



INTERVIEW

An Ueber to take your Brand to the next level

Brand Elevation: Lessons in Ueber-Branding, by Wolfgang Schaefer and J. P. Kuehlwein. London, UK: CPI Group UK Kogan Page: USD 39.99, ISBN-10: 1-789-66466-7/ISBN-13 978-1-789-66466-9

Pablo D. Lopez Zadicoff is an economist by training. He believes economics is a social science that goes beyond numbers and hard math, in need for integration with sociology, psychology and anthropology, among others, to achieve its goal of explaining human behavior. While completing his MBA at NYU Stern School of Business, he discovered his interest in Luxury Marketing and the synergies between it and behavioral economics. Originally from Argentina, he studied economics at Universidad del CEMA and Universidad Nacional de La Plata, focusing on labor and behavioral economics. He currently lives in Washington DC, where he works at Compass Lexecon as an economic consultant specialized in supporting complex negotiations and dispute resolution mechanisms between private parties and governments across the globe. pablolz@compasslexecon.com

In this conversation with J.P. Kuehlwein, we discuss the ethos of the Ueber-Brands™, and we preview the 6-step method the author develops in his new book Brand Elevation to take any brand to this mythological plane.

Ueber-Brands™ is the term coined by J. P. Kuehlwein and Wolfgang Schaefer to describe the breed of brands that have thrived in the XXI century. Kiehls, Burt's bees, Toms of Maine, Patagonia, and Lego, among many others, are Ueber-Brands with a strong defined personality. These are, according to the authors, brands that have a purpose that goes beyond turning a profit, brands that inspire or align with their consumer's ideals and help them achieve their aspirations; brands that seduce rather than sell, that promise a dream; brands whose consumption experience (and their product) delivers a truthful experience.

J. P. Kuehlwein is Principal at Ueber-Brands, an advisory firm that helps “elevate brands to make them peerless and priceless.” He previously was an Executive VP at Frédéric Fekkai and held Marketing and General Management positions at P&G in the US, Europe, and Asia. He was named “International Marketer of the Year 2016” by The Internationalist and the Association of National Advertisers (ANA). JP teaches at Columbia Business School and the NYU Stern School of Business, is a Senior Fellow at the Conference Board and serves as an industry advisory board member and lecturer at the Fashion Institute of Technology. JP has authored several books and articles including “Rethinking Prestige Branding” and “Brand Elevation” together with Wolf Schaefer (Kogan Page, 2015 and 2021), “Luxury in Emerging Markets” with Glyn Atwal and Douglas Bryson in the Oxford Handbook of Luxury Business (2020), and “The evolving meaning of Luxury brands and a framework for creating modern Prestige” in Managing Luxury Brands (Kogan Page, in press) authors@ueberbrands.com.

The first book by the authors, *Rethinking Prestige Branding*, analyzed the genesis and behavior of these peerless and priceless brands through a detailed study of dozens of case studies which resulted in a systematic definition of *Ueber-Brands* as quasi-mythological creatures. After repeated requests from clients, colleagues, and marketers, the authors ventured into conjuring a 6-step recipe for alchemy that can elevate any brand regardless of price point and industry.

Pablo Lopez Zadicoff: We discussed the genesis of your research back in 2008, when in your P&G days you observed the group’s established brands struggling with recession, while smaller, more expensive brands in the same product category were growing. Is the success of the original *Ueber-Brands*™ the product of a deliberate strategy or the outcome of natural selection?

J. P. Kuehlwein: Most *Ueber-Brands* are very deliberate in seeking to overcome what might look like “natural selection” or the typical “brand life cycle.” The large majority of brands (and even more of new product introductions by brands) don’t survive the first 4 years. Depending on the category and study, the numbers are usually between 70 and 95%. *Ueber-Brands* seek to be timeless, peerless, priceless. They seek to acquire meaning that makes them desirable beyond whatever material benefit they offer, whatever other brands are doing, whatever period of time we are in. Take the Porsche 911, Leica M, Hermès Birkin but also the can of original Red Bull, Patagonia X-Jacket or Moleskine notebook. They have succeeded to make themselves “eternal”—and that at a relative premium and through “thick and thin,” when it comes to the macroeconomic environment.

