Subaru: The Emotional Myths Behind the Brand’s Growth

Savvy marketers understand that they are not in the business of selling products or services. They are in the business of building and maintaining strong, enduring brands that sell and sell and sell. The key to building and maintaining strong, enduring brands is advertising with a compelling story and a strategic focus (“strategic storied advertising”). Advertising with a compelling story and a strategic focus works to create meaning for the brand and give it an appealing identity and personality that in turn work to create an emotional connection with the consumer. We are storied creatures. Our life is a story. We communicate through telling and listening to stories. Strong, enduring brands use the power of story and/or mythic images to create (or represent) mytho-symbolic brand building worlds. These mytho-symbolic worlds are often drawn from archetypal (universal) stories, characters, beliefs, etc. that exist within our culture . . . and our collective psyche. Storied brands come to represent appealing mytho-symbolic worlds, with their own mythology, symbolism, and values, that work to maintain and reinforce the brand’s identity, personality, and emotional connection with the consumer.

Not so long ago . . . Subaru was an also-ran third-tier Japanese car company, struggling in the shadows of Toyota and Honda. Not any more. Subaru has become a popular brand. Buyers have been lining up to buy the various models. Even with a slumping economy, Subaru sales have been on the rise.

The turning point came in 1993. Subaru was limping along, with seven years of declining sales, when George Muller, a Subaru executive, made two important decisions. He decided to focus solely on importing all-wheel-drive vehicles to America. And he hired a new advertising agency, Temerlin McClain of Dallas, which was charged with creating an advertising campaign that would launch the all-wheel-drive Outback in America. McClain decided to use Paul Hogan as the spokesman for the new Subaru Outback.

Soon after the Paul Hogan advertising began running, Subaru showrooms began seeing an increase in buyer traffic. And sales began to increase. In fact, Subaru enjoyed seven straight years of increasing sales during the time Temerlin McClain was running its Paul Hogan campaign. The stunning comeback astonished the hard-nosed automotive industry that had already given the car company up for dead. What happened? What did Subaru do right?

Undoubtedly, there was a confluence of factors: Muller’s foresight and courage; the fact that the all-wheel-drive Outback offered consumers the safety and performance of an SUV—but on a smaller, more fuel-efficient scale that seemed to make more sense; and of course, Temerlin McClain’s fateful decision to use Paul Hogan as the spokesman for the Subaru Outback. Few would
argue that using Paul Hogan as spokesman for Subaru was an important factor in Subaru’s amazing success story. The question is why?

In an interview, Dennis McClain said, “Paul Hogan was part of the conceptualization of the Outback proposition.” And “right from the beginning,” he saw “a natural tie-in between the Outback name and Paul Hogan,” the Australian actor who became famous for his portrayal of the outback character, Mick Dundee, a.k.a. Crocodile Dundee.

In other words, McClain’s decision to use Crocodile Dundee was not only a creative decision but also a strategic decision, because consumers associate Paul Hogan with the appealing Crocodile Dundee Outback character they remember from the movie.

Prior to the Crocodile Dundee Outback advertising, Subaru did not have a compelling story. And it had not yet established a strong brand identity and personality. Subaru was selling an all-wheel-drive product—instead of a brand. But consumers buy brands. A brand is more than a product. A brand is ultimately a perceptual entity, a host of associations, feelings, imagery, symbolism, etc. that exists in the mind and hearts of consumers.

Paul Hogan’s Crocodile Dundee character and the Outback name gave Subaru a compelling story and its own unique brand identity and personality, which made sense for the brand and connected emotionally with the American consumer.

WHY A STORY?
We are receptive to stories because telling stories and listening to stories seem to be part of the human condition. Telling stories is a natural and compelling way to communicate with consumers. We are storied creatures. Storytelling is as old as humankind. We tell and listen to stories all the time.

Our life is a story, an uncertain, continually reworked narrative, part truth, part fiction, that is unfolding even as we live it. The stories we tell reveal a lot about who we are, who we would like to be, and what is important to us. We tell stories not only so others can come to understand who we are, but also so that we can come to understand who we are. We literally create our sense of self, our identity, through telling and listening to our own half true stories.

