

Red Bull—It Gives You Wings! An Examination of the Emotional Experiences That Drive the Brand for the Popular Energy Drink

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Abstract

An examination of the emotional experiences that drive the brand for the popular energy drink known as Red Bull. This article explores the narrative of the brand and how it connects with the emotions of its consumers, with a particular focus on the clever way that Red Bull creates and sponsors extreme sporting events and activities. It also examines the emotional labour that goes into creating and sustaining the brand, and how the company engages its spokespersons and customers in telling their brand stories and forging strong emotional bonds with their customers.

Keywords: Red Bull, emotional branding, emotional labour, marketing

Introduction

In this paper, I will examine the emotional experiences that drive the brand for the popular energy drink known as Red Bull. I will identify, describe, and analyze the narrative of the brand and how it connects with the emotions of its consumers, with a particular focus on the company's innovative approach to event marketing. Red Bull's event marketing includes everything from inventing new sports and events to sponsoring a wide range of extreme sporting events and activities—all of which have helped the company attain invaluable authenticity with their target audience, while engaging their customers in emotional experiences that help support the brand identity. I will also discuss the emotional labour that goes into creating and sustaining this brand, engaging their spokespersons and customers in telling their brand stories, and forging strong emotional bonds with their customers. I will begin by describing the brand.

The Red Bull Promise

The first time I heard about Red Bull was in a series of commercials I watched on television when I was living in Dublin, Ireland in 1999. The commercials featured simple black and white cartoon animations, with characters invariably facing some sort of dilemma or seemingly insurmountable obstacle. One of the commercials drew upon the familiar story of Sisyphus, the character from Greek mythology destined to push a rock up a hill for eternity as his punishment in Hades. We see Sisyphus toiling away, when suddenly a fairy appears and gives him a can of Red Bull (which is displayed on the screen in full colour), proclaiming that it provides "stimulation for body and mind". Sisyphus drinks the can, and then easily overcomes his obstacle. He sprouts wings and flies after the fairy, while spouting the brand's tagline: that Red Bull "gives you wings".

These advertisements and their memorable slogan effectively portray the Red Bull promise by touting the product's benefits: that drinking Red Bull stimulates you both physically and emotionally so that you can excel. This appeal to both the physical and emotional is summarized well by Smith and Zook in *Marketing Communications: Integrating Offline and Online with Social Media*: "Brands, therefore, have both rational and emotional benefits, e.g. Red Bull's physical (rational) benefit is that it keeps you awake (physical stimulation), and its emotional benefit is that you feel you can do more (feel stimulated)" (2011, p. 38).

Red Bull's physical/rational claims are indeed true; multiple studies have shown that drinking Red Bull provides the desirable effects of increased alertness, improved memory, and enhanced mood (Alford et al., 2001; Malinauskas et al., 2007; Seidl et al., 2000). But it is their ingenious marketing

and the tremendous success that Red Bull has achieved in forging emotional ties with its customers that makes Red Bull stand out from the crowd: “Consider other brands that rely on emotional branding to build strong emotional bonds with their users: Starbucks, Red Bull, Coca-Cola, Nike, and Apple. Are these superior products? Sometimes. But they are nearly always superior brands” (Russell, 2009, p. 144).

I will provide several examples of how Red Bull's adept appeals to our emotions, along with active engagement from its consumers, have enabled the company to become the global brand it is today with a significant presence in over 160 countries. I will show just how these concerted efforts have enabled the entire Red Bull corporation to embody a meaning of its own, a branding phenomenon discussed by Naomi Klein in *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Klein, p. 9).

A Brief History of the Company

A businessman named Chaleo Yoovidhya invented the original formula for Red Bull in Thailand. This non-carbonated drink, called Krating Daeng (roughly translated as “Bull Red”) was quite popular in Thailand, and other Asian countries had similar sugary, caffeinated tonics, but these were relatively unknown in the West. In the early eighties, while vacationing in Thailand, an Austrian entrepreneur named Dietrich Mateschitz discovered that the drink helped alleviate his jet lag. He decided to go into business with Yoovidhya to market the drink to the West, after which carbonation was added to the beverage to make it more appealing to Western tastes (Thomson, 2012).

The active ingredients in Red Bull include “caffeine, glucuronolactone, and taurine amongst other potentially performance enhancing ingredients”; the company claims that it is their combination of these unique ingredients that makes the drink so special (Alford et al., 2001). Red Bull describes its product as a “functional beverage” with unique, high quality ingredients that vitalize the body and mind (energydrink-us.redbull.com, 2014).

