

Braveheart to Begbie

From Braveheart to Begbie: the challenge of building brand around national identity.



We are sat with a group of high-end spirits drinkers discussing a selection of single-malt Scotches. Buying one will set you back anywhere between £35 and £100. Even amongst those who don’t know their Scotch, normally these pricey bottles garner appreciative murmurs about classic design, craftsmanship and, most importantly, heritage.

“A bottle you’d see at the corner shop with all the fags. Guys with dogs on strings.”

Wait, what?

There is one significant difference between the drinkers we are talking to tonight and our usual audience; they’re women. And it seems that for women, that all important heritage doesn’t quite cue the same things as for men.

Traditionally it has been ‘heritage’ that allows Scotch - a spirit made of mushed grain and water - to maintain a price even the most fashionable gins or reserved of cognacs cannot. A bottle of Scotch is not just a drink, it is a distillation of the land from which it comes. To buy a single malt is to buy into a poetic idea of Scotland; one that starts with Walter Scott and ends with Mel Gibson bestriding the glens in a historically inaccurate kilt.

As one drinker in a male group put it “if I’m drinking whisky I’m a whisky drinker. If I’m drinking Scotch I’m a laird.”

National identity is a feature many brands play on; from the beach vibe of Havaianas to the Britishness of Burberry. Even global megalith Starbuck’s still leans on Seattle roots when looking to add a shot of authenticity. For brands, national identity is a shortcut to personality.

Want people to think of you as quirky? Be British. Cool and understated? Draw on your Scandinavian ethos. Hoping to charge a premium for efficiency? Play up your product’s German DNA.

By leveraging commonly held associations, national identity has proved an effective way for brands, in fact whole categories, to inject value and meaning into otherwise undifferentiated products. It’s cliché, but that’s the point; tropes everyone recognises - a shortcut.

And with nationhood more or less the theme for this decade, surely now is a good time for brands to lean on their geographical identity? Forget Trump and Brexit. In emerging economies like South Africa and Malaysia a desire to redefine national identity on their own terms is driving not just cultural discourse but brand choice. In Warsaw, soviet-era style Milk Bars are making a come-back, serving traditional dumplings to Polish hipsters who 5 years ago would have opted for a flat white at an international coffee chain. A recent survey by McKinsey found more than 75 percent of young Chinese consumers prefer local apparel brands to international players.

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This kind of nationalism comes up every century or so; whenever technology or economics forces countries to re-evaluate their destiny. But this time around, is it so simple? Can we still rely on country of origin to communicate a universally accepted set of values or has national character become... muddier?

Minorities are no longer as restricted when expressing dissenting perspectives. Media and information channels have not merely fragmented, but splintered. Religion, state and sport no longer provide universal experiences.

And of course, there’s women.

It’s been a while coming, but the female perspective is finally forcing a re-evaluation of all kinds of cultural icons. Which is where we come back to women, whisky and Scotland.

Of course Scotland isn’t only stags and lochs. But while Scotch was mainly talking to white, middle-aged men those were the most salient characteristics. Because centuries of art, literature and marketing have sold that image of Scotland to that audience.

Those associations are there for women as well. The trouble is, so are a lot of others, and it’s not as easy to predict which will surface. Notions of Scotland as a barbaric land, filled with men unable to control their rage started with Medieval propaganda. Perhaps it’s not surprising that for women, these associations of male aggression are more emotionally salient than picturesque landscapes. Particularly in the context of alcohol brands.

We all know neither view of Scotland is true. Both are massive over-simplifications designed to sell something, whether that’s whisky or English rule. But for brands, that’s not the point. Those associations are there, and the question is which is most likely to inform the interpretation of your comms, design and product?

As spending power shifts from white 30-something-men (or rather we all wise up to the fact that’s never been who really has the spending power) brands and categories that rely on national identity will need to get more sophisticated in their approach. That doesn’t mean abandoning your roots, but rather examining more closely what those roots might say to different groups, and taking greater care to ensure you hit the right triggers. As your audience becomes more diverse - whether that’s age, race or gender - so do their reference points. While men look at a bottle of single malt Scotch and think of Braveheart, for a woman there’s an equal chance she’s thinking of Robert Carlisle in his role as Begbie, backhanding a glass over a balcony before greeting the room with a Glasgow kiss.

Successfully leveraging your brand’s national heritage is no longer about understanding only where you started, but where your audience are starting from.