

THE CREATION OF BRAND FAME IN THE DIGITAL AGE

by Pete Buckley

The most effective way to build a brand in the digital age is to ensure every encounter with the brand reinforces its fame. Brands need to align every detail to the objective of fame from the products at their heart (statics) to the content they create (flows).

Introduction

On the 15th October 2009 in Fort Collins, Colorado, Richard and Mayumi Heene allowed a gas balloon filled with helium to float away into the atmosphere, with their six-year-old son Falcon inside. The news attracted worldwide media attention. Within hours of the balloon being released "Balloon Boy" became the no. 1 searched term on Google. Falcon and his balloon had become famous. But their fame was short lived. When the balloon eventually landed and no boy was found inside suspicions began to rise. Ultimately, Falcon's parents were prosecuted for the hoax and balloon boy disappeared from the public conscious as quickly as he had arrived.

The digital age is transforming the very nature of fame. How it is created, how it develops and most importantly how it's sustained.

This transformation is of crucial importance to brands as it's well established that fame is the essential ingredient of strong brands. A recent analysis of the IPA databank stated "fame is the fundamental value that all strong brands own".¹ Whilst some have different names for it (Ehrenberg used salience, Stephen King used familiarity), across the years fame has consistently been singled out as the key driver of brand growth.

This essay evidences how changes driven by the digital age have made sustainable fame even more essential to brand growth and details a number of steps brands can take to most effectively create on-going fame.

Fame defined

Before we get to the heart of the issue it's important that we clearly articulate what fame is and how it is created. Brand fame is about reach and numbers; it can be defined as the perceived majority of people having a high quantity of high quality associations in their mind about a brand. Fame is driven by two key ingredients being consistently present:

1. Mass visibility
2. Being talked about by the masses

These two ingredients are not disconnected and often drive each other. A recent study into word of mouth found that whilst interesting brand behaviour did impact the volume of chatter the key driver was the visibility of the brand.²

Put simply brands which are seen more get talked about more.

Research into the exposure of people in the media found there are two distinct types of fame:³

1. Ephemeral fame

Passive fame for a limited amount of time, usually fixed to a specific event i.e. a stunt, a shock, a scandal.

2. Self-perpetuating fame

Sustained fame which experiences on-going sustenance, constantly topped-up by exposure and chatter.

To experience growth brands need to create self-perpetuating fame. The digital age has changed society, culture and how ideas/news spread by drastically increasing the visibility of conversations and behaviour. Ensuring a brand is consistently visible and talked about matters more today than ever before.

How digital has changed fame

Crucially for fame, digital has increased the strength of cumulative advantage, also known as the snowball effect. Put simply the famous get more famous more easily in the digital age. The web and social media are teeming with social influence; this coupled with low transaction costs make the digital environment the ultimate breeding ground for cumulative advantage.⁴

The more inter-connected an environment the stronger the influence of cumulative advantage. Research has shown that the perceived popularity of a song becomes the key determinate of choice when popularity increases, meaning that the most popular songs become even more popular whilst the least popular become even less popular.⁵

The sociology of fame suggests that fame is highly susceptible to self-reinforcement, whereby every increase leads to a greater chance for recognition and exposure in the future. In the digital age, brands which are talked about become even more talked about and the brands that are seen become even more seen, leaving those which aren't more lost than ever.

This is further exaggerated by the explosion of choice. All decisions are a blend of personal and social information, when personal information is weak and choice is high, people tend to rely more on social information and particularly popularity. In a study on social influence, when investors were uncertain about the direction of the market, they were more likely to look at what was popular and base their decisions on that, resulting in the popular becoming ever more popular.⁶

The increased influence of cumulative advantage means it is more important than ever for brands to focus on creating a sustained, long term consistent fame, a fame which is self-perpetuating.

How brands can create self-perpetuating fame in the digital age

The route to most effectively creating self-perpetuating fame in the digital age has two stages:

1. Start with statics
2. Make flows more culturally congruent

1. Start with statics

As Balloon Boy would testify more people are more famous for shorter amounts of time in the digital age. Ephemeral fame is now much more common. The digital age has resulted in the cultural latency of events dramatically reducing, meaning events move more quickly through a cycle of interest (from unknown to famous to uninteresting in less and less time).

