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AN EXCERPT FROM

***THE BRAND WITHIN:
HOW WE BRAND OURSELVES, FROM BIRTH TO THE BOARDROOM***

By Daymond John with Daniel Paisner

The “O” factor

Now, here’s the hand-in-hand insight that goes along with these four stages of product evolution: they apply to us as individuals as well. We lift ourselves from the non-descript, huddled-masses crowd in an effort to make something of ourselves. Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States? Perfect example. He went from being a no-frills, hard-working, essentially-unknown community organizer and public advocate – one of thousands working tirelessly and anonymously for the common good – to the most powerful elected office in the free world. But it didn’t just happen.

This guy didn’t just burst onto the national scene, like some fully-formed phenomenon. It might seem that way, to a casual observer, but there was a process, an evolution. Absolutely, there was a groundswell of support and enthusiasm for this guy, but just like the word suggests, it started at the ground level. It was a bottom-up transformation. Back when he was a civil rights attorney, President Obama was toiling at the item stage of our product evolution cycle.

Understand, I’m not out to diminish the good work he did in this capacity, or the good works quietly carried out by thousands of civil rights attorneys across the country, but on a global scale his work was relatively unnoticed. Yeah, he’d been editor of the Harvard Law Review. Yeah, he was teaching constitutional law at the University of Chicago.

Yeah, he wrote a book that talked about his values and his background and all the stuff that went into shaping the man he had become and the vision he held for this country, even though folks weren’t exactly busting through those bookstore doors to buy a copy when it first came out.

And yeah, he was making a local name for himself and making a difference in his community and he surely deserved whatever props and good will came his way as a result, but if he stepped aside or moved on to something else there would have been another attorney to step in and continue fighting the same good fight.

Next, he sought election to the Illinois State Senate, representing Chicago's South Side, and here he moved from our item stage to a label. Here he announced himself as a politician, and for my money you're not a politician until you run for office. So he ran, and won, and now he stood alongside dozens of other state senators from Chicago, and dozens more across the state, with a clear and identifiable label on his back.

Folks across Illinois might not have known who he was if they met him on the street, but Barack Obama had kicked things up a notch to where there was now some kind of marker attached to what he was doing. He filled a role, a need, a slot in the state senate. Again, if it wasn't him in that senate seat, it would have been someone else – and the majority of the good people of Illinois might never have known the difference.

A couple years later, when he ran for Congress, he moved into brand territory. He didn't make it past the Democratic primary, but by now all these values and ideals we've come to associate with President Obama were attaching themselves to the man and his political career: hope, change, passion, integrity. People were starting to respond to his message, and to the quiet, silky confidence he put out when he was delivering it. Somewhere in there he caught the attention of big-time party honchos, who saw in Barack Obama a candidate who embodied these values and ideals in a fundamental way – who had been branded by them, really.

He ran for the U.S. Senate in 2004, winning a wide-open Democratic primary in March of that year by a huge margin, and by this point the brand was really taking shape. When he was asked to deliver the keynote address at the Democratic National Primary that summer in Boston, before he'd even been elected to national office, everything was lined up just right for this guy to kick things up yet again.

Most of us know the rest of the story. Following his 2004 convention speech, the young Illinois state senator emerged as one of the shining stars of the Democratic Party, and almost overnight it seemed he became an iconic brand. That groundswell I talked about earlier? It moved from the ground level to the swelling level, and we all got caught in the rising tide and Barack Obama came to stand for all the things the Democratic Party hoped to represent and a pull for young Americans looking to feel like they had some kind of voice in our country's future.

This was especially so for young black Americans, who saw in Barack Obama a powerful symbol of opportunity, change, redemption and hope – someone uniquely positioned to lead a kind of cultural revolution while working within the system.

The shift into lifestyle territory came quickly after that, and it really took shape when Barack Obama announced he was running for President. Now there was a

real movement, and folks around the country – around the world, even – started to sign on because they were really responding to the Obama message. You started to see Obama signs and stickers all over the damn place. Not just the usual campaign signs and stickers, but symbols of hope and change that seemed to go beyond politics.