Other competitors in the functional beverage industry offer similar drinks with ginseng and other “special” ingredients, but there is a certain mystique about the ingredients included in Red Bull. There is a rumour that taurine is derived from bull testicles, which is particularly beguiling (Kim, 2003, p.4). In reality, taurine is an amino acid that is found naturally in our bodies, and studies have suggested “...taurine may modulate the effects of caffeine and may influence mood states, but no evidence was provided for this hypothesis” (Kim, p. 4).

When Red Bull was first launched, it was priced as much as three times higher than other soft drinks, because Mateschitz wanted to tell consumers that this was a drink with real benefits (a caffeine and sugar-fuelled energy boost) and the high price helped him do it. It also put Red Bull in a category all by itself, at least initially (Thomson, 2012).

This tactic is consistent with Adam Arvidsson's discussion in *Brands: A critical perspective about how successful brands can extract a premium price that “represents what consumers are prepared to pay extra for the branded good in relation to other comparable goods”* (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 250). The drink continues to be overpriced, and this too is part of the brand.

The Taste

Red Bull's taste is intense and unique; it is sweet and fruity, rather like liquid candy. A popular alcoholic drink at nightclubs and parties is Red Bull mixed with vodka, and one of the reasons for its popularity is that the overpowering flavour of Red Bull is so strong that it masks the taste of alcohol.

The Logo

Befitting a brand that is all about energy and adrenaline, the logo for Red Bull is comprised of two red bulls that are charging at each other, with the “Red Bull” text emblazoned in red above (see Figure 1). The can design is also very unique and very much a part of the brand; it is thinner and smaller in volume than typical soft drink cans, and is instantly recognizable thanks to its distinct



Figure 1. A can of Red Bull. Adapted from Redbull.com, 2012, Red Bull Graduate Program, Red Bull, retrieved from <http://www.redbullgraduateprogram.com/>

blue and silver background. These same colours and graphic elements have been used to brand everything from planes and helicopters to Formula One racing cars.

How Does the Brand Connect with the Emotions of Its Consumers?

Smith and Zook note "If the brand gets it right (understands a customer's deep needs and reflects them through a range of communications) then buyers are simply buying some of their own aspirations. They are, in fact, buying a slice of their ideal self" (2011, p.38).

Red Bull has done this well, by cultivating a brand identity that is all about creativity, non-conformism, energy, speed, risk-taking, and euphoria—traits that are associated with members of its primary target audience of college-aged males. The company uses a wide range of techniques to engage its consumers in emotional experiences that help support this brand identity.

For example, in the early days of the company, many extreme sports enthusiasts, including free climbers, whitewater kayakers, and snowboarders, were paid small amounts of money to wear Red Bull branded shirts and helmets when they competed, which ultimately turned these hitherto unknown and unheralded athletes into enthusiastic promoters of the drink (Curtis, 2006). The emotions these athletes displayed when engaging in their sports were authentic; they really were experiencing euphoria. They were participating in these extreme sports prior to Red Bull's emergence. With a marginal investment, Red Bull was able to associate itself with the authenticity of the athletes' emotions, particularly since many of these sports were relatively new and had not yet caught the attention of the masses (Curtis).

As discussed by Douglas Holt in *Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding*, Mountain Dew is another brand that successfully engaged in similar sponsorships of extreme sports in the early 1990s, enabling the brand to be seen as "part of the movement rather than mere cultural parasites that appropriate valued popular culture" (2002, p.84).

Red Bull continues to sponsor a staggering array of athletes across many different sports around the world, but it has ventured even further by sponsoring individual participants and competitions for music DJs, breakdancers, and filmmakers. The company also has its own record label, two Formula One Racing Teams, and several international soccer teams (redbull.com, 2012).

While many of Red Bull's ideas are not exactly revolutionary, they do resonate with the interests and emotions of their target audience, and they are consistent with Klein's discussion around how "...many of today's best-known manufacturers no longer produce products and advertise them, but rather buy products and 'brand' them, these companies are forever on the prowl for creative new ways to build and strengthen their brand images" (2000, p. 5). However, Red Bull does much more than simply sponsor athletes; it buys existing teams and rebrands them, or starts up its own new teams to join existing sports or communities. Red Bull even goes a step further by creating its own unique sports and events.

Red Bull's Event Marketing

Holt explores some of the newer techniques used by marketers to present their brands as authentic

cultural resources, addressing postmodern society's tendencies to rebel against corporate attempts to market to them directly:

The postmodern branding paradigm is premised upon the idea that brands will be more valuable if they are offered not as cultural blueprints but as cultural resources, as useful ingredients to produce the self as one chooses. And in order to serve as valuable ingredients in producing the self, branded cultural resources must be perceived as authentic (2002, p.83).



