



Spot Removal and Whitening of Image: Making Past Messages Fade.

By Max Sutherland

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This is last in a three part series (see inset). Normally we want to hold on to the mental territory we capture but there are times when things change and it becomes strategically desirable to have a past message fade. The key laundering ingredients are commitment, planning, patience and finesse.



Brands are built through positive advertising messages and formative associations. On rare occasions the ground shifts under us and changed circumstances transform a positive into a negative. Normally we want to hold onto the mental territory that we capture but in these situations when a discoloration spot appears on our brand image, we reach for the whiteners and the spot remover.

Consider the KFC example. Notably it is no longer called Kentucky Fried Chicken. Fried food has an unhealthy image today and like most fast food brands this company now offers [healthier menus](#). However, its full name 'Kentucky Fried Chicken' reinforced a negative association with FRIED, making it virtually impossible for that association to go latent. It makes strategic sense therefore to suppress this constant reminder and switch to the acronym KFC instead.¹



Obsolete messages are difficult to erase completely but they *can* fade in memory so eventually they no longer impact on the brand's image. Sometime in the future no-one much will remember KFC stands for 'Kentucky Fried Chicken'.

It needs to be stressed that to make an association go latent is a long-term proposition that takes forward planning, commitment and patience. Quick fix, single-use whiteners and spot removers just don't work.

The Story So Far...

1. **'Information Intercourse':**

Brand features stick more easily in the mind if they integrate with each other rather than being isolated islands of information. The human mind is like an interlocking structure. New information craves intercourse and looks to integrate with other information. If it doesn't, it is prone to slip out - instead of being retained.

2. **'Worm-holes of the Mind':**

Our minds strive for integration and they tend to reject anything inconsistent, but the integrative process seems to go AWOL when it comes to latent knowledge. The interleaving process that is so fundamental to the way our brains work, only works while the cortical boss is looking.

Advertising reminders are the crucial defense against worm-holes forming. Messages erode back into the recesses of the mind without reminders. However, sometimes we may want that to happen. So... read on.

Indeed, any attempt to remove long-standing heritage associations with a miracle, quick fix is naïve and borders on the impossible (not to mention, the suicidal). It takes time.

Reminders

To make associations go latent, you have to be able to remove the reminders. If the reminders are merely in the advertising, that's easy. However, reminders take all sorts of forms and it gets particularly tricky if they are embedded in the brand name.

When a brand name like Kentucky Fried Chicken triggers associations inconsistent with what the brand is trying to stand for, this will continually frustrate effective communication. You can change the product with healthier menus but unless you remove the constant reminder of fried in the name, it makes it impossible for the image to change along with it.

Reminders in the name may be infused rather than literal in which case the reminder and the brand are one and the same. Phillip Morris means tobacco even though it doesn't contain the word tobacco. It does however contain both the Kraft and Nabisco food divisions so no one is surprised that Phillip Morris changed its name recently (to Altria). The only surprise is that it wasn't done earlier.

By contrast, BP is a company that seems to pro-actively pre-wash and to re-tint its brand association elements at any early hint of discoloration before spots set in. Consider that BP is an acronym, short for the original full name 'British Petroleum'. It was officially shortened in 1989 so as to be more strategically appropriate for an oil company competing globally. By suppressing the country-of-origin reminder, it removed that constant reinforcement that occurred each time the name was used. This was crucial to enabling the association with 'British' to go latent.



However, the BP story doesn't stop there. Eleven years later and moving into a new millennium, it was becoming clear that oil was running out and in this global warming world greener issues would take an ever-increasing hold. The company felt the marketing ground beginning to move and evidently saw a very different future ahead. In 2000 it adopted the tagline '*BP - Beyond Petroleum*' enabling it to inch towards a new identity with a very different meaning for BP. With astute planning and loads of patience, this **British** Petroleum company is morphing into a very different identity befitting a global energy company in touch with today and prepared for (an alternative-energy future of) tomorrow.

Most importantly BP has finessed this. New information craves integration and invites rejection if it triggers inconsistent associations. But using time and forward planning BP has been able to finesse the potential conflicts in this transition of its image associations. This evolutionary, adaptive approach contrasts with the slam-bam, persuasion attempts by General Motors to remove negative associations from its brand name Oldsmobile (see ['Worm-holes of the Mind'](#)).

Positive Associations

Spot removal and evolutionary adaptation are valid reasons for wanting a past message to go latent. But why would anyone walk away from an unblemished association element if it remains a positive? Indeed! It is however not unusual to hear the expression 'we need to move on' usually as a prelude for the new broom syndrome arguing that switching messages is necessary in order to develop the next stage of the brand's positioning. Be careful because what this usually means is abandoning what you have just spent

months or years building. Why start all over again each time? Far too many positive brand messages are abandoned under this false guise.

When a formative association is positive, there is usually little reason to remove it completely or abruptly. A better way 'to move on' is to integrate the new with the old and provide a transitional bridge between them (see '[Information Intercourse](#)' for a Volvo example). Rather than discontinuous messages, this involves message integration.

In the first of this series I discussed how Aflac became a well-known insurance company in the USA thanks to the formative associations of a wacky duck quacking its name during five years of ad campaigns (see '[Information Intercourse](#)'). After three years even though the duck continued to be successful, Aflac briefly thought of killing it off in order 'to move on' to the next stage of positioning. Wisdom prevailed and instead of being discontinuous, the [new Aflac messages](#) (and even the logo) integrate the irascible old duck. To abandon positive brand equity associations is daffy.



When you abruptly switch to a new message all those long-standing associations will nevertheless hang around in mind to be triggered by and interfere with any competing messages – including your own. What this means is that the new message takes time to 'wear in'. And the amount of time it takes for it to 'wear in' is determined by the time it takes the old association to go latent. The longer the old association has been used, the more prolonged this will be. Brand associations will not go latent overnight – especially if they are long standing and well consolidated through frequent reminders over long periods of time.

Conclusion

The only really valid reason for abruptly abandoning a positive association to make it fade is when the ground moves and threatens to transform it into a negative that will ultimately limit the brand's future development. Fortunately, this is rare but when these situations arise, the art of doing it can be crucial for brand repositioning. Successful politicians when they modify their position, usually do it slowly, seamlessly and with finesse. It is not dissimilar in marketing. To make existing associations go latent takes commitment, planning, patience and finesse. Overnight spot removers don't work.

Notes

¹ Yet a very recent and ambivalent move sees KFC [experimenting with the full name again](#).