PLZ: I take that their decision was deliberate, but their ultimate success was at least helped by circumstances outside their control, would you agree?

JPK: Have some of these brands and product icons emerged through lucky cultural or socio-economic circumstances? Certainly! Harley Davidson has synergized with the first

popular wave of Make America Great Again sentiment in the Reagan years. Patagonia fits the “let’s wear our sustainability convictions on our sleeves” Zeitgeist.

But even then, the brands had developed a (now even more fitting) DNA and were ready when the right context (re-)emerged or grew into a sizable trend. Furthermore, I believe these brands have also “created their own luck” by living a higher mission and creating a brand myth that has deep appeal and meaning to some people and was “ready to be discovered.”

PLZ: *I have no doubt these brands have worked to be ready when lightning struck... Another big exogenous factor in their growth appears to be social media: Facebook, Instagram and others allow customers to make formerly private consumption (like Tom's of Maine toothpaste) public. Do you think Tom's of Maine, for instance, would be an Ueber-Brands without this exposure?*

JPK: Social media certainly helps many *Ueber-Brands*, as it has become a major tool for humans to inspire, define and project their identity. Since *Ueber-Brands* play a key role in that endeavor, social-media-fit/-friendliness is a key asset. That said, all brands seek to leverage social media and it is less the “seeing the brand being owned/used” that distinguishes the *Ueber-Brand* most. Rather, it is the existence of a group of influential disciples who talk about the brand, co-create with the brand, inspire the brand ... without being paid for it. They truly experience the brand as an important part of themselves and the brand sees them as inspiration and muse first (before being a customer).

PLZ: *Let me rephrase the question, do you think product categories like toothpaste could have achieved such a strong cultural meaning, without the visibility into private life that social media allows?*

JPK: I think you are right that the public visibility many choose to now give into previously obscured parts of their private lives make brands play a potentially meaning-giving role they might previously rarely have. There certainly seems to be more social conversations that somehow involves a toothbrush or paste than I can remember pre-social-media. And now that we are showing that brush, why not make it one that showcases our refined taste or support or believe in sustainable product choices!

PLZ: *Millennials and Gen Zers certainly agree... Ueber-Brands in fact appear to align with their consumption patterns, but new generations of consumers will come soon*

enough. In particular, by the time your readers are able to successfully implement your brand elevation strategy. How can Ueber-Brands build in enough flexibility to pivot when society changes?

JPK: If *Ueber-Brands* align with Millennials or Gen-Z then that is because they have depth and meaning, and young people are particularly in search of meaning. But these brands are not a generational phenomenon. I mentioned Harley Davidson above. One could argue that this brand is one favored by men who suffer a midlife crisis rather than young guys. That said, the brand being a symbol of the “American Outlaw,” of “Freedom,” also works for younger, newer groups of people. Like women who seek to escape the cultural orthodoxy of being the “weaker sex.” The challenge of the *Ueber-Brand* is to stay true to itself while also staying relevant. The craftsmanship and creativity of Hermès famously pivoted to match a client wearing jeans in the 80s and today has launched “petit h,” celebrating *la joie de l'atelier* through up-cycling ... but in the same spirit as it has done for generations.

