



Necessity. The Mother of Invention

Part 2. The people and brands that inspire us to go the extra mile



Few people really know what they're capable of until they have been motivated to explore their limits. The pandemic inspired many apparently ordinary people to do extraordinary things, from those responsible for the fastest ever vaccine development programme to airline cabin crews taking on the challenge of frontline healthcare.

In Part 1 we looked at how we humans can develop superhuman capabilities in the face of seemingly daunting threats, reflecting on how technological advances in aircraft design in the two decades of 1931-1951 (incorporating WWII) were dramatically quicker than throughout the five peacetime decades of 1967-2017.

But do we need a crisis to release our superhuman potential, or can we be inspired to achieve extraordinary things by a great leader or, more particularly, a compelling brand promise?

Brands that inspire superhuman potential...

We know that inspiring brands, like inspiring people, have the power to motivate. Moreover, brands with an inspiring leader at the helm often achieve the most powerful results of all—brand values snap into sharper focus when lived and modelled by the chief that espouses them, intensifying the brand experience for customers and employees (it can, of course, be similarly polarising for rejectors for whom the leader is the very personification of the brand they have come to loath!).

Two brands that deliver against these criteria are Apple and Tesla.



Apple

Since its inception in 1976 Apple has accumulated generations of dedicated followers with an almost religious zeal for new product announcements. The level of pride in owning a new Apple product has always been legendary (just search 'Apple unboxing' on YouTube) and that passion is shared by its employees. Apple is a perfectionist culture that was personified by its single-minded founder, Steve Jobs, and perpetuated by the conviction that 'we're here to put a ding in the universe' with clever thinking, iconic design and pure simplicity; customer satisfaction is not engaged enough for Apple, it strives for 'joy of ownership'.

The organisation structure is as simple yet radical as the product and the company takes an entrepreneurial approach to product development with employees enjoying a high level of freedom and flexibility but a high degree of accountability. Every live project has a Directly Responsible Individual (the DRI) who is personally answerable for it. This generates a sense of ownership and responsibility with teams focused on comparatively few products at any one time, before moving, together, onto the next one. Apple's 'focused excellence' approach means that every job is done brilliantly, by not diluting effort across several jobs only the highest quality products are launched (and if others are delayed, that is a price worth paying). By elevating design quality to iconic levels it has heightened the desire for its products, making every rival look and feel ordinary by comparison. Idiomatically, rather than follow the traditional approach of hiring a star designer, Steve Jobs created Apple's own star by raising the profile of its talented British design chief, Jony Ive. He designed Apple stores to resemble art galleries to celebrate the latest Apple sculptures. Packaging became as exquisite as the products inside them

"We're here to put a ding in the universe...Our job is to figure out what people are going to want before they do. People don't know what they want until you show it to them..." [Steve Jobs]

(empty boxes are collector's items). Ives' numerous celebrity appearances and awards culminated in his receiving a knighthood in 2006. Sir Jony Ive is Apple's knight in shining designer armour and the ultimate expression of how Apple inspires superhuman levels of performance. He succeeded in putting a ding in the universe—with an Apple logo on it!

It is this single-minded approach, inspired by a passion to deliver the values the brand promises, that sets such extraordinarily high expectations of Apple employees. And they repeatedly do whatever it takes to deliver. The result is new generations of customers experiencing the 'joy of ownership' that Jobs dreamt of and which has continued to make Apple the iconic brand it is today.





Tesla

Elon Musk is Tesla. An ambitious force of nature that makes the impossible possible and hauls the rest of the world into the future. It is not a place for the feint-hearted, the pressure is intense and demanding. Musk regularly overpromises to the world, then holds his employees feet (along with his own) to the fire to deliver. Employees frequently claim that everyone has to work harder than they would at any other company in the world, but they also claim to have done the best work of their lives at Tesla—even if some leave exhausted.