Figure 2. A plane performs in Brazil in the Red Bull Air Race World Series. Adapted from Newton, G., 2010, A plane performs in Brazil in the Red Bull Air Race World Series [Online image], retrieved from http://www.redbull.com/cs/Satellite/en_INT/Article/Flying-high-in-the-party-city-021242843199590

with "original cultural resources" (Holt, 2002, p.84). While Holt suggests that marketers should aim to make these resources appear to be "untainted by instrumental motivations of sponsoring companies" (Holt, p.84), Red Bull does the exact opposite, splashing its name, logos, colours, and products everywhere it can.

It seems that its events are so spectacular and unique that nobody seems to mind; when describing a Red Bull Air Race he attended in Barcelona, journalist Bryan Curtis writes that this excessive branding is "not quite as off-putting as one might expect" because the event enabled spectators to see: "flying as it had rarely been seen since the early days of aviation, and the omnipresent Red Bull logos made it no less beautiful" (2012).

The Power of a Ubiquitous Brand Identity

Arvidsson notes that this branding omnipresence is a very powerful tool that companies like Red Bull can engage in thanks to its significant marketing budget:

For the big brands, with a lot of resources at their disposal, the ideal is ubiquity: to make the brand part of the biopolitical environment of life itself, no different from water and electricity, and to thus make life in all its walks contribute to its continuous and dynamic reproduction (2005, p. 249).

The Red Bull brand is now so successful and well known that a study by Brasel and Gips (2009) suggested that the mere exposure to the Red Bull brand identity can cause people to act and feel a certain way. They tested a video game with functionally identical cars and different branded paint jobs, and found that the Red Bull branded car encouraged participants to pursue a fast, aggressive racing strategy, consistent with the brand's personality—without even being aware that they were doing it (2009).

In a later article entitled How focused identities can help brands navigate a changing media

Red Bull has achieved this authenticity by inventing its own new sports and events, including: Red Bull Air Race (see Figure 2), an aerobatic slalom competition often hosted in stunning and exotic locales; Red Bull Flugtag, where competitors create and "fly" their own quirky aircraft; Red Bull Big Wave Africa, a surfing competition on monstrous, 5-metre-high waves; Red Bull Crashed Ice, a high-speed downhill obstacle course race on skates; and, most recently, Red Bull Stratos, a stratospheric skydive from 128,000 feet (redbullstratos.com, 2012).

These events all help Red Bull create thriving communities by bringing its customers together to share their common interest in the company's brand (Rifkin, 2001, p. 109), while providing consumers

landscape, Brasel (2012) suggests:

Red Bull brand placements in an extreme snowboarding video game may transfer excitement and risk-taking brand identity cues from the game to the Red Bull brand. At the same time, the presence of the Red Bull brand can make players act more aggressively and take greater risks, which might also increase enjoyment of the game (p. 290).

Going with the “Flow”

In addition to providing a chance for people to watch these mesmerizing new sports, Red Bull's unique marketing events also often engage the active participation of groups of consumers directly in the communication process:

An example for a marketing event is the worldwide series of “Red Bull Flugtag” organized by the energy drink company Red Bull during which the participants jump from a ramp in a do-it-yourself flying machine into a lake and can win prizes in different categories (e.g., longest jump, most original flying machine). In this way, the brand is trying to express the advertising message “Red Bull vitalizes the body and mind” (Drengner et al., 2008, p. 139).

This type of active participation is known as “flow”, described by Drengner et al. (citing Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) in the *Journal of Advertising Research* as “a highly enjoyable psychological state that refers to ‘the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement’ in an activity” (2008, p. 141). Their research also suggests “the stronger the active flow experience of an event participant is, the more positive is his or her perception of emotions” (p. 142).

Red Bull's events also engage the lives and emotions of the communities where it stages its competitions. A study that looked at the social impacts on the host community for Red Bull Big Wave Africa found that many locals considered the event to be a sort of regional showcase that promoted community/national pride and provided economic benefits for local businesses (Ntloko & Smart, 2006, p. 87).

Red Bull Crashed Ice

International events like Red Bull Crashed Ice, which saw its inaugural competition in Stockholm in 2000, provide the company with emotional branding opportunities year round, thanks to qualification rounds in cities around the world, where thousands show up, eager for their chance to qualify to compete. Here in Canada, Crashed Ice is particularly popular: “It has such a strong connection with Canadians,” said Keith DeGrace, communications director of Red Bull Canada. “It's a hockey culture” (Higgins, 2007).