Figure 1 – Statics & Flows Source: Author	
Statics	Flows
<p>Product Design, Services, Distribution, Packaging, Retail Space, Commercial Partnerships, Recommended Retail Price, Long Term Sponsorships, Regularly Timed Events</p>	<p>Content, Advertising Social Media, Communications Partnerships, Price Promotions, Product Placement, Short Term Sponsorships, One-off Events</p>

This increase in speed has been seen way beyond single events. Baby name popularity (often used by anthropologists as a proxy for popular culture) has seen a substantial acceleration in innovation, since the growth of digital at the end of the 20th century. More new baby names have appeared and disappeared in a shorter amount of time than ever before.⁷ Popular culture is getting quicker, more intense but with a shorter attention span. A natural response to this from a brand perspective would be to increase the velocity and variation of brand activity, make more stuff, more of the time and hope it develops into a peak of fame and attention for the brand. This has been one of the drivers behind the growing attention given to real time and agile content planning. While this makes intuitive sense it can potentially result in a lot of effort for very little return. Even if successful the result is likely to be ephemeral fame, here today, quickly gone tomorrow and in isolation is little help in the creation of self-perpetuating fame.

The solution is for brands to ensure they create fame from their statics as well as their flows. All brand activity can be categorized into two types, statics or flows. Statics are the near constants the brand is built upon whilst flows are the ever changing temporal activity of a brand.

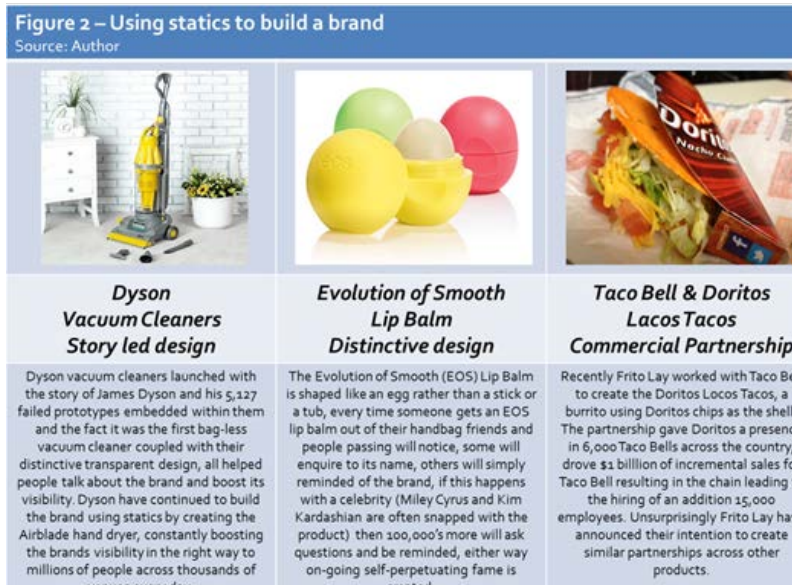
In the digital age the importance of statics in creating brand fame is dramatically increased. If used correctly statics can constantly create fame for the brand at every encounter, as opposed to the more occasional and sporadic fame created by brand flows.

Visibility and talkability need to be design into a brands statics. Products need to have stories embedded within them which people can spread, packaging needs to be distinctive so visibility is increased, and services need to be innovative and interesting so people talk about them.

Digital brands lead the way in exploiting their statics, GAFA (Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple) consistently focus on using their statics to drive fame rather than flows. Fame, advantage and growth is driven mainly by product innovation.

More and more brands are now establishing their fame through statics rather than flows, Starbucks, Zappos, Method and Red Bull have all grown dramatically through this approach in the digital age.

When audio brand Beats By Dre launched, its headphone product had a story embedded within it, (“Dr Dre was fed up with poor quality white headphones so he personally designed the best headphones ever made”), the distinctive design made sure their visibility was maximized, you can’t mistake someone wearing Beats. Different music celebrities helped design different products ensuring each came with its own story. All this was coupled with a long term commercial partnership with HP which saw Beats branding added to their high end laptops and their technology embedded inside. As Jimmy Lovine the co-founder of Beats stated after the launch “we aren’t buying many ads”.



The use of statics to build fame matters more than ever in a world where visibility and chatter have more value and cultural latency is ever decreasing.

Many brands don’t understand this. They launch focusing on how to make their flow famous, asking how can we use advertising or content to make this brand famous? The problem with this approach is popular culture is accelerating and its attention span reducing, what was interesting today, will not be tomorrow. The most effective way to overcome this is by transforming the brands statics to continuously spread news and visibility, creating self-perpetuating fame for the brand.

Every day millions of people notice the transparent design of a Dyson; see Beats branding on a HP laptop and eat a Doritos Taco Locos. Every day these help the fame of these brands grow. As Philippe Starck said in 1990 about his famous lemon squeezer designed for Alessi, “it’s not meant to squeeze lemons, it’s meant to start conversations”.

Exploiting statics isn’t easy or quick. It means having influence outside of the marketing department’s usual remit, and creating initiatives which can take a serious amount of time, expertise and expense. Launching new products and creating long term commercial partnerships does not come easily. The Frito Lay Taco Bell partnership took three years and 45 prototypes to launch. But in the digital age the pay back from such activity is undoubtedly worth the effort.