Freud and Jung both believed that the most important question we could ask is, “what is the myth [story] by which we live our lives?” We are all searching for meaning in our lives. And we look to stories to help us understand the world and find meaning. We are continually comparing our stories with other people’s stories in order to try to get ideas and insights about how we should live our lives. Stories from books, movies, culture, religion, etc. (and yes, advertising) also serve the same purpose.

THE PERSUASIVE POWER OF A STORY
The goal of advertising (whether through building brands or otherwise) is ultimately to persuade consumers to buy a product or service. William Wells says there are basically two ways to persuade people: “Lecture or Drama/Story” (Wells, 1988). The lecture approach uses logic, reason, and rhetoric to persuade us to use a product: “Buy this product because it has all-wheel-drive.” The story or drama approach is a more intuitive approach that relies more on feelings and emotions. Wells describes the story approach as “transformational”—it takes you inside the story and delivers a message while creating an emotional connection with the audience.

In his book How to Argue & Win Every Time, Gerry Spence, the highly successful criminal trial lawyer, says storytelling is the secret to his phenomenal success. He goes on to explain that he uses the persuasive power of story to “… speak easily, openly, powerfully, to reach the heart zone … to touch us in those soft, unprotected places where our decisions are made” (Spence, 1995, p. 118).

MYTHMAKING ON MADISON AVENUE
At the core of strong brands, we often find stories, myths, and mythic images that resonate with consumers and that help to give the brand an appealing identity and personality, which in turn works to create an emotional connection with consumers. Like Hollywood and Disney, Madison Avenue is in the mythmaking business.

In pretechnological societies, mythmaking was the purview of the shaman or medicine man. Joseph Campbell, a disciple of Jung, said the role of the shaman was “to make visible and public the systems of symbolic fantasy that are present in the psyche” (Campbell, 1949, p. 101). In a modern, media-driven world, mythmaking is the role of the artist, Hollywood filmmakers, and yes, advertising. Advertising has become one of the most visible and pervasive art forms in modern cultures.

STRATEGIC STORIED ADVERTISING
The Crocodile Dundee Outback advertising is a good example of strategic storied advertising, advertising that combines storytelling with a strategy. Without an underlying strategic focus, telling stories, no matter how compelling or entertaining, will usually not work to achieve advertising’s objectives. Strategic storied advertising is about finding the right story, a compelling story that makes sense for the brand and connects emotionally with the consumer.

Strategic storied advertising is a narrative fiction that uses fictitious (or real) characters, imagery, situations, symbol-
One of the clearest, most interesting examples of a brand that has used the power of strategic storytelling to represent a mytho-symbolic, brand-building world is the now-banned Marlboro advertising.

Brands, creating an emotional connection between the brand and the consumer is critical.

USING THE POWER OF STRATEGIC STORIED ADVERTISING TO BUILD STRONG BRANDS

Strong brands use the power of story, myth, and mythic images to create (or represent) mytho-symbolic, brand-building worlds that are often drawn from archetypal stories, characters, beliefs, etc. that exist within our culture and our collective psyche.

Marlboro

One of the clearest, most interesting examples of a brand that has used the power of strategic storytelling to represent a mytho-symbolic, brand-building world is the now-banned Marlboro advertising. The American cowboy is a mythic image that represents the mytho-symbolic world of America’s western frontier. Marlboro created one of the strongest, most enduring brands in the world by leveraging the powerful, emotional appeal of the mytho-symbolic world represented by the cowboy and the American west.

The cowboy is a uniquely American articulation of the “hero archetype,” a universally appealing image that comes under many guises (cowboy, fireman, knight, etc.). It does not matter that there are very few real cowboys. The mythic cowboy-hero represents the mytho-symbolic world of the American west, a world that still exists in the American psyche, a world whose values are freedom, rugged individualism, and the pioneering spirit.

