

Approximate Transcript of Ueber-Brands Podcast 04

Interview with Maria Sebregondi, Co-Creator of Moleskine

JP: Our co host and co author, he is actually here today - hi Wolf Schaeffer (WG).

WG: Hi everybody, this is Wolfgang

JP: And I know why he is here, its because we have a very special guest today - Maria Sebregondi (MS). Maria is co founder, co creator of the brand Moleskine, or is it '*Moleskine*' (*pronounced differently*), we don't quite know, and we will talk about it, and the VP of Brand Equity and Communication. Thank you so very much Maria to be with us.

MS: Hello everybody and thank you for inviting me.

JP: Well Maria, Moleskine where do we even start, maybe with the name, because people don't quite know how to pronounce it. Is it Moleskine; is it Moleskine can you tell us about it?

MS: [1:57] Okay, I like to say *Moleskine*, but this is a literary name coming from the English travel writer Bruce Chadwin, and we think that everybody can pronounce it as they want. We even did a nice video on that, because people were asking "oh how do I pronounce this name?" and we made this video, which is representing tens of languages and pronounced it each in a different way. We love to say that Moleskine is a brand made by by the public so it can be pronounced however you want to. But take from that, that Moleskine is first of all an enabler for creativity, so it's not a platform, hiding from blank pages from a notebook, but expanding from other kinds of platforms.

WG: Maria the conversation we had in preparation of our book [Rethinking Prestige Branding] you said that one point if I remember correctly that you see the brand in yourself also. As someone who wants to protect the analogy kind of recording in the age of the digital. Is that right? Is that something you see as your mission? And then how does that translate? You're doing a lot of projects also, that are going digital as well. How does the mission connect with that?

MS: [3:43] It is probably more correct to say our mission is to fulfill the continuum between analog and digital activities. We need this kind of continuum; we use different kind of technology, all the time; low technology, and high technology. Even right now we are using technology. We need both analog and digital technology. *You could say human beings are made of "high-level software"* in the same way, we are very physical, but at the same time we are mental. And there is a part of Moleskine this will always be very physical, and we need it, but at the same time we are experimenting with the new opportunities that technology offers. Nowadays there is a continual passage from one world to another, and we at the Moleskine brand are wanting to build a bridge between these worlds in a meaningful way. So we are now, for example, experimenting with this opportunity to expand the experience of paper into the digital world and to make the transition both seamless and useful.

[5:35] For example, we have this collection of smart notebooks that we have created in partnership with technology and products by Evernote. Evernote is this very useful piece of software that allows the customer to organize their notes and memories in a very useful way. So we partnered with them a few years ago, and we are continuing to experiment, and develop a very solid partnership, with a different kind of notebook. Especially now that we have come out with an application for the smart phone, you can take a picture of your page, and have them immediately sent to a special area of your digital archive. This makes them searchable and sharable in a very seamless way. You can also edit your physical notes on the page of the notebook with special stickers in different colors for sending them different ways, like uploading them to the Cloud and then edit them, and continue your work in the digital space. We are experimenting with a digital pen and a physical Moleskine notebook. On paper pages you can write and the pen is able to recall the writing or sketching, and record it on your digital device. - And there is more to come.

JP: [7:31] Now, Maria, it sounds very exciting this idea of looking to bridge the digital divide to allow us to have our analog scribbles and notes, that might become masterpieces, but then also utilize digital technology. I can imagine however, that there's some skeptics - maybe the 'Millennials', that would say 'why would I bother to have everything you just described that basically translates my notebook to the computer. I am already beyond that, I'm just on my smart phone'. Are there 'Moleskine people'? Is it a certain creed? A certain belief? And how are they different from the non-believers?

MS: [8:15] I have two points on that, which are very important. The first one is that many researches are demonstrating that the 'Millennial' are the ones who are interested in the physical experience. That's why for example, you can see the passion for music or for paintings, or for things things that are hand-made. So Millennial are the ones who embraces analog in a very strong way, but also using technology to make things visible, and shareable.

This is one point, but the other point that is very important for us and for Moleskine, is the fact that we strongly believe in the uniqueness in the analog gestures. And we strongly believe the more we become digital, [...] the more we need the uniqueness of our own gesture. The uniqueness of our experience. When you are hand writing, not only do you have a unique kind of writing, which is distinctive for any person, everyone has different hand writing. [You can see this as it is used for legal/forensic purposes]. But each time I write by hand I express also the emotions, the mood that I am in at that moment. So there is a uniqueness that is related to the moment I am writing. And this uniqueness is something that we don't want to lose.

