



Why Have Marketers Ignored America's Man-of-Action Hero?

Q&A with: Douglas Holt and John Quelch

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Douglas B. Holt says brand managers have little appreciation for how myths in American culture can be used to create "extraordinary" brand-building opportunities. In this e-mail interview, Holt discusses a recent [working paper](#) (with coauthor Craig J. Thompson) looking at the possibilities presented by the rise of the man-of-action hero.

Salls: What is the man-of-action hero, and why is this manhood ideal so important in American culture? You say the man-of-action hero is a synthesis of two other popular models of American manhood—the breadwinner and the rebel. How does this work?

Holt: The man-of-action hero is a mythic model of masculinity, one that is distinctively American. Men of action are society's entrepreneurs. They're vigorous, charismatic outsiders who reinvent society's institutions. At the root of the man-of-action hero is the American idea that individuals with vision, guts, and a can-do spirit can transform weak institutions, invent wildly creative contraptions, build fantastic new markets, and conquer distant infidels. American men love the populist guy who stands against dominating institutions, fights for an alternative vision that runs against the grain of convention, and eventually wins out.

Two other models of masculinity are also widely popular in the USA: what we call the breadwinner and the rebel. Breadwinners are men who play by the rules of the institutions that they participate in, work hard to achieve, and eventually become respected authoritative figures—pillars of their communities. Colin Powell is an exemplary breadwinner today. At the other end of the spectrum are rebels. Rebels are defiant individualists, mavericks who buck every institutional norm in following their inner muse. Rebels are potent figures because they have the confidence to reject what society deems important. A generation ago, a classic rebel would be Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider*; today we have rebels like Tupac Shakur, Howard Stern, and Dennis Rodman.

The problem with both the breadwinner and rebel models is that each has an undesirable underbelly, a stigma that ultimately makes the model less than ideal. Even the most celebrated breadwinners are haunted by the idea that they are conformist organization men. Likewise, even the most potent rebel is understood either as a tragic figure (as in the case of Hank Williams) or as a childish Peter Pan (as in the case of Howard Stern).

American men find both the breadwinner and the rebel appealing, but also are aware (at least tacitly) of the negative connotations and want to avoid them. Men want to achieve within their organizations and become respected as pillars of their communities. But they don't want to be considered boring organization men who are too tied to the system to follow their own passions. Alternatively, men want to be rebels, to be totally

autonomous, free from institutional constraints to find their own adventures. Yet they don't want to be castigated as immature, lacking the willpower and social-mindedness to take on important responsibilities. The man-of-action hero combines the autonomous willpower of the rebel with the breadwinner's willingness to contribute to societal institutions.

The man-of-action is a utopian figure because he resolves the identity dilemmas that American men routinely face in their everyday lives. To make a functionalist argument, the man-of-action hero is so powerful because it draws upon the power of the founding myths of the country (the myth of success, the frontier myth, the city on a hill) and reinterprets these myths in a way that provides meaning for men who work in large companies in an intensely competitive and not always identity-affirming labor market.

Q: What is the compensatory consumption thesis and why did you want to challenge it?

A: The academic goal of the study was to confront what we call the compensatory consumption thesis, which is widely accepted both by academics and the American public. The basic idea is that many American men hit an identity crisis of sorts because their jobs and their family roles no longer allow for the authoritative (some would say patriarchal) roles of the past. To compensate for this felt emasculation on the work and home fronts, men are now obsessed with symbolically pursuing the ideal of the rebel in their leisure and consumption. Most recently this idea was popularized by Susan Faludi in her book *Stiffed* as well as by Robert Bly in *Iron John*.

We've spent lots of time examining how men are portrayed in mass culture as well as interviewing many dozens of men across the country. While rebellion plays an important role to be sure, we found that this model offers a distorted and partial view of American masculinity. This model makes sense to many people because they are so influenced by the most spectacular fragments of men's consumption that appear on the popular culture radar: Harley rallies in Sturgis, the Million Man March, men howling in the woods à la Iron John, men tracking big game in Alaska. However, when you enter the everyday life of American men, you don't find men whimpering about their 9-to-6 jobs only to become James Dean wannabes on the weekend. I'm sure such men exist, but they certainly aren't the norm.

Rather, American men are driven by a different sort of model: they are compelled to achieve, to rise to the challenge of the organizations in which they participate. Yet they also often are cynical about big institutions (companies, government) and fear becoming absorbed by them. So simultaneously they yearn to forge their own paths, to make a life in which they feel entirely autonomous. It's the give and take between these two poles that create drama in men's lives, and that provide the motive force in how men construct their identities. The utopian goal of these everyday dramas is the man-of-action.