It is important, however, to recognize that the mythic cowboy-hero and the mytho-symbolic world it represents is just that—a compelling mythic image that has little to do with reality. The mythic cowboy-hero that haunts the American psyche is largely fictive, a product of the human imagination, wishful thinking, dime novel stories, Hollywood movies, and America’s collective Jungian yearning for a hero.

Sure, once upon a time in America, there were real cowboys, but they had little to do with the mythic cowboy-hero image that has become an American icon. Modern America grew up with cowboy heroes like the Lone Ranger, with his white hat, stallion called Silver, and two six-guns.

But the reality is very different. Most real cowboys were actually hard working, cowpoking, blue-collar workers with low paying, dirty jobs. And, although mythic cowboy heroes are almost always depicted as Caucasian, many of the real cowboys were African or Mexican.

Even the term “cowboy” may be problematic. In a recent article, Wuerthner (2004) cites several sources (Dary, 1981; Jordan, 1993) that trace the likely origin of the term “cowboy”: “The term ‘cowboy’ most likely came about on the Texas rangelands, which were largely controlled by wealthy Anglo-Americans from an antebellum south, whose black slaves tending cattle were often referred to as ‘boy’” (p. 9).

March 2006 JOURNAL OF ADVERTISING RESEARCH 13
No, it is not the image of the hard-working, cowpoking cowboy that has made a lasting impression on America’s soul; it is the mythic image of the cowboy as gunfighter, the wild-west warrior hero that haunts our dreams and shapes our sensibilities . . . and our politics. Marlboro has leveraged the powerful appeal of the mythic cowboy-hero-gunfighter, a “killer image,” to create one of most recognizable brands in the history of advertising.

McDonald’s
McDonald’s is another example of a brand that uses strategic storytelling (along with promotional advertising) to create a very appealing mytho-symbolic world. McDonald’s strategic storied advertising has helped to create a wonderfully appealing, all-American brand, a mythical, family-oriented world, a wondrous, magical place where everyone is welcome, safe, happy, loved, kind, caring, sharing, and forever young or young-at-heart. It does not matter that sometimes when we go there it feels more like a cafeteria food fight. Strategic storied advertising has helped McDonald’s create a brand with a mytho-symbolic world that is a microcosm of all that is good about America—everything America is supposed to be.

Subaru
Like Marlboro and McDonald’s, Subaru’s Crocodile Dundee Outback advertising is another example of how strategic storytelling, archetypes, and mythic images can be used to create appealing mytho-symbolic, brand-building worlds. An in-depth analysis of Subaru’s Crocodile Dundee Outback advertising reveals a complex structure, with different story elements, and layered archetypal themes and imagery that work together.

First, it is important to understand that the Crocodile Dundee story was a huge success all around the world—the most successful Australian movie ever made. It was extremely popular in America. Indeed, movie critics were surprised at the movie’s enormous appeal, which was able to cut across demographics, ethnographies, geographies, etc. All of this undoubtedly added to the recognition and appeal of the Crocodile Dundee character used in the Subaru advertising.

Interestingly, Paul Hogan actually wrote the script for Crocodile Dundee, “longhand with a pencil.” He drew from all the outback characters, stories (crocodile and otherwise), as well as his own personal outback experiences. He also drew from his personal experiences as an Australian who had once visited New York City, and how “it was the absolute opposite of the Northern Territory Outback.” Paul Hogan said he saw in this contrast a wonderful opportunity for humor.

But of course, all of this only begs the question: what is the seemingly magical appeal of the Crocodile Dundee movie and the outback character portrayed by Paul Hogan? From whence comes the magic? And how did this magic help Subaru?

The Crocodile Dundee story is archetypal—a story with a familiar archetypal (universal) theme: “the stranger in a strange land.” The Crocodile Dundee story turns on a twist of fate, wherein a laid-back crocodile hunter, who is at home in the Australian Outback, suddenly finds himself in the middle of New York City.

While in New York City, Crocodile Dundee is confronted with a knife wielding mugger, a bidet, a transvestite, prostitutes, kidnappers, etc. We all recognize and delight in the laughable contrast between the laid back, “innocent” outback character of Crocodile Dundee, and the unfamiliar, fast-paced, strange, and, for Crocodile Dundee, alien world of New York City. It is the “country bumpkin” versus “city slicker” story.