PLZ: *You consider that Ueber-Brands have “bigger reason[s] for being, beyond profit.” As a cold-blooded economist I find this a difficult proposition to believe in....*

JPK: Profit is certainly important, but what we say is that these brands have a mission—in fact missionary zeal—that goes beyond selling and making a fast buck. That does not prevent them from being in business and making a profit. In fact, their margins (and multiples, if they are listed) tend to be richer than those of companies’ mass-marketing propositions that need scale to be profitable. The question is what comes first: the belief that you need to create meaning beyond the material to seduce customers and create an attractive margin, or that you need to promote the hell out of a product so it becomes (the most) popular and generates substantial revenue. *Ueber-Brands* tend to go for the former strategy. I only know of few companies, like Patagonia that MIGHT be said to exist not to maximize profits for their owners but rather to fund efforts to protect the earth ... But they are the absolute exception versus the rule—and usually privately owned companies.

PLZ: *I will jump boats now and compensate for my cold economist blood. When you talk about brands being truthful, you bring me back to my amateur actor days. Acting is the art of make-believe, having the audience buy into the fantasy and be emotionally impacted by it. How to do it,*

however, is as much art as it is training. Moreover, If you ask actors like Nicole Kidman or Daniel Day-Lewis, they will tell you that to build a convincing performance they may likely impersonate the character for the whole duration of the film shooting, really embodying the "myth." John Malkovich or William H. Macy, on the other hand, would never agree to that and would use non-psychological tools to generate equally convincing performances. Can't Ueber-Brands aspire to profit maximization and still have a convincing persona for consumers?

JKK: There are many ways in which a brand can fulfill its mission and live its myth. Some do it (seemingly) naturally—Tesla seems to be Elon, Aesop seems to be ruled by intellectuals—others put on a great show—Cirque Du Soleil or Disney, Harley and Brunello Cucinelli, too. But they all do it with conviction and skill. Just like those actors. They are their real selves or real fantasies but never fake selves or fantasies

PLZ: *After reading your book, I cannot stop wondering: Do Ueber-Brands exist to sell goods and services, or are these just an excuse, a vessel to sell the real product which is the Ueber-brand itself?*

JKK: To a large extent, they exist to help us and themselves be ourselves. Nespresso does not only sell a good and convenient cup of coffee but also a feeling of being stylish, sophisticated, socially successful ... depending on who you are and how you feel today. That is the value added beyond the commodity value of the generic cup of coffee. Some brands succeed to detach themselves from one (or even any) specific product or service in lending identity and meaning. Armani came to define a lifestyle that could be translated to fashion, hotels, restaurants, flower shops ... Supreme lends its street cred magic to almost any product. Lego has developed many ways in which it sells learning through creative play—far beyond its plastic bricks. Red Bull is a drink—or rather a magic potion—but also an event, news, the feeling of adrenaline pumping through your veins. If it was for sale, its value as a sports and entertainment company would likely compete with its value as a soft drink brand.

PLZ: *And in this respect, can we assimilate the unpaid brand ambassadors or disciples you mentioned before to halo products, much like the General Motors Corvette bringing people closer to a Chevrolet Malibu?*

JKK: If the Malibu fits into the dream of the person desirous of living the Corvette life, then we could assimilate them. We

call those ambassadors and disciples the *Ueber-Target* of a brand. They love the brand but also are muses to it. Most importantly they live the kind of life or beliefs that the broader strategic target of the brand desires to live. Think of Elon Musk and Tesla, Coco and Chanel, the outdoor enthusiast “dirtbags” and Patagonia, or the Hells Angels and Harley Davidson. Consciously or sub-consciously many people desiring these brands do so (also) because they want to see themselves as visionary, confident, adventurous, or obnoxious as these *Ueber-Targets*—at least at the moment of consumption.

PLZ: *I see a lot of potential for Ueber-Brands in the new Metaverse... In fact, you mention the game/platform Fortnite as an Ueber-Brand in your book. The game's concept is genius (and quite evil depending on your perspective): Fortnite lets you play an online battle royale for free; and yet all players want to spend hundreds of dollars in buying “clothes” for their avatars/characters and special celebratory dance moves, neither of which have any effect whatsoever in the player's “battlefield” performance. Are we reaching a new level in conspicuous consumption in the Metaverse?*

JPK: Humans take their nature and needs wherever they go. The metaverse will be no different. Already, people are staking their claims to fame and fortune in that new world. *Ueber-Brands* will be there to generate meaning, convey status, cultural or social capital ... if this is where humanity is going.