Scientists are demonstrating that when we use, for example, hand writing we are involving a wider part of our brain. When you translate your ideas by typing on a keyboard you only use one part of your brain. But when you do it by hand, in handwriting, you involve a more emotional part, which is getting to a deeper memory and a deeper understanding. So this is very important when you think about the fact that in many different countries there is a decrease teaching cursive handwriting to children and this is something we are looking at with worry.

WG: [11:29] Maria is a very influential, Korean-German philosophy and cultural critic [...] who was writing a lot about how our digitalized world is affecting the way we connect with the real world. How important is it for you and your brand to connect with these kinds of people, with the intelligentsia, or the cultural drivers of our societies - versus the actual [Moleskine] users? Do you make an effort to stay close to those that are reflecting these kinds of thinking, or are you more experiential in the way that you approach things?

MS: [11:40] I would say both, we have been more experimental, but it's more an experience that we are doing with our public. But we are also more and more interested in acquiring thought leadership on some aspects of our contemporary cultures. For example] We created a conference last year for the future, quoting different experts on those matters and we would like to go deeper on that.

WS: Do you think it's also influential or important for your end-consumers? Are there aspects they can somehow connect to?

MS: [12:53] Yes, I think that is very important the closest part of our public. They are studied in general, and they are people in need of selecting, curating and editing their content in a meaningful way and also meeting the brand as a partner in this spot. People that are cultivated in terms of knowledge or in terms of creativity also expect to in the Moleskin brands a partner helping in this XXX (what is the German psychology term???)

Background laughter

JP: Nice, German psychological word.

WS: Is a good word.

JP: Maria are there also non-believers? Now I'm asking because we find with a lot of our brands that having a group that doesn't believe, is not passionate, or is even passionately opposed, often help a brand to attract its core audience. Think about PC versus Apple people. Now I guess its maybe Samsung versus Apple. Do you find that as well? And how do you leverage that or how to you acknowledge that?

MS: [14:11] Absolutely, absolutely this very strong, our public, especially the closest part, are people that could only consider expressing themselves on Moleskine paper, and not on anything else. You know for Moleskine people, Moleskin is very strong. It's a personal identifier. So it's a very strong relationship.

JP: One of the things that Wolfgang and I were wondering is: We find Moleskine books in a lot places. Let's say we go to a L2 conference in New York, there is a customized book. When we visited Lego; there was a customized Moleskine, we go to SoHo and obviously there is the store and when you go through there, there is a Moleskine for a lot of things. Not only for taking notes, but also noting down your wine collection, or your travel, etc.

MS: Yes...

JP: Is there a risk of Moleskine inflation, of too much Moleskine?

MS: [15:29] No, we enjoy the fact that we are a total cultural brand, we are enablers for creativity. And when you speak about culture and creativity you are in a domain of the inclusivity, and when you are talking about culture and creativity you are in the domain of inclusivity, not in the domain of exclusivity such as luxury and other kinds of situations. Speaking about culture and creativity: Excellence is not exclusive. So you can be excellent, but at the same time relate it to everybody. When you speak about access to knowledge our value is to have it extend to the whole population, not only for a selected audience.

JP: On the other hand, excellent, and knowledge are, of course, higher aspirations within themselves. So in a way it is an exclusive tool, or at least it is a sophisticated tool isn't it?

MS: [16:39] Yes, Yes, it is sophisticated and it is exclusive but in terms of what you want, not what the brand wants.

It's your choice to be excellent in knowledge or to have a high aspiration in the domain of culture and creativity. It's not related to your power in terms of money, it's more related to your values and aspirations.

WG: I think that this whole mixing of exclusive and inclusive at the same time, and not to retain the old idea of premium or prestige as being elitist, but really being democratic, is really modern and is one of the reasons we think Moleskine is an Ueberband in that sense. I think it is very important, and yet having said that, for a brand to retain its premium price and also its aspirational value its sometimes important for it, as you grow out and become more and more present, to at the same to grow up. Do something at the top of your brand to lift it up again, to innovate or take yourself to a higher level. How do you deal with that aspect?

MS: [18:13] Well I totally agree with your consideration and yes, we are developing a lot our publishing area. I don't know if you are familiar with that. We are also publishers and

we have a collection of the most important contemporary architects with a collection on inspiration and process in architecture. We have already more than twelve volumes. We have another collection related to fashion designers, which is collecting the design and the creative process of some interesting fashion designers. And the publishing area is something that is making our excellence in terms of culture and knowledge visible. And we are creating for our public and community different experiences. Recently we had sketch done a 'sketch mob' in Milan during the Expo by designers and sketchers guided by Carlos Tanga, an important illustrator. This was a very nice experience. Very high in terms of quality but also very democratic and open to everybody.