The highly regarded Hollywood screenwriter Robert McKee says flat out: the “story is about archetypes.” He goes on to explain why: “. . . the archetypal story unearths a universally human experience . . . its telling illuminates conflicts so true to humankind that it journeys from culture to culture” (McKee, 1997, p. 4).

In other words, the powerful appeal of an archetypal story comes from a universally recognizable experience, something we can all relate to and understand.

At the same time, McKee also goes on to explain that a really good archetypal story also “. . . creates settings and characters so rare that our eyes feast on every detail.” Storytelling has two parts: the story and the “telling.” You not only have to
come up with a great story, you also have
to tell/present it in a compelling way.

In the Crocodile Dundee story, we are
indeed introduced to the unfamiliar (for
most of us) little known, exotic world of
the Australian Outback. We are also in-
troduced to this very interesting charac-
ter, Crocodile Dundee, who, on the one
hand, seems to have some similarity to
the American cowboy but, on the other
hand, is like nothing we have ever seen
before.

Here is this laid back Australian Out-
back character wearing a snakeskin jacket,
a cowboy style hat festooned with crocco-
dile teeth, and a really big hunting knife;
he likes to tackle crocodiles with his bare
hands, play with snakes, use dynamite to
catch fish, hypnotize animals, whirl a
bull-roarer, and he feels most at home in the rugged
Australian Outback among the native
bushmen, whom he regards as brothers.

Well-told stories like Crocodile Dundee,
that combine an archetypal or universal
experience, with unique characters and
settings that introduce us to new worlds,
generally have a powerful cross-cultural
appeal, which helps to explain why Cro-
crocodile Dundee was so successful all over the
world.

The seemingly magical appeal of Paul
Hogan’s Crocodile Dundee character. In
addition to the powerful, universal ap-
peal of the archetypal Crocodile Dundee
story, there is the seemingly magical ap-
peal of the Crocodile Dundee character.
Some of the magical appeal of Crocodile
Dundee is undoubtedly Paul Hogan’s in-
nate charismatic charm. In typical “out-
back” fashion, Hogan exhibits an openness
when meeting strangers, and “a playful,
laconic sense of humor.” He likes putting
people on. In his biography, Hogan says,
“That’s the way Americans see us—we
might as well give them what they want”
(Oram, 1988).

In a recent interview, Denis McClain,
the creative director at Temerlin McClain
advertising, says he saw in Paul Hogan’s
character “a charming and rugged person-
ification of this [Outback] vehicle—a bit
of an unexpected hero, with a natural
sense of humor, who brought a sense of
adventure to the Subaru brand.”

Paul Hogan’s charismatic Crocodile
Dundee character also exhibits what the
ancient Greeks called the “cardinal vir-
tues.” The cardinal virtues are the stuff of
heroes: a man who possesses a sense of
justice, what is fair, and just; wisdom, a
practical intelligence—common sense; a
disciplined and measured response to a
problem or crisis; and the courage to take
action if necessary.

But there seems to be something about
the Crocodile Dundee character that goes
beyond Hogan’s virtuous charm and hu-
mor, something so universally appealing
that it cuts across time and disparate cul-
tures. Women love him. Men want to be
like him. He is a uniquely Australian char-
acter, and yet he is somehow familiar to
us all.

A mythic Outback hero. Yes, we have
seen this character before—in our dreams.

Like the mythic American cowboy-hero,
Crocodile Dundee is a uniquely Aus-
tralian articulation of an archetypal or mythic
image. Crocodile Dundee is a mythic Out-
back hero that evokes the mytho-symbolic
world of the Australian Outback, a rug-
ged, outdoors, untamed, adventurous
world that is similar to the American west.

The powerful appeal of mythic or ar-
chetypal hero images, represented in char-
acters like the cowboy and Crocodile
Dundee, are their universal appeal and
their emotional resonance. Like arche-
typal stories, archetypal images resonate
in our psyche because they represent uni-
versal yearnings. Jung believed that the
archetypes function somewhat like an in-
stinct to drive and shape our behaviors.
Jung called them “the world’s dreams.”