PLZ: *Let me dig deeper here. Isn't the Metaverse the culmination of the transformation of brands into the real products? If I drive a Porsche, I am certainly having an experience and making a personality and wealth statement to the world, but at the same time I get a premium quality car that has a concrete function as a means of transportation. We can discuss how much of the consumer purchase decision is linked to the product itself, but the product exists. Once in the Metaverse, my virtual 911 has no real function, it is just a statement of personality and wealth. This appears very fertile ground for Ueber-Brands....*

JPK: People paying money for something as abstract or ephemeral as a manifestation in the metaverse, certainly indicates that meaning is being created. I dare to predict that brands will play roles—including those of projecting social status or satisfying hedonistic desires—to the extent that our social lives will be lived in the metaverse and experience in the virtual world can be emotionally

engaging. I guess that the *Ueber-Brands* of the metaverse are those that will be able to create “meaning beyond the virtual” just as they go beyond the material in the physical world.

PLZ: *Sounds a little bit superficial, but maybe it is just me reaching middle age and playing the old tune of “old times used to be better...” But let me touch upon a related topic: are Ueber-Brands a “first world problem?” You lived all around the globe, in societies with different Maslow levels of unsatisfied needs. Are Ueber-Brands marketing strategies focused on the US (and to a lesser extent ON other developed nations) or are these feasible in societies where access to goods and services is more difficult and people cannot afford making a “personality statement” when e.g., brushing their teeth or baking bread.*

JPK: Everyone is seeking for meaning, no matter the income, religion, age... There are some things that come first—like shelter—but meaning is pretty high up there in what helps us not only to thrive but survive. As Victor Frankl has so dramatically illustrated, for example. I understand that Maslow did not say that self-actualization is only relevant or reserved for those who have “worked off” all the lower levels on that pyramid. Everyone desires to be respected, loved... and everyone craves the feelings of pride, satisfaction. That explains the famous phenomenon of people who should save their money spending a relative fortune on luxury items—many luxury and lifestyle brands have been revived and now thrive thanks to young Chinese “splurging” on the high-priced accessories they sell while living at their parent’s place and bringing their own lunch to work to save money. Just because you are not the boss or (yet) rich does not mean you do not have pride or the aspiration to get there.

PLZ: *I completely agree but isn’t there a difference in reach in the Ueber-Brand ecosystem? In all societies there is certain level of conspicuous consumption, and I can see how people in developing economies can value a Louis Vuitton bag even more than the US/European counterparts. But the emergence of Ueber-brands across the consumption spectrum, in particular related to small day-to-day consumption, is a luxury not all societies can afford.*

JPK: Do people who are part of a more affluent environment have the luxury to decide between many options and make criteria like “this brand aligns with/projects my values” part of their purchase decisions more often? Probably. Particularly when we think of retailed, branded

goods. In that sense, *Ueber-Brands* are likely to be over-represented in the “first world” and stretch down and across far beyond the typical luxury categories of cars, jewelry, fashion, accessories, hospitality and so forth. And choosing between them one of those famous “first world problems.” That’s where brands like King Arthur Baking Company, the Burning Man festival, or Ben & Jerry’s are *Ueber-Brands*, as well. They attract a post-modern, Western, meaning-seeking, first world kind of crowd by offering the “higher purpose” that other institutions like caste, church, or state are no longer experienced to give us.