WG: Do you see these ventures actually becoming a business model or evolving your business model, where, eventually, it may not be so much about selling the actual notebooks anymore? I mean they will always be a part obviously. – If you think of Red Bull, which is more and more morphing into a media house for all intense and purposes. Is that something you could see for Moleskine as well?

MS: [20:05] For sure in our vision and in our medium and long term vision there is a phase also for that. We are now working on our direct retail experience, which is creating new sides of our users and what we could do with them. We have now more than 50 direct stores where we can show all the Moleskine work and be showing a different experience of the brand. And this is creating more opportunities and a new vision. We are approaching a wider relationship with our Moleskine cafe, which we are opening next month in the Geneva airport. A more relational model is what we are developing.

JP: You are getting into Moleskine physical experiences beyond what is in the books, which you've already started with museums and tours. Can you tell us a little more about the role of the Moleskine store and now its seems like this experiment with the café. Why do you think they are important? What's your goal in creating these physical places?

MS: [21:38] Well, the more that we expand our style and journey together with our public the more we need to offer a wider experience that can't be offered by just the retailer, or the wholesaler model. So having our space is creating a very direct relationship and allows us to respond to the needs of our public in a deeper way. For example, in our retail store you can customize your notebook and create something with

stamps on your pages, or you can experiment with our bags. So there are many different experiences that you can have. This is what we want to offer.

JP: Beyond the physical experience, if I'm just interacting with Moleskine people, - whether it's in the store or maybe even in your office - would I notice something special about Moleskine people?

MS: [22:56] I think that creativity and passion are the most distinctive characteristic for our, public, but also for our people in the office. So this is a special brand, and talent is something that we are always nurturing, in our public and in our offices. Talent is something that is very personal and is also is the most sharable value.

WS: But to that point, if I think, for instance, about the Fondazione Prada in Milan. Which is obviously a lot about glamour. It's about creativity. It's about design. But it also has a very Prada-typical 'brainyness,' a very cerebral attitude, by the choice of architect – Rem Koolhaas. - When I look at your stores, I would have expected them to have a little bit more of that ... let's call it 'brainyness'. That cultured, intellectual feel that I get whenever I talk to you, and when I think about the Moleskine brand and all the things that you do. But I don't feel that as much when I'm in the store, as much as I would love to. Would you agree with that?

MS: [24:20] I totally agree with your feeling. I personally will not deny ... we as a company would like to find a way to create a more cultural and involving and engaging aspect to our stores. For sure, when you enter our office you get more. Wherever you turn your eyes you find things created by our people, you find handwritten things, notes, creations everywhere, books, bicycles... you find a creative and lively atmosphere, which is not totally repressive in our stores.

JP: Well there's a growth opportunity for the brand, I guess. I wanted to switch gears one more time, because I have one more question that I had to ask because you're not only the VP of Brand Equity and Communication, as it says officially, but you were also a part of the entire brand creation, and that brand creation is very rich in stories - I would even say myth. You have the little booklets in every Moleskine product, and there you talk about Bruce Chatwin and about him liking his little black book, but then it also references Hemingway, Pablo Picasso and so on. And it gets very inspirational. Now some call this a market ploy, because they

say, 'well, Pablo Picasso for sure never has used this book because it didn't exist, this brand,' and others call it just a 'myth' that is a catalyst and it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy because now people like Francis Coppolla and others, true greats, are actually now using the brand. - How are you looking at the role of story and maybe even a bit stretching it into a 'myth' in the creation of this brand?

MS: [26:29] The story for me is very, very important. When I proposed to the company to create this notebook and this brand I was totally, and deeply immersed in the Bruce Chatwin story and in the way he used his notebook. I personally used some of those notebooks. And I was missing them personally. Because I used them in Paris when I was there between the 70's and 80's and I was missing them. And when I read read this chapter in Chatwin about how sad it is to not having any more of these kinds of notebooks ... and the story related to Picasso and Hemingway ... and I went to the Picasso Museum in Paris, and saw how many of those notebooks Picasso had filled. - *I said to myself 'we should recreate this notebook'.*

So this story is very, very inspiring. It was inspiring for me and I was sure it would be very inspiring for everybody. This is not an object born in a marketing room, but a really humanistic creation and concept coming from a personal passion that we thought could be shared by a lot of people.

JP: A truly inspirational story. Maria unfortunately as usual we're running out of time. This has been fantastic. Thanks so much for sharing your brand. If people want to contact with Moleskine, where should people go first to meet the brand and its people?

MS: We have a very nice website, moleskine.com for sure, but also we are present in the main social channels so you can find us everywhere.