**Brand becomes cult: Harley Davidson, Vespa and Beetle tend to inspire loyalty beyond reason**

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Way back in the 1940s the Italian aeronautical engineer and designer of pioneering helicopters, Corradino D'Ascanio, was asked to design a utility transport vehicle for a country ravaged by post-war trauma.   
  
D'Ascanio designed a motor scooter that was centered around the vision of a man seated comfortably on his couch, and gave the touches accordingly — the engine was placed at the rear, unsightly mechanisms were covered up, and plenty of legroom was created.The compact little vehicle that was thus created became the iconic [Vespa](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/topic/Vespa) (Italian for [wasp](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/topic/wasp)).   
  
Now the iconic brand has made its foray into the Indian market not as an object of transport but as a lifestyle symbol. Cult brands like the Vespa, or Volkswagen's [Beetle](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/topic/Beetle) or Harley-Davidson are all linked by a few common threads: they have a strong loyal following; they are seen as lifestyle enablers; and that they are a means of transport is incidental.   
  
To put it another way, they are products you could do without — but which you badly want to covet. Says Arijit Ray,CEO, Dentsu Communications: "Iconic brands always stand for something unique. They have a code that underpins a strong point of view on culture, society and values." The Beetle, for instance, which was known as a people's car in the 30s and 40s, transformed into a cult brand in the 60s and became an icon—particularly the psychedelically painted ones — of the hippie culture.   
  
Similarly Harley-Davidson(HD)has always been associated with inspiring freedom, self expression, boldness, passion and power. It acquired iconic status during the first and second World War. Today it has built a community of enthusiasts from diverse groups coming from all over the globe.   
  
As Sanjay Tripathi, head of marketing at Harley-Davidson India says: "A brand becomes a cult when it is an integral part of the social and cultural milieu of the society. These brands have become an integral part of the society; it was not just that they grew with society but also the society evolved with them."   
  
The most recent entrant to this list in India, Vespa, has been launched keeping in mind that "there is a generation that is all set to earn and indulge, that is looking for ways of self-expression and is willing to indulge on brands that provide an opportunity for the same, reflecting an extension of their personality," says Ravi Chopra, chairman & managing director, Piaggio Vehicles India, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Piaggio Italy.   
  
Accordingly, the focus is more on the emotions and not merely the steel that goes into making the automobile, he adds. Creating brand salience for such a category can be a tricky task. That's because many would have heard about the brand and its lineage but may not fully know what the brand stands for — unlike the case of mass brands like say Maruti or Hero MotoCorp, which have unabashedly embraced the fuel efficiency proposition.   
  
Agrees Lutz Kothe, head - marketing and PR, [Volkswagen](http://www.zigwheels.com/newcars/Volkswagen" \t "_blank) Passenger Cars: "Creating and ensuring the right communication for such an icon (like the Beetle) is not an easy task. The right balance has to be maintained between heritage and legacy, and a modern, well-equipped carline." In the Beetle's case, while people were emotional about the original Beetle and its heritage, the New Beetle launched in 2009 in India had changed and aligned itself with modern tastes and requirements.

In contrast, when it is about selling mass brands like Maruti or Hero Moto-Corp, the focus is more on product features and the functional benefits like mileage, durability and after-sales service. For cult brands what matter more are status, lineage, legacy and the pride of ownership. Explains Samir Gupte, president, OgilvyAction, the brand activation arm of the Ogilvy Group "Maruti and Hero MotoCorp are familiar and known. There is an existing mass equity that can be capitalized.   
  
In the case of a brand like Vespa, there is little familiarity and more intrigue; because it is foreign, slightly distant and more talked about than seen in real life (especially in India)." In such a category, imagery and experiential components play a huge role.   
  
For instance, the memorable shot of [Audrey Hepburn](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/topic/Audrey-Hepburn)side-saddled on Gregory Peck's Vespa riding through the streets of Rome in the romantic comedy 'Roman Holiday' is possibly the most iconic Vespa communication ever done by the brand. And that was not even done as a part of a well-thought-out media plan as it was many moons before the strategy of product placements was even spoken about.   
  
Harley-Davidson, the bike that sells in India in the range of Rs 5 lakh to Rs 35 lakh range, does the job through a host of experiential initiatives like HOG (Harley Owners Group) rallies and Boot Camps. Says Tripathi: "The Boot Camp is a brand introduction event in which prospective customers come and learn about the history, heritage and lifestyle of Harley-Davidson as well as go through the bike family introduction."   
  
In a carnival-like atmosphere, they get a first-hand brand experience and an opportunity to test-ride the legendry HD bikes with proper HD riding gear. Advertising in most of these cases is not the answer to brand building or even launching them.   
  
Explains Debraj Tripathy, managing director, MediaCom: "An innovation is the best way to launch these brands. The innovation helps attract attention to the fact that the brand is now in India, thus generating interest among target consumers."So when Vespa had to announce its launch in India, it chose to go digital with an innovative campaign conceptualized and designed by OgilvyOne in partnership with Meridian Communications.   
  
Informs Prasanna Kulkarni, senior creative director - digital, OgilvyOne: "The pre-launch campaign comprised an interactive application which engaged the audience and at the same time spoke about the Vespa lineage and its association with music, cinema and art over the years."   
  
The campaign generated more than 70,000 unique visitors.The arrival of the New Beetle was announced with the first heli-banner flown across the city of Mumbai followed by cut-out hoardings of the carline across all major cities in India. In addition, there were special outdoor innovations created like wavy zebra crossings at several strategic locations in Mumbai with the message 'Curves are back'.   
  
Still, creating brand salience is not always as easy as it might appear. In Vespa's case the challenges are even more diverse, "We need to walk a thin line since mass advertising is usually seen as contrary to establishing a premium image; and, secondly, in a category that is now skewed towards women, to position the brand as a gender-neutral object of desire would be a challenge," says Samrat Bedi, head of Meridian Communications, Mumbai.

This is where the experiential elements can play a major role. For instance the Vespa showrooms have been given a completely different look and feel to them; they have been designed to provide a lifestyle experience inclusive of a Vespa history wall that presents the rich legacy of the brand, informs Chopra.   
  
Also on the anvil is the introduction of Vespa merchandise and accessories, as also the well-known Vespa clubs, which are present in more than 40 countries. As [Kevin Roberts](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/topic/Kevin-Roberts), global CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, would say: True iconic brands are the ones that inspire loyalty beyond reason.