

Passionbrands: getting to the heart of branding

Helen Edwards and **Derek Day**, authors of *Creating Passion Brands*, explain what it is to be a passionbrand, and why Camper shoes have all the right qualities

A PASSIONBRAND IS a brand that, in a cynical world, manages to ignite passionate advocacy among consumers and employees alike. They are the brands with the imagination to stand for something rather than just following the latest consumer whim, the brands with a burning inner fire and the courage to live by their beliefs.

There are five big factors that make these brands different.

1. They have something to say about modern life.
2. They act out of deeply held beliefs, not the latest focus group findings.
3. They are good at something that's good for people – and stick to it.
4. They have a moral integrity that penetrates every fibre of the business.
5. They are never sanctimonious, boastful or dull.

Today's young people are growing up in a sophisticated consumer society: they know the game, are as savvy about marketing as the professionals and yet still look to brands to help them communicate their identity to both themselves and their peer group. Their antennae are finely tuned for humbug, imitation and cant; they seek and respect authenticity and integrity. It is this authenticity that is at the heart of Camper's extraordinary cross-generational appeal.

Camper: belief made active at every step

Around the world, six million feet wear this season's Camper shoes. On some of these feet the left shoe and the right shoe don't match, such are the originality and playfulness with which Camper invites us to share its enthusiasm for that most ordinary and honest of human endeavours: walking.

Camper cares about slowness – it promotes the notion of the 'Walking Society'. It abhors the trend towards speed in modern life, as exemplified by brands like McDonald's and Nike. Instead it invites us to slow down and take in the wonderful world around us, assuming we haven't lost our capacity for the appreciation of the simple joys on offer. For Camper, putting one foot in front of the other isn't just a means of locomotion, it is one of the defining characteristics of our bipedal species, a reminder of our connection with the history behind us and the earth beneath us. 'Contact earth' is one of Camper's much-repeated themes.

The company's home is on the Mediterranean island of Majorca. It is still a family business, headed today by Lorenzo Fluxa, a fourth-generation shoemaker. Although Camper is a brand with global reach, the traditional Majorcan way of life provides design inspiration for many of the shoes. Some take their shape from the ancient sailing ships that plied the Mediterranean shores, a wistful reminder of a slower way of life. Others

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are inspired by the name itself: *camper* means 'peasant' in Catalan, and it is hard to think of more earthy symbolism than that. The qualities of the peasant way of life – austerity, simplicity and discretion – are reflected in the design rhetoric of the shoes and celebrated on the company's website and in the quirky, give-away booklets you find in its stores.

We talked with Lorenzo Fluxa at the Camper store in London's Bond Street, where the good earth is given over to fashion retailing and commands rent of £3000 per square metre. The irony of a brand that means 'peasant' holding its greatest appeal to the urban-chic crowd is not lost on him. Irony is, in any case, a recurring theme in the brand's design repertoire, and Fluxa was clear from the start that his customers would be urban – like the friends from Barcelona who admired and coveted his own handmade 'country shoes' and espadrilles some 30 years ago. What he is not comfortable with is the notion that Camper is merely a fashion statement. 'When people call us a fashion brand it offends me,' he says. 'Camper is beyond fashion.'

Not everyone buys that. But to those whose challenge amounts to a cynical rehearsal of the anti-global, anti-fashion mantra, Camper provides two answers. The first is the product itself. Camper shoes exhibit qualities not normally associated with the high-churn fashion world: durability, comfort and a kind of friendly sturdiness that befits their purpose; these shoes are made for walking, and not just on catwalks. Many of the designs are classics that are reproduced year after year, with only subtle enhancements, which runs counter to fashion's normal seasonal U-turns. And the use of materials tends towards the traditional and rustic, like natural rubber, canvas and rope, imaginatively recombined in a timeless design aesthetic. The second answer to the anti-fashion brigade was provided by one of the company's chief designers, Marti Guixé, in 2003. His jaunty red and white Camper store bags are emblazoned with the motto 'No los compres, si no los necesitas',



Soft progress: a Camper 'Walk-in-Progress' store

which translates from Spanish as 'Don't buy them if you don't need them', a typically full-bodied Camper riposte.