2. Make flows more culturally congruent

Whilst optimising statics is essential for creating self-perpetuating fame, brands also need to consider how best to use their flows to further add fame.

Determining how brand flows are designed requires an understanding of how the digital age has changed the nature of influence in society. The growth of digital and social media specifically has further accelerated a shift in influence from authority/institutions to friends, family and peers. More than ever people trust people like them more than figures of authority; the annual Edelman Trust Barometer has documented this shift accelerating over the last 10 years in particular.

To exploit this shift brands need to align their flow activity with what people are interested in rather than what the brand is into. Conveniently the digital age has brought about great opportunities to create content which is contextually relevant. The growth in native advertising is testament to this.

But congruence with content will only get brands so far, for more sustained fame brands need to shift their ambition from 'congruence with content' to 'congruence with culture'. Cultural congruence means seamlessly infusing brands into popular culture. It inverts the planning process. Instead of starting with the brand and working back to the audience it means starting with audience's culture then working back to the brand i.e. 'what are the audience interested in? How can our brand be a central part of that story? What can the brand do to truly become part of popular culture?'

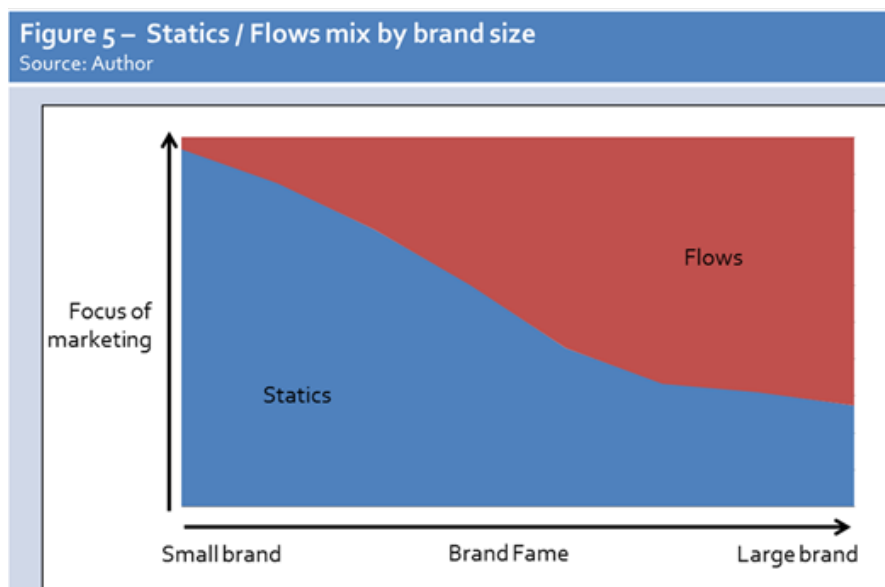
Obviously marketing communications has always tried to align with common interests through sports sponsorships and celebrity endorsement for example, but the digital age requires this to evolve much further.

In a review of last year's MTV VMA's Ad Week commented that it was hard to know where the ads ended and the show began, so integrated was Beats By Dre in the proceedings.⁸ Beats ran a bespoke ad to comment on the twerking by Miley Cyrus minutes after the incident, they placed their product in the video for Miley Cyrus's 'We Can't Stop' and used the video for the hit "Blurred Lines" as their TV ad, again heavily featuring their product. This was complete and full integration, Beats moved marketing communications from being an awkward add-on to being seamlessly embedded. Popular culture may be speeding up but if your brand flows are inside rather than outside, it will be much easier to encourage conversations and efficiently boost visibility to drive fame.

Cultural congruence isn't just possible through alignment and response. Brands can, and do create popular culture themselves, Red Bull Stratos is a prime example. It is in this creation space where Coca-Cola are focusing their future marketing as explained in their Content 2020 strategy. The objective is to create stories which will spread and become part of culture. Whilst this exploits the opportunities of the digital age it is worth highlighting that without strong brand statics constantly reinforcing the brands fame this type of content strategy would struggle to create a self-perpetuating fame alone.

Static/flow mix depends on brand size

Whilst statics and flows are relevant to all brands the most effective balance of focus depends on the size of the brand. Large brands with an established fame can re-enforce their fame more easily through flow activity (famous brands are easier to notice), whereas smaller brands, and brands being launched need more focus on their statics, the heart of the brand, the more constant factors which can make every encounter build fame a little more. As a guide, a split between the focus on statics and flows is given below:



CONCLUSION

Balloon Boy and his sudden fame can appear tempting for brands in the digital age. But fame capable of building brands is sustained and self-perpetuating not ephemeral and short-lived. The creation of self-perpetuating fame demands brands ensure their statics are fame generating and their flows are culturally congruent like never before.

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