Q: Why did you choose to study straight white men from the working and middle classes?

A: The compensatory consumption thesis is particularly focused on how straight white men from working and middle class backgrounds, those below the top 10 or 15 percent, create a meaningful sense of identity as men. These men have lost substantial status and economic power over the past few decades. They are portrayed as dealing with their emasculation at work and in their families by drawing upon the symbolism of macho rebels who buck the system.

We believe that the man-of-action hero model is a pervasive aspect of American culture that appeals to men across the spectrum, and many women as well. Clearly the man-of-action hero is a very important model for professional life for the upper middle class. However, for the purposes of this academic paper, we had to restrict the boundaries on our claims.

Q: Are there people in business today who exemplify the man-of-action hero? How has this behavior

shaped modern American business?

A: American business history is chock full of man-of-action hero stories: Edison, Henry Ford, Walt Disney, Ray Kroc, on and on. But the man-of-action hero receded in the postwar era through the seventies, when we particularly admired bureaucratic men—men who'd worked their way up through the trenches, breadwinners. Since the rejiggering of the American economy beginning in the early 1980s, the man-of-action hero is back and more than ever he is found in business rather than politics or fiction.

Business leaders have become, along with sports stars, the most potent and vital exemplars of the man-of-action hero, beginning with Sam Walton, Lee Iacocca, and Steve Jobs, then Ted Turner and Phil Knight, and then the dozens of celebrated e-commerce heroes who would destroy and reinvent the economy. If you read *BusinessWeek* or *Fortune* or *The Wall Street Journal* (not to mention *Wired* and *Fast Company*), the managers who are celebrated are the entrepreneurial figures who buck the industry and go their own way, only to eventually conquer and reinvigorate the industry they rejected. Occasionally we get a patriarchal breadwinner type like Jack Welch. But he's the exception.

The man-of-action hero myth provides tremendous inspiration for the American economy, and also shapes how we do business. At Harvard Business School, we love to teach cases of renegades who pull the rug from underneath industry titans. And students can't get enough of it.

Q: Armed with your research, how should brand owners respond?

A: Brand managers today have little appreciation for the extraordinary brand-building opportunities that come from using the brand to tell stories that resonate in American culture. Academics and branding consultants are at fault for this. For thirty years now, we have inundated managers with a model of branding—what I call the "mind share model"—that is effective only for a subset of rather conventional brands. For many of the most powerful brands—think of Nike, Marlboro, Coke, Harley—mind share rules don't apply. These brands deliver cultural value. They compete for what I call "culture share."

In my forthcoming book (*Culture Share*; HBS Press), I develop the principles through which these cultural icons are built. Icons are the big winners of the culture share game. I conduct historical studies of brands like Volkswagen, Budweiser, Harley, Nike, and Mountain Dew. One of the key findings of my research is that all of these brands reinterpret a key national myth.

The man-of-action hero has been the central myth in American culture for the last twenty years. Yet only two brands that I've studied—Budweiser in the eighties and Nike in the period from 1988-1995—have tapped into this myth. Each brand used advertising to create a new version of the man-of-action hero that responded to what was going on in American society at the time. And when they did, these brands took off.

Many other brands could have done the same if their managers understood how culture share worked. Take Ford and Chevrolet, for instance. Given the heritage of these brands, especially their dominance of the truck market, both are ideally situated to use their products as bully pulpits to tell man-of-action stories. But instead of articulating a point-of-view, we get cliché after cliché celebrating Americana. Bob Seger singing "Like a Rock" year after year just doesn't cut it.

Q: Are you working on any other research or projects?

A: I'm working on a sequel book to *Culture Share*. *Culture Share* is a strategy book; the follow-up will provide the organizational complement: how to manage for culture share. We investigate twelve of the most successful culture share branding efforts in recent American and British history. These brands build culture share primarily through advertising, so we analyze how the client and agency worked together to develop these successful campaigns. We interviewed managers on both the client and agency sides to reconstruct

how these campaigns were developed. We found that the underlying organizational principles run contrary to the conventional procedures of the blue-chip marketers like Procter & Gamble and The Coca-Cola Company, companies that other companies typically imitate. These principles are also quite different from what we've been teaching in MBA branding and advertising courses for decades. This study provides additional evidence that building culture share brands is qualitatively different than conventional brand management.

I'm also working on a study with HBS professor John Quelch in which we investigate how multinational companies should manage their corporate brands. The idea is that a significant part of the value of MNC brands comes from the inferences that consumers draw from their global reach. This idea makes intuitive sense to managers but has never been studied. We fielded a large international survey across twelve countries to investigate different global drivers of brand value. 

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