But it seems the world does need Camper. Last year three million pairs were sold, generating around \$130 million in turnover. The Bond Street store is now one of 80 worldwide, in cities as separated as Sydney, New York, Tokyo and Tel Aviv. Opening and refurbishing so many stores puts high demands on capital, which for a relatively small company can result in a short-term strain on resources. Camper's solution is to open its stores slowly, in two distinct phases. First comes the 'Walk-in-Progress' store concept, which is a raw, unfinished space with white walls and products sitting on top of a counter made of piled-up shoe boxes. Customers are invited to write thoughts, messages and ideas on the walls with the red felt-tip pens provided, so that the store gradually takes on the unique patina of the neighbourhood in which it finds itself. Only a year or so later, as funds become available and planning permissions are complete, is the store developed with all the design elements of a fully fashioned Camper interior. It is typical of the creativity of Camper that its solution to a problem should serve imaginatively to reinforce its core belief. Camper stores don't simply open;

they evolve – a fine example of the principle that ‘everything communicates’.

The constituents of cool

More of an issue for the brand is imitation. The very permanence of Camper’s designs makes them a relatively easy target for copycats. Fluxa is both sanguine and dismissive about this. ‘On the one hand there is the flattery element,’ he says, ‘but the feeling is that, while they can copy some design features of the shoes, they cannot copy the spirit or the will that is there at the heart of the company.’ In this he is right. The young, urban target to which Camper appeals has its antennae finely tuned for integrity and authenticity, the constituents of cool. The strength of Camper’s ideological belief, and the passion with which it manifests it through product and everything else, is a force in people’s desire for, and willingness to pay for, the real thing.

If belief helps make Camper less imitable, what about the other virtues that we claimed it could confer on a brand: to make it less fractured, more famous and more loved?

Camper is certainly a strong cohesive brand, and this cohesion owes everything to the heart with which it embraces its ideological stance. Camper believes that, on life’s journey, slow is better than fast, and it defines its role in the furtherance of this ideal as making ‘the safest and cheapest vehicles possible: comfortable shoes’. Camper, like other belief-led brands, is wary of extension into anything that would dilute its clear reason for being. As Fluxa confides, ‘Every week we get offers to put our brand name to watches, bags and clothes, but we will never do that just because it could make us some more money.’

Is Camper a famous brand? It is certainly more famous than its modest advertising budget would justify, and this fame owes much to the imaginative variation of a consistent theme. In typical Camper style the fame has been slow to come, but shows signs of permanence. Thirty years ago the brand was known in Catalonia; 20 years ago it was known throughout Spain. Its

fame is now global, and its appeal extends to the globally famous: Robert Redford, Philippe Starck, Nicole Kidman, Samuel L. Jackson and Bruce Willis are all fans, attracted by the cachet of a brand with the courage and wit to translate farmer shoes into urban streetwear.

As for love, the devotion of Camper loyalists would give Harley a run for its money. There are many who have pairs that run to double figures and could not imagine themselves in anything else. Perhaps a quote from the Camper correspondent in our deprivation study will illuminate what it is that Camper so uniquely symbolises in the fast modern world: ‘I buy two or three pairs a year. They are trendy, smart, different. Even when I wear them in meetings, I feel less corporate. I want to be successful in my career, but in a way that I want, broken up with travel and living in different countries. Camper just fits with that somehow.’

Camper is as good an example as you’ll find of a company with a strong core belief that is made active in everything it does: name, products, stores, brochures, booklets, website, advertising, PR and, last but not least, its practical contribution to the preservation of the Mediterranean rural world. It is a belief felt with passion and communicated with flair, a belief captured without artifice in its simple, three-word slogan: ‘Walk don’t run’. This was no adman’s line, but was coined by Lorenzo himself. Trenchant, grounded, economical, blunt: a peasant could not have put it better.

The authors’ new book *Creating passion brands* is published by Kogan Page priced at £25 in hardback, order online at www.kogan-page.co.uk



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