PLZ: *In the context of growing nationalism across the world, and now the war in Ukraine, can companies like Airbnb or Tesla aspire to be global Ueber-Brands or should they only focus on one or two markets and behave like “traditional” brands everywhere else?*

JPK: The search for meaning and our fascination with myths is universal. Joseph Campbell scoured the religions and legends of the world and concluded they all follow a very similar structure (he calls it the monomyth) and our fascination with these mythical stories is similar through the ages and across the globe. If Airbnb succeeds to be experienced as “being home, even when you are away,” or “belonging anywhere,” as they advertise it, then that is even stronger in a time where people are displaced, “home” is threatened, new “homes” need to be found, etc.

What is the biggest challenge humanity is facing—bigger than Putin? Climate change! ... (at least it is for a significant portion of the world population that also happens to be pretty educated hence high net worth and a good source of profit). So, if Tesla can be a symbol of hope for modern life that does not trigger the climate apocalypse, then it will continue to be an aspirational brand pretty much around the Globe.

PLZ: *But, for example, “being home” means very different things in China, Argentina or the U.S. So how can you create a consistent brand message that means so many different things. It is true that since the fall of the Berlin Wall we have lived in a quasi-monolithic US capitalist culture, but isn’t this changing? And with it the ability of creating a cast of true global Ueber-Brands?*

JPK: *Ueber-Brands* are usually not for everyone, true. And they should not be! “Trying to please everyone” is not a strategy that allows for the type of distinction people are willing

to pay a premium for. The “who is in and who is out” can be based on beliefs or ideologies that might not resonate in the context of certain predominant cultures. And maybe “belonging anywhere” is less of a yearning desire in cultures where family and community are much more of a matter of course than in the West that celebrates individualism. But the strength of the myths that *Ueber-Brands* have at their core is that they are “shared dreams,” as Joseph Campbell said. Belonging, reaching for the stars, gaining super-human powers, those are desires humanity shares. Translating them into brand manifestations that resonate locally (or “metaversally”) is a skill to look for in a good marketer.

PLZ: *Let's now briefly talk about this new book, and its 6-step process to elevate a brand to an Ueber-brand status. Can you provide a 5-line teaser summarizing the method?*

JPK: I'll provide a 12-word teaser: Brands can become meaningful beyond the material by Dreaming, Doing and Daring. How is that?

PLZ: *Short and sweet. I'll guess the readers will have to get the full scoop after reading the book! Let me help them with a preview. One of the steps of your brand elevation process focuses on the company culture and the need to have all employees buy into the company ethos and act accordingly. Is the “working from home” wave an impediment to generate Ueber-Brands?*

JPK: To the extent that “seeing and feeling is believing,” yes. Not being able to physically immerse oneself in the culture and environment of a brand that “shines from the inside-out” is somewhat of a handicap. But a big part of that “shine” is about the ideology and ideals of a company and those can be transmitted in ways other than physical presence, as well. But I do believe that humans themselves, when it comes to important meaningful things, will seek to be “present” so manifestations and gatherings will re-emerge as important touchpoints that give us the feeling of “belonging.”

PLZ: *Lastly, it seems that creating an Ueber-brand is a long-term strategy, but is there an Ueber-Brand whose ascendance or decline surprised you? Meaning, a brand that achieved or lost its Ueber-Brand status overnight without notice?*

JPK: The short answer is No. Dreams might be created overnight but living them and having a brand end up standing for them—becoming icons—takes skill and time.

PLZ: *But innovation sometimes happens overnight, good products show up and I guess that is fertile ground for Ueber-Brands....*

JPK: If your success is founded on the functional benefits of your proposition and a “competitive moat” like IP protection or scale alone, then the demise will come and can be sudden when the “better mouse trap” eventually appears. Think Zoom versus Skype versus I-forgot-what-came-before. And it seems that Zoom is already on its way out....

However, even brands that have meaning that far exceeds the pure functionality or performance of its products cannot survive if they fail to also establish a business model that generates profits. What surprises me is how many brand owners do not seem to recognize one or the other of these fundamental brand and business truths!

PLZ: *I am sure they will stop doing so after reading the book. Thanks JP, it's been a pleasure.*