Musk believes that it is his job to be intimately familiar with the company's operations and puts himself, physically, in the middle of the action. He leads by example and lives out Tesla's three brand pillars of Boldness, Openness and Sustainability. He is driven by a conviction to make a global impact and audaciously puts the planet before shareholders. This ethos is embodied in the products and is also manifest in his making innovation patents public—demonstrably putting principles before profit.

Tesla owners are as dedicated and enthusiastic as its employees. They frequently participate in product development and testing, making them feel genuinely invested in the brand and its success. Their loyalty and advocacy levels have been sustained at such high levels that Tesla has never sought to invest in marketing—even with a range of cars starting at \$38,000.

Over time, the brand's commercial performance has become as spectacular as the cars. Since its launch in 2008 it has brought electric vehicles into the mainstream, completely transforming the way the world thinks about them. The big motor manufacturers were quick to dismiss Tesla as an eccentric niche, today it is worth more than the worlds top seven car

"If you're at Tesla, you're choosing to be at the equivalent of Special Forces. There's the regular Army, and that's fine, but if you are working at Tesla, you're choosing to step up your game. It's cool to be Special Forces, but... it's not for everyone" [Elon Musk]

companies combined. The Tesla brand is driven by a bold vision, bigger than itself, to create a better, cleaner and more sustainable future for the planet. Tesla's refusal to accept the status quo, its obsession with reinventing products and sectors from first principles rather than following any existing industry practices, are pure Musk, but have been the means by which the firm's outrageous ambitions have consistently been delivered. He and his staff systematically over-deliver on their conviction that nothing is impossible. If Tesla can claim to have changed the world it is because its employees, mentored by Musk, achieve more than anyone else in any other company.





Superhuman overachievement is always possible... at a cost

The quest to go beyond and deliver what was previously thought impossible seems to be as much a characteristic of a single-minded brand (especially one with an uncompromising culture driven by a larger-than-life personality) as it is of a national crisis or global pandemic. The cost is that such brands can be intensely polarising for customers and employees. But any distinctive brand is defined as much by those it rejects as by those it attracts—Apple and Tesla command a premium precisely because their distinctive values, exemplified by their products, give them an emotional appeal that sets them apart. How many employees of GM or HP do you suppose feel as motivated to overachieve each morning as their equivalents in Tesla or Apple? How proud do they feel when someone asks them who they work for? Have you seen how a Tesla or Apple customer glows and gushes when asked whether the Model 3 parked outside, or that cool new Mac on the desk, is theirs?

Is a personality-driven brand necessary to achieve superhuman results?

There is nothing quite like having a brand brought to life by an inspiring leader (Branson, Dyson, Disney, Roddick, Chanel, et al). Apart from making the brand values easier to relate to, their personal value means that they usually have the power to take, seemingly irrational, risks that would terrify most boards or shareholders. This courage of conviction has been a vital component in the growth of both Apple and Tesla, both of which have endured troughs in shareholder confidence.

But it is now a decade since the demise of Steve Jobs and Apple has shown that its brand values are sufficiently well defined and firmly-entrenched to be sustainable without the personal driving force of its founder. Indeed, its market value has risen tenfold over this time to make Apple the world's first \$3 Trillion corporation. Significantly, its employees remain as fanatically-eager to overachieve as ever.

Unfortunately, the magic of most entrepreneur-led brands starts to fade when the founder is no longer leading them, or when they sell-out to bigger groups (few of which truly understand how to sustain brand values). But Apple has convincingly shown us that, with a zealous commitment to resolutely-held brand values, sky-high expectations can continue to be met thanks to the superhuman efforts of team members—without or without a charismatic chief to model them.

The challenge for boards and shareholders

More people than we might have thought are capable, with the right motivation, of achieving things that go above and beyond normal expectations. It need not take a crisis to unleash their potential. They need a purpose that stirs their emotions and propels them to over-deliver, to be voluntarily immersed in a shared culture where they can believe that their efforts can change the world.

This is encapsulated in a promise. The promise we call a brand.



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