

# Lifestyle Brands Make It **PERSONAL**

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Attaching a philosophy that consumers identify with or aspire to can make marketing a snap.





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**M**arketers of top lifestyle brands hold winning lottery tickets in their hands. People see the best lifestyle brands as a reflection of themselves, and that loyalty inspires customers to envelop themselves in the brand. It also means marketers have built-in customer bases ready to buy new products and better the bottom line. But creating the 360-degree aura a lifestyle brand must emit requires a lot of work and solid, consistent execution. So marketers, “grab life by the bars,” as renowned lifestyle brand Harley-Davidson proclaims, and get ready to ride.

Consumers want brands to stand for something, experts say. “We use brands to validate our lives. A lot of our consumption activities are becoming more sacred because we attach meaning to them,” says Laurence Vincent, group director of strategy at Siegel + Gale, a strategic branding and communications firm headquartered in New York.

Consumer marketers should consider taking traditional branding to the next level because speaking to your customers’ way of life can help the brand stand out in the marketplace. “Traditional branding has gotten organizations to a certain place in consumers’ minds, and lifestyle [branding allows them] to take it a bit further in delineating their uniqueness,” says Bruce Dybvad, CEO of Interbrand Design Forum/Interbrand Cincinnati, a global branding consultancy.

It’ll also help marketers sell products more easily. If consumers aspire to or think of a brand as a representation of themselves, it makes it easier for marketers to broaden brand offerings into more product and service categories, Vincent says. He cites Nike is an example. What started as a running shoe company now extends to anyone who wants an athletic lifestyle, allowing Nike a presence in product categories such as apparel, watches and audio equipment.

Companies strive for lifestyle branding because they can reap financial benefits by building and sustaining a strong, emotional and long-term bond with the consumer, Dybvad says. He says lifestyle branding also can mean a higher profit margin for the company.

The loyalty that lifestyle brands inspire usually translates into purchase and repurchase of items by its fans, says Susan Nelson, executive director of consumer insights at Landor Associates, a brand consulting and design firm in New York. Enthusiasts of Apple, for example, often rush to purchase the latest version of the iPhone or iPad. “You have to keep it in your life, and as new [products] come out you want to have a better one,” Nelson says. And enthusiasts of a brand will buy multiple products within that brand: 74% of iPad purchasers were Mac owners, and another 66% owned iPhones, according to an April 2010 survey from investment firm Piper Jaffray. Harley-Davidson says two-thirds of its motorcycle purchasers are repeat buyers.

Lifestyle branding can be effective, regardless of whether consumers actually live the lifestyle the brand represents, says Stef Gans, CEO of Effective Brands, a marketing consultancy in New York. It’s more about communicating a message. “Millions of people walk around in [surf and outdoor clothier] Quiksilver’s clothes but they’ve never been on a surfboard, or they live in a landlocked state.”

Many brands have successfully connected with consumers by tapping into who people are or who they would like to be. “Most lifestyle brands are aiming for aspiration because they’re setting an expectation that most of us can’t ever achieve. That’s part of the fun of the branding experience. We are what we consume,” Vincent says.

### The Nominees Are...

Ask branding experts for examples of quintessential lifestyle brands and J. Crew, Harley-Davidson and New York-based Polo Ralph Lauren Corp. are cited again and again.

Preppy lifestyle bastion J. Crew, whose fans flock to fan-operated blogs like J. Crew Aficionada to express their love for the brand, has stayed true to its fresh-faced image since its debut in 1983. The New York-based company’s branding efforts have reaped financial benefits, as in the third quarter of 2010, J. Crew’s revenues increased 4% to approximately \$430 million from the third quarter of 2009 and store sales increased 1% to a little more than \$303 million.

Milwaukee-based motorcycle manufacturer Harley-Davidson Inc. has been a touchstone of the leather-clad biker set since 1903. Its website includes the Harley-Davidson Experience, which provides tools for fans to build their own rides, ride planners and motorcycle maps—stuff a serious rider wants to have. The Harley Owners Group has more than a million members in 1,458 chapters globally, according to the company. Harley’s general merchandise (non-motorcycle) business made \$282.2 million, or 6.6% of its annual revenue, in 2009.

“The companies that do [lifestyle branding] best do it naturally,” says James Gregory, CEO of New York-based branding firm CoreBrand, in citing Harley-Davidson. “The theme of the brand is freedom and the open road. Their employees and their vehicles are ingrained with the lifestyle. Everything they say and do is focused on the lifestyle.” That lifestyle includes Harley-sponsored riding events like Million Mile Monday and rallies around the world, and a focus on developing bikes that appeal across generations of riders. To attract new customers and tap into a younger consumer base, Harley developed a Rider’s Edge New Rider Course. Thirty-three percent of the course’s students are under age 35 and 37% are women.

On the other end of the style spectrum, Polo Ralph Lauren, a designer brand with more than \$10 billion in annual sales, includes everything from a fashion empire to a bedding and bath line, Ralph Lauren Home, to RL Restaurant on Chicago’s Magnifi-



cent Mile. Flagship Ralph Lauren retail stores in New York, Paris, Milan, Italy, Tokyo, London, Moscow and Chicago feature lavish exterior architecture and interior design that exude luxury and privilege. "Most people who buy the brand are not part of that life, but they certainly identify with it, and that's the reason it has such great loyalty. You walk into the store, and it's almost a theme park around that lifestyle," Vincent says.

"[Lifestyle branding] isn't about just a creative ad. [For Ralph Lauren, it's about] Ralph Lauren, the figurehead, the icon of the brand," says Pamela Danziger, president of Unity Marketing, a Stevens, Pa.-based marketing consulting firm specializing in luxury goods. "The retail establishments are a very important part of delivering that lifestyle message. It's not the Gap. When you go into a Ralph Lauren boutique on Madison Avenue, you are entering his world and you are entering his lifestyle and vision of his lifestyle that you can then participate in."

Some say that lifestyle brands like J. Crew, Harley-Davidson and Ralph Lauren inspire loyalty by acting as a style editor of sorts, essentially making consumers' choices for them. "Instead of the shopper having to do the work in defining their style, they attach themselves to a brand that they think reflects their style. That brand [then] canvasses the world for the furniture pieces, cookware pieces and apparel that represents that lifestyle," Dybvad says.

And lifestyle branding doesn't apply only to consumer goods. Nelson nominates the National Rifle Association [NRA] as one of the world's greatest lifestyle marketers. "You can identify [an NRA member]. They stand for something; they have a voice and you know what that voice is," Nelson says. "[Lifestyle branding] is a form of communication between people who don't know each other. What a powerful way to build loyalty, for your brand to be a shorthand for communication. It's the most emotional and powerful form of branding you can get."

Some brands become lifestyle brands just by being themselves. "People gravitate toward [some brands] because there's something special about them," Nelson says, citing grocer Trader Joe's and outdoor gear retailer Recreation Equipment Inc., commonly referred to as REI, as examples. "Trader Joe's certainly didn't go after that [but] people are beginning to accrue values to them, [and now] they have the opportunity to do more than sell groceries." REI started as a low-cost sporting goods co-op but now markets REI Adventures, a travel division that sells active travel vacations.

To keep or achieve lifestyle status, and thereby reap all of the financial and brand extension rewards that lifestyle branding has to offer, companies need to

focus on the details. "Where marketers fail most often is they ignore some of the touch points that can destroy the connection that people make between the brand and the target lifestyle," Vincent says. "It's not going to live on its own in a TV advertising campaign. Everything from product design to service design all play into the lifestyle component, and if you miss a piece, consumers aren't very forgiving." **m**



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