

A R C H E T Y P O L O G Y

Barack Obama An Archetypal Brand Success?

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Can the same vital ingredients which make a world class brand more successful than the rest also have been at play in the amazing success of Barack Obama in becoming one of the most powerful figures in the world? This is the question I asked myself when I wondered did this man, whether by intuitive serendipity or calculated design, leverage the same powerful forces in the subconscious realm of the human psyche which, I believe, make brands 'ultra powerful'.

Not that the creators of the most highly successful brands set out to leverage these forces, usually that happened by accident. The forces I'm talking about are archetypal patterns and archetypal brands use them. They are neuronal imprints which are pre coded in us to act as templates which deliver automatic behavioural responses when we encounter certain triggers in our environment. They exist because we are essentially pattern searching and matching creatures and because they reside in our subconscious we are largely unaware of their influence.

There are lots of these patterns and it is only fairly recently that we have had a system to decode those in brands and those which are very successful seem to tap into three of them. First, they leverage an archetypal character pattern. Second they 'tell' an archetypal story. Third, they resolve for us conflicts in primal desires, which exist within us as individuals but which also surface in society as cultural contradictions.

The reason these things are important is that we find brands which deliver on these criteria almost compulsively seductive. Our brains pattern match to them as something familiar and

which we then respond to, often completely without conscious awareness.

So let's deconstruct the Barack Obama phenomenon.

A Challenger Character Archetype?

In Brand Obama we find at play a character archetype best labelled 'the Avenger' (*one of a group of character archetypes in Brand Archetypology we refer to as the Challenger Characters*). The Avenger is best immortalized in the character of Robin Hood who while of 'presidential' class is also allied with 'the people' – especially people who are oppressed in some way. This character particularly comes to the fore when it is perceived that there are absent, corrupt, tyrannical or unjust leaders directing a country. This character is an outsider, but one who promises change, driven by the desire to respond to and rebalance injustice. There is a sense of championing the rights of the underdog, the disadvantaged. There is a 'virtuous' passion in this character, someone who stands up firmly behind 'his' beliefs and gives the impression of being willing to sacrifice all for humanity and 'rightness'. There is a belief that there is a better way, that a fairer and more equal system can be created. Sound familiar?

An existing brand example would be Richard Branson and Virgin. The Virgin/Richard Branson brand mostly leverages the same archetypal character. Consider how often Virgin goes up against a 'ruling' paradigm. In fact this character archetype always needs an establishment to oppose, so the great danger for Obama going forward will be how to not become the establishment – a nigh impossible task for a government. The weakness in this character in becoming the 'Ruler' is that there is no 'intrinsic' imprint in this character pattern of how to build systems and infrastructure to support and build a society. There will always be a danger of too much 'crusading' without covering the basics - making sure the systems and processes work. It's no real surprise that we saw yet another remake of

the Batman story as the Dark Knight last year – a good example of how movies often reflect these patterns when they are activated on a mass scale and become apparent in the prevailing political and cultural zeitgeist.

An Archetypal Narrative?

You can probably already recognise the archetypal narrative or story that goes with the above character. It's called a 'fight the monster' story. The structure of this story is that there is a monster who threatens the world - now a monster can be actual or metaphorical, internal or external - but there is a sense that the main character, equipped with special resources and skills, must save the 'world' from certain disaster. A secondary narrative around this character is of course the 'avenging' story. The Avenger sets out to correct injustice and wrong doing, to crusade and avenge, on behalf of those who have been victimised.

These characters and stories resonate with us because they are in our archetypal history – they are part of our humanity and exist in the patterned part of our psyche. What happens is when a particular emotive trigger is activated, in this case lets say fear and indignation, our patterned response is to look for something that's like this archetypal character – the one we've labelled the Avenger, with a fight the monster, avenging narrative story. Essentially we are primed to conduct a search and find mission for the pattern – when we find it we instantly 'buy in' and feel a sense of completion. Since all of this takes place outside of our conscious awareness, brands which embody these patterns are very powerful because they promote behaviour which is essentially automatic but which we later rationalise to justify how we behaved.

Resolving a Primal Desires Conflict?

Iconic brands are said by Professor Douglas Holt of Oxford University to be those that fulfil or resolve identity level conflicts in the population. In Brand Archetypology we call these Primal Desires conflicts. Strong brands resolve these conflicts by being able to 'combine', usually through their communications, dimensions which wouldn't normally exist together (in brand jargon that's called making a myth). Let's look at how this works for Barack Obama. By virtue of being both 'black' and 'president' Barack acts as a 'myth' character. In his case he combines the oppositions of being superior and subordinate. 'President' confers authority, status, 'aboveness' while 'black' delivers the below or subordinate position. At an archetypal primal level, this equates to the conflict we all have about how to resolve the desire, on the one hand, to be superior, powerful and hierarchically above others, and on the other, our desire to be intimate – to be on the same level with others. When cultures develop a predominant 'fearful' state, this conflict becomes even more accentuated because we begin to feel so much in the below position – the victim or potential victim to powerful forces outside of our control.

Another play on the same opposition is delivered through 'male' and 'black', creating yet another powerful myth structure. Here we have 'male' delivering the above position while 'black' again reflects the below position. However, what is also present in the cultural below position is 'female' so we have a mythical character – symbolically a male combined with a woman. What better myth character to hold the conflicted cultural tension between an ideology which preaches white male supremacy and the unpleasant political and social reality of that tyranny. We still have a powerful male but because he is black we have symbolically a more considered and compassionate 'female' aspect.

In a culture where it is the more aggressive, dominant, competitive and posturing male characteristics which are increasingly resented and blamed for the ills of our time, it is not surprising that we reject women who have acquired these 'male' aspects. They are not a welcome addition to a woman whereas even a symbolic 'female' aspect can work wonders for a man. We're looking for a soft but male hand. Richard Branson for Virgin often 'holds' the same primal tension.

So, it does indeed look like Barack Obama shares the same secrets that power the most successful brands – archetypal brands. To be fair, up until now this has usually happened serendipitously rather than by design. However, knowing how to decode brands in this way can be enormously helpful in the ongoing management of any brand. Particularly knowing what lurks in the shadow or denied territory of a character archetype domain can provide boundaries and 'watch out' guidance for any brand. In the Avenger shadow at best is the Zealot, at worst the Pirate, Thief and Destroyer - so perhaps Obama needs to beware....?

To discover more about how understanding your brand with archetypal analysis can help you.....

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