



How Your Firm Can Reignite Sales Growth



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Connecting with a fundamental consumer concern can give your brand purpose and create a platform for long-term profitable growth.

When Steve Jobs returned to Apple in 1997, the company’s annual losses were in excess of US\$1 billion. Bankruptcy loomed on the short-term horizon. One of Jobs’ first moves was to hire an ad agency to help him rebuild the brand’s status. It resulted in the famous “Think Different” campaign.

At the campaign launch, Jobs told the audience that to him, marketing was about values. “It’s a very noisy world,” he said. “We have to be really clear on what we want people to know about us.” Apple wouldn’t achieve much by talking about “speeds and feeds” or “bits and mega-hertz”.

Indeed, the campaign focused on iconic personalities of the 20th century. The implication, cleverly pointed out by Jobs, was this: If these inspirational figures had been born in the computer age, each and every one of them would have been Mac users. With its universal resonance, “Think Different” ushered the long-awaited return of Apple to profitability.

A brand beset with myriad problems

During the same period, a merger saw the birth of Diageo, the world’s biggest player in the alcoholic beverage market and the seventh largest food and beverage (F&B) company. As the merger benefits were slow to materialise, management was soon under pressure to revive sales of its Scotch whisky Johnnie Walker, the crown jewel in the company’s portfolio.

As described in our [Johnnie Walker case study](#), times were tough for the whisky industry as a whole. From the early 1990s, consumers had been developing a taste for different drinks. Less inclined to buy whisky, they opted for alternatives such as wine, champagne, vodka, tequila and ready-to-drink mixes like Smirnoff Ice. Scotch sales were quickly eroding.

Besides the grim market conditions, worsened by the Asian financial crisis, Johnnie Walker had more problems. Its various labels – such as Black Label, Red Label and Blue Label – were handled differently from country to country. There was no brand consistency.

Also, whisky had a conservative image that relied on an ageing customer base. Johnnie Walker ads tended to feature old, rich men surrounded by young beauties. Such staid and predictable messaging could hardly give the brand new wings.

The core values behind a brand

Appointing Alice Avis as the Global Brand Director for Johnnie Walker, the company gave her stretch targets: boost sales at more than triple the predicted growth for Scotch, seize 19 percent of the Scotch market (up from 11 percent) and double the brand’s profit contribution.

Taking on the challenge, Avis immediately recognised that half-measures wouldn’t do. She needed a breakthrough. With her team, she set out to understand what makes a brand a global power brand. They found that one of the common elements to names like Apple, Coke and Nike was purpose: a clear understanding of what the brand stands for and how to appeal to

consumers on an emotional level.

To get a better handle on what Johnnie Walker stood for, Avis engaged Interbrand, a leading brand consultancy. Among other findings, they determined that substance, excellence and masculinity were the brand's core values.

What it means to be a man

Armed with this knowledge, Avis used the results of a vast study on masculinity to figure out how to best reposition Johnnie Walker. Researchers asked men in 46 countries how they saw their role in life. The study found that men were caught in a dilemma, stuck between the masculine model of their childhood (the aloof provider) and that of their adulthood (the caregiver doing his share of the household chores).

In many parts of the world, the paternalistic model was crumbling, and men were trying to redefine masculinity. A new paradigm emerged – masculinity meant a *continuous striving for success*. The journey mattered; ruthless materialism à la Gordon Gekko (from the movie *Wall Street*) was being phased out. These insights led Avis to rebrand Johnnie Walker as an icon of personal progress, with a campaign centred on the new tagline “Keep Walking”. It was also Avis's idea to reverse the Striding Man logo's orientation and show him now confidently walking to the right, towards the future.



Lasting a glorious 16 years, the “Keep Walking” campaign allowed the brand to connect with a fundamental and universal concern of men: *How do I evolve, stay masculine and succeed?* With it, Avis set the brand on the path to achieve its long-term goals in terms of sales, market share and profitability.

Two key takeaways from Johnnie Walker

Marketers seeking to reignite growth should consider the following.

1. Migrate from product brands managed by geography to a master brand managed globally.

Johnnie Walker started out with the brand’s various labels overseen by separate teams that developed their own ideas and country teams functioning independently, with little global marketing direction. This

resulted in marketing inconsistencies between labels and from one region to the next. Between 1997 and 1999, up to 27 Johnnie Walker campaigns were running across the world, with an uneven look-and-feel. Aside from confusing consumers, this placed huge limitations on brand activation.

Once the global branding team took over with the unifying Johnnie Walker master brand proposition of personal progress, it produced a critical mind shift. The country marketing teams started selling a singular brand with a consistent message. The distinct labels (e.g. Black, Red and Blue) could still serve various market segments, but the message remained homogeneous at the global level, magnifying the power of the brand.

2. Brands should connect to a universal consumer concern or aspiration.

Johnnie Walker became a global power brand by connecting to a deep-seated, universal concern of consumers. The brand became men's ally, helping them to solve a real-life problem. This is how brands acquire purpose: by being of value to consumers in the context of the challenges they're facing.

In today's world, no one sells burgers by saying they're tasty or cost only 99 cents. Differences between products have eroded. Consumers are asking brands: *How do you make my life better? What are you doing to help me with a problem or fear I have?* Thus, a brand needs to create an emotional connection with consumers by showing it cares.

In the case of Johnnie Walker, men were in an uncertain space. Unlike their own fathers, they were now changing baby diapers, but were still expected to "be a man" and strive for success. The "Keep Walking" campaign fed into that tension. It told men to just keep moving forward. Johnnie Walker would be their friend along the way.

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