Sometimes, when the world seems like
its closing in on us, when everything seems
hopeless, and the world is a dark and
scary place full of dragons and monsters
ready to swallow us up, we long for a
hero who can save us from the dangers of
the world and make us feel safe again.

And a hero, in the form of a mythic or
archetypal image, emerges from the depths
of our unconscious psyche. The hero is
an extraordinarily, powerful archetypal
image because, like the firemen who ran into the World Trade Center, the hero is courageous, selfless, and willing to risk his life to help a stranger.

In one of his television interviews, Joseph Campbell recounts an extraordinary newspaper story about a heroic policeman who risked his life to save a stranger who was about to jump off a bridge. The policeman runs to the edge of the bridge and grabs the jumper, but as he does, the man jumps, and the policeman is pulled over the railing with the jumper. Just as the jumper is pulling the policeman over the bridge, the policeman’s partner grabs him and somehow manages to hold both of them until others come to their rescue.

Campbell goes on to explain that in that moment, the policeman, a young man with his whole life ahead of him, a young man with a wife and family, hopes and dreams, risked everything to save a stranger. Continuing, Campbell says that in this courageous, selfless act, the young policeman entered the world of the meta-physical, the world of Christ, Buddha, etc.

The courage of the hero inspires us to be courageous, to discover the hero within. Crocodile Dundee is such a hero, Joseph Campbell’s “Hero with a Thousand Faces,” the hero that dwells within us all—if only we have the courage.

Mythic or archetypal images like “the hero” have a powerful, magical appeal because they are truly enchanted. They have their own innate power, which Carl Jung described as “numinous,” or psychically charged. We become possessed by these images. They fire up our imagination. The cowboy, knight in shining armor, fireman, and Crocodile Dundee are all different representations of archetypal or mythic images that speak to our innermost need for a hero.

But Crocodile Dundee is a special breed of hero. He is not some bigger-than-life hero, but rather, a very down-to-earth hero, almost an anti-hero. Crocodile Dundee is a lot like us—except he has the courage to be true to himself, despite the world around him. He also has the courage to confront his fears and the “dragons” that threaten us all. His honesty and courage give us hope, lift our spirits, and give us the courage to go forward. And his humanity makes him all the more appealing.

Mythic Outback hero-frontiersman. In his biography, Paul Hogan talks about what he believes is the mythic image represented by Crocodile Dundee: “... he’s a myth(446,602),(578,667)(748,603),(875,668)ical outback Australian who does exist in part—the frontiersman who walks through the bush, picking up snakes and throwing them aside and living off the land; who can ride horses and chop down trees, and has that simple, friendly, laid-back philosophy” (Oram, 1988, p. 159).

Crocodile Dundee, and the mythic Outback-hero image he represents, is indeed a frontiersman, similar in his appeal to the “American frontiersman.” The American frontiersman, like the cowboy, is a mythic image associated with the mytho-symbolic world of the American western frontier.

And, like the cowboy, the frontiersman was mythologized in dime store novels, movies, television shows, etc. In the 1950s, a lot of young baby-boomers wearing Davy Crockett hats wanted very much to be like Davy Crockett, the mythic frontiersman-hero.

American frontiersmen like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, as well as fictive frontiersman characters like James Fenimore Cooper’s “Hawkeye,” were bigger than life heroes in the 1880s, who, like the cowboy heroes, were, and still are, revered by Americans.

Similarly, Crocodile Dundee’s Outback frontiersman-hero character is a mythic image associated with the mytho-symbolic world of the rugged, Australian Outback.

Crocodile Dundee’s mythic Outback frontiersman-hero and the mythic American western frontiersman-hero are both men who are still close to nature and their natural instincts. They are both primitive men who are at home in the wilderness and who can track animals, live off the land, ride horses, etc.

While there is a reality to both the American West and Australia’s Outback, they have been mythologized to a point where it is difficult to say where mythology ends and reality begins.

