its own movement.

It started with a bold vision. “Our purpose at Zumba is to change lives through health, wellness, and overall happiness,” said Zumba CEO, CMO, and cofounder Alberto Perlman. This sweeping vision echoes the essence of Zumba culture: “FEJ,” which is pronounced “fedge” and stands for Freeing, Electrifying Joy. Like other brands that manage to elevate their perceived value above the merely commercial exchange of goods or services for money, Zumba believes it is on a mission. Its leaders are not satisfied simply to make the headlines – they want a place in history books. Being driven by a higher purpose serves as the foundation for breakthrough brands.

And, importantly, Zumba connects its internal culture, FEJ, to the larger external context, particularly by inspiring many students to become trained as instructors, entrepreneurs who run their own Zumba communities, and evangelists who recruit new students and instructors. As such, Zumba has established authentic relevance and deeper emotional connections with its customers. In fact, the connection between Zumba’s external and internal culture is so strong that the line between the two worlds has become blurred.

The Zumba brand flourishes in this self-reinforcing loop. Recently the company introduced a new mantra to its network of instructors, “Let It Move You,” that it’s now promoting to the public in a TV advertising campaign. The internal-external

connection of the brand is evident in Perlman's explanation of the campaign: "Our number one goal is to support our licensed Zumba instructors and inspire millions to get off the couch and moving in a Zumba class."

Achieving Zumba's level of cultural impact is the result of anticipating and advancing cultural movements instead of chasing trends. Great brands like Zumba constantly scan the cultural environment for signs of meaningful, long-lasting change that might affect them. They seek to understand the potential — as well as the existing — role of their brand in people's lives and in broader culture. They keep abreast of new technology, demographic shifts, consumer tastes, laws, resource prices, and competitive behavior. And they identify possible ways to exploit developments in these fields to give their customers more reasons and more opportunities to engage with them.

Cultural movements represent forces that shape the way people live. Great brands use cultural movements to create futures in which they thrive and grow.