Writer Matt Higgins also speculates that the event resonates with many because it “offers a shot at the big-time for those whose hockey dreams have been unfulfilled” (2007). Higgins also provides examples of participants who talk about feeling “indebted to Red Bull for making it all possible”.

Red Bull Stratos

At the time of writing this paper, Red Bull's most recent innovative public idea was an event called Red Bull Stratos, which was framed as both an extreme sporting event and a unique scientific experiment:

The purpose of the Red Bull Stratos mission is to transcend human limits. Supported by a team of experts Felix Baumgartner ascended to 128,100 feet in a stratospheric balloon and made a freefall jump rushing toward earth at supersonic speeds before parachuting to the ground. His successful feat on Oct. 14, 2012 holds the potential to provide valuable medical and scientific research data for future pioneers (redbullstratos.com, 2012).

Stratos was viewed live on YouTube by millions of people around the world, received free widespread coverage by mainstream international news networks, and was shared and discussed widely via social media including blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. In discussing some of the reasons

behind the success of the event, marketing expert Susan Gunelius notes that: “Red Bull Stratos piqued consumers’ emotions in a manner that mirrored the brand message and image. It evoked feelings of freedom and triumph and made people believe anything is possible” (2012).

The event was deemed newsworthy, even by people who would not usually be interested in mere extreme stunts, thanks to the deliberate positioning of the event as a scientific experiment. This angle, coupled with widespread media coverage, helped the brand reach an expanded audience. A documentary of the project called “Space Dive”, which aired on the National Geographic television network, was co-produced by the BBC, Red Bull Media House, and National Geographic (National Geographic, 2012).

What Emotional Labour Goes into the Brand?

As described in the previous section, Red Bull employs a wide array of techniques to tell its brand story and to connect with the emotions of its customers. In this section, I will discuss some of the emotional labour required to sustain the brand, including the efforts of their product sampling teams like the Red Bull Wings Team, and the way Red Bull engages all of its employees in continuously selling and embodying Red Bull’s core values (Jobs.redbull.com, 2014).

Red Bull’s Product Sampling Strategy



Figure 3. Wings Teams in action. Adapted from Redbull.com, 2012, Red Bull Graduate Program, Red Bull, retrieved from <http://www.redbullgraduateprogram.com/>

One of the myriad strategies in which Red Bull engages is free product giveaways at sporting events, college campuses, and other locations where fans and potential customers tend to congregate. Consider this description of an early morning visit to a Formula One racing event from Bryan Curtis in the New York Times:

As you approached the track, young, apple-cheeked Red Bull women—of which the company appears to have an endless supply—seemed to materialize out of the forest. It wasn’t even 9 a.m.,

but already they were wearing prepared smiles and asking, “Reg-u-lar or diet?” (2006).

In addition to these product sampling program workers, Curtis also describes an encounter in the Red Bull racing paddock with another group of women called the “Formula Unas”; similar to the qualifiers for sporting events like Crashed Ice, these ladies are chosen in beauty pageant-like competitions held in every city that hosts the F1, where hundreds line up to compete for the “honour” to be one of ten women chosen to represent the company at the race (Curtis).

In North America, the company has an immense fleet of Red Bull branded vehicles—often Mini Coopers with oversized cans of Red Bull on the back—that crisscross the continent. The groups of workers who distribute product samples are called “Wings Teams”. As implied by the job description posted on Red Bull’s website, Wing Teams need to be very adept emotional labourers in order to succeed, sharing many similarities with the flight attendants studied by Arlie Hochschild in her highly influential book, *The Managed Heart*. Here is a sample of requirements from the “Wings Team Member, Sampling Program” job description:

To Be A Successful Wings Team Member You Must:

- (Have an) Attractive, natural appearance
- Maintain physically fit physique
- Maintain charming and lighthearted attitude during entire duration of sampling mission
- Maintain high level of energy during entire duration of sampling mission

- Embody the brand values during every sampling mission
- Must be polite, courteous, and treat all consumers respectfully regardless of the situation
- Be the sparkling personality that captivates their audience at all times
- Be a social chameleon: approach a variety of strangers and interact in a natural conversation with the goal of developing brand loyalty with the consumer
- Develop a rapport with consumers in a short time through natural dialogue (redbullusa.com, 2012)

Like the flight attendants studied by Hochschild, these workers are paid to display these emotions whether they feel them or not. While they are usually working at sporting events or areas where people tend to be generally happy and are likely to appreciate a free can of energy drink, the requirements to be perpetually “charming, sparkling, captivating, energetic, and courteous” regardless of the situation would surely become emotionally exhausting. In certain circumstances, such as dealing with a belligerent or intoxicated spectator at an event, these requirements would necessitate feigned emotions, with workers likely employing a mix of techniques like surface acting and deep acting to maintain the required display of emotions (Hochschild, 1983).