The “Noble Savage.” Crocodile Dundee, the Outback frontiersman-hero, is also an example of what the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau called a wild man or “Noble Savage.” Rousseau argues that man was essentially good in the state of nature (just like the animals) before he was corrupted by society and the so-called civilized world. Crocodile Dundee, the Outback frontiersman-hero, is an example of “a primitive,” “a wild man,” an “innocent” who has not been corrupted by society.

There is a wonderful moment in the original Crocodile Dundee movie, where his innate goodness and innocence comes to light. Crocodile Dundee, who is visiting New York City, gets into a fight in
order to protect the honor of a couple of “ladies.” Dundee does not realize the “ladies” are prostitutes. He sees only the good in people.

Crocodile Dundee, the Outback frontiersman-hero, the uncorrupted innocent, is also similar in his appeal to Tarzan, the character created by Edgar Rice Burroughs, at the turn of the century. Tarzan and Crocodile Dundee are both “wild men” who are at home with nature, among the animals. There is an innate goodness about them that has not been corrupted by a world driven by greed and power. They are both “innocents,” uncontaminated by the civilized world.

Interestingly, like the Crocodile Dundee movie and advertising, Burroughs’ book, Tarzan of the Apes, was also hugely successful throughout the world. Until he wrote the story of Tarzan, Burroughs was a man who drifted from job to job, struggling to feed his family. In fact, he did not start writing until he was 36 years old. He was writing pulp fiction for a penny a word—until he somehow reached down into depths of his unconscious and came up with a uniquely compelling story: Tarzan of the Apes.

Burroughs soon found himself holding “a tiger by the tail,” a mythic, archetypal hero character that took the world by storm and made him one of the most famous, most widely-read, and highest paid writers of his time. Hollywood quickly recognized the powerful archetypal appeal of Tarzan and made a series of highly successful movies. More recently, Disney created an animated version of Tarzan, a story that is still working its magic on new generations.

The contribution of Temerlin McClain’s Crocodile Dundee advertising. It is difficult to assess the absolute contribution of Temerlin McClain’s Crocodile Dundee Outback advertising to the success of Subaru. But at the very least, Paul Hogan and his Crocodile Dundee hero-frontiersman-noble savage character, together with the Outback name, gave the Subaru brand a compelling story, and an appealing identity and personality that connected emotionally with the American consumer.

The importance of creating an appealing brand identity and personality is that they work to create an emotional connection between the consumer and the Subaru brand. Consumers begin to feel psychologically comfortable with the brand. The Subaru brand begins to feel “rugged, adventurous, and outdoorsy—like Crocodile Dundee and the Outback.” Some consumers even thought Subaru was an Australian car company. Suddenly Subaru seemed like the right choice.

Of course, the naysayers will say, “it had nothing to do with Crocodile Dundee... I bought the Outback because it has all wheel drive...” See, that is the funny thing about mythic images. We are not always conscious that they are working... “except lately, I find that I have this overwhelming desire to say ‘G’day.'”

Sal Randazzo began his market research career at Young & Rubicam where he worked on brands such as Lincoln Mercury, Kodak, and Jello. He then served as strategic planning director at Backer & Spielvogel where he worked with Bill Backer on the now famous Lite All-Star campaign. After Backer and Spielvogel, Mr. Randazzo moved to DMB&B as a senior strategist. While he was at DMB&B, he was tapped by Peter Kim, vice chairman at McCann-Erickson, to join McCann-Erickson as the worldwide planning director where he developed the highly successful communications strategy for Lucent Technologies, for which he won a gold AME award and silver EFFIE. Mr. Randazzo left McCann-Erickson to start his own market research company (ConsumerWorks), which specializes in using storytelling and archetypes to help clients develop and maintain strong, enduring brands. He holds masters degrees in psychology and philosophy, and has completed his course work for his doctorate in psychology. He has served as the chairperson for the Qualitative Research Council of the ARF. Mr. Randazzo is also a prolific writer who has published numerous articles on marketing and research. He has published a book titled, Mythmaking on Madison Avenue: How Advertisers Use the Power of Myth and Symbolism to Create Leadership Brands.

REFERENCES