It is also possible that even the most naturally effervescent individual could develop a significant amount of emotional dissonance over time—a potentially stressful discrepancy between the emotions felt and the emotions displayed (Hochschild, 1983). But this emotional distance is not likely to have a long term effect since team members are only able to do the job for a relatively short period of time; another requirement is that members “must be located on a college campus or fully integrated into a collegiate network” (redbullusa.com, 2012).

All Red Bull, All the Time

In addition to openings for Wings Team members, there are numerous other job opportunities within the Red Bull empire listed on their website (along with the slogan “Most jobs take energy... this one gives it”), including: Red Bull Musketeers, who help drive sales in clubs, bars, and restaurants, and Student Brand Managers, who help market the products and participatory events like Flugtag to other students, often working with the Wings teams. There is even the “Red Bull Graduate Program”, an 18-month intensive course designed to prepare you for a career with Red Bull, described as “a company of success-oriented, passionate entrepreneurs. Professional, yet real and informal. It’s not just a lifestyle brand, it’s a lifestyle—not 9 to 5, but 24/7. It’s a place where the innovator, doer, perfectionist, strategist, and rebel intersect” (redbullgraduateprogram.com, 2012).

The company’s careful attention to fostering their brand identity at all levels within the hierarchy of their organization seems to work, and it is assisted in this task by Mateschitz’s charismatic personality:

You only have to speak to Mateschitz’s employees for a few minutes before they refer you to his optimistic message. Red Bull, they say, promotes an attitude of originality, nonconformism and dreamy reverie. If a Red Bull employee wants to learn to pilot a plane, Mateschitz says, he will pay for flying lessons so as to expand his or her horizons. As he sees it, “When you are called Red Bull, when you stimulate body and mind, when you give people wings, this has to do with sports, flying, with having been empowered to do whatever you want to” (Curtis, 2006).

But while the Wings Team and some of the more professional or corporate jobs may require new hires to be indoctrinated into the Red Bull mentality, the company seems to have managed to skip the need for emotional labour altogether in some instances, by choosing to sponsor athletes that already fit the description they were looking for, and letting them be themselves:

“Red Bull gives its sportsmen opinion-leaders no talking points, no memorable catchphrases to shriek as they dive off the mountainside. They’re expected only to be their

daffy selves, which, in turn, promotes the drink's daffiness" (Curtis).

Conclusion

To be successful in today's postmodern marketplace, with new global players and competitors joining the market every day, companies must focus on "how to capture and hold the attention of the consumer long enough to make him or her a loyal, long-term customer" (Rifkin, 2001, p. 106). As we have seen, Red Bull employs a wide variety of methods to engage the consumer, and to project its emotional brand. They have taken notice that developing communities of interest is an effective way to capture this attention and build lifetime relationships, and thanks to their innovative event marketing, they've enabled themselves to "become the gatekeepers to these newly defined communities and, for a price, grant customers access to these coveted new social arenas" (Rifkin, 2001, p. 109).

I have also examined how Red Bull has managed to remain highly visible, plastering its logos and name virtually everywhere, while managing to avoid having "postmodern consumers perceive [its] modern branding efforts to be inauthentic because they ooze with the commercial intent of their sponsors" (Holt, 2002, p.83). I have shown how Red Bull manages to keep its authenticity intact by introducing new sporting events and competitions, which effectively neutralize the potential perception that they are simply in it to sell their energy drink, and are not actually part of the group.

I discussed how the Red Bull brand has become so ubiquitous that the mere exposure to its logo and colours can "activate identity-consistent thoughts and behaviour in consumers by their exposure" (Brasel, 2012, p. 289).

Finally, I investigated some of the emotional labour that goes into building and sustaining the brand, exploring how some Red Bull workers need to work harder at it than others thanks to the wide variety of marketing techniques employed by the company.

Douglas Holt suggests that "Brands that create worlds that strike consumers' imaginations, that inspire and provoke and stimulate, that help them interpret the world that surrounds them, will earn kudos and profits" (2002, p.87). As long as Red Bull can continue to sustain its energy and culture of innovation in the marketing sphere, its substantial kudos and profits will continue long into the future.

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