These came across in campaign ads, on web-sites and blogs and Facebook pages and every other social networking, communication or outreach platform available to the Obama campaign. Whatever this guy was selling, people wanted to be a part of it, and they announced their brand loyalty and their shared vision by wearing tee-shirts and hats and working to get out the vote and promoting their candidate's ideals in whatever ways they could.

It wasn't just about getting out the vote, although that was surely part of it. It was also about signing on and declaring your affiliation with a campaign that meant to change the face of a nation. That logo with the blue O and the ribbon of red and white stripes underneath, designed by a graphic artist named Sol Sender, came to stand for something bigger than the candidate himself, and it got to where you could slap that O on pretty much anything and people would buy into it.

It was a curious coincidence that Pepsi changed its logo around this time – its first new logo in nearly seven years, and its 11th in the beverage company's 110 year-history. But I have to think it was just that, a coincidence. True enough, the new logo featured a free-flowing white band in the middle of the Pepsi "circle," all of it done up in red, white and blue and calling to mind the ubiquitous O, but of course a giant corporation like Pepsi could never be agile enough to make such a major shift in its logo, to capitalize on the patriotic themes of the Obama campaign. A move like that takes months and months, although it certainly didn't hurt that the company's new "look" matched up so neatly with a political brand that was sweeping the nation.

Anyway, you could chant the "Yes we can!" mantra of the Obama campaign, and in it hear the rallying cry of a movement, a nation, a lifestyle. "Yes we can!" We'd hear it over and over again, to where it went from being a call to action to a rallying cry to an affirmation. After a while, the O alone was enough to get the man's point across – so much so that in the week following his election, The New Yorker, the respected mainstay of the New York literary community, highlighted the O in its name on the magazine's cover over a simple illustration of the Lincoln Memorial to signify the historic moment. That just about said it all.

And so, in the space of one Presidential election cycle, you had an unassuming local politician pinch the initial O from another icon of the African-American community (sorry, Oprah!), and write his way into American history. It was a full-on movement, and on the back of it we managed to elect the first black President in our nation's history, but it happened in this methodical way, one stage at a time.

King of Pop Culture.

Timing is everything in the item-label-brand-lifestyle business, and this was illustrated in a full-on way with the sudden passing of Michael Jackson. I'm not out to beat on this great artist's reputation after he's gone, but even Michael's friends and family will cop to the fact that he went through some rough patches in his life before he died in June 2009 at the age of 50. He went back and forth between so many highs and lows it's like he was on that rollercoaster he used to keep at his Neverland ranch, and it just so happened that he was on an upswing when he checked out. In fact, judging from the rehearsal footage we all saw in *This is It*, the well-received documentary about the build-up to his final tour, it looked like Mike was back at the top of his game.

A side note: I was so moved by Michael Jackson's death that I wrote about it on my blog. I had some thoughts on Mike that didn't seem to fit anywhere else. "At first," I started out, "I was going to write my column on the amazing accomplishments Michael Jackson achieved during his brief life. I was planning to do this in an effort to educate the younger generation about why Mike was way more than just a singer and the reason the world is so stricken by the loss.

Those who seek true power should take time to re search and educate themselves on one of the last living legends this generation will ever see. I'm going to take it a bit further and talk about something else. As I try to wrap my mind around how to express in words what we are experiencing with the loss of this complex individual, I begin to understand that Michael was way more important in our lives than we have ever realized.

"This man was clearly the most recognizable face on the planet. Mike made us laugh, cry, fall in love, get over heartbreaks, wear weird clothes, get our freak on, and dance the night away! He made us dream of far-away places; he scared us with zombies; he made us face the truth about those who are poverty-stricken; he tried to save the planet and teach us that race is not black or white. He gave us a peek into an extravagant lifestyle of wealth, set records that other artists will forever attempt to break, created a standard of excellence in performance, showed us the face of unhappiness with the lengths to which he went under a knife, and generally made us question the price of fame.

"He was the butt of our jokes. He made us question if we should trust our kids with those we admire. He made us value the importance of having a childhood as we witnessed his anguish at having his snatched from him. He was the person at whom we could all point our fingers. "Forget the saying 'I want to be like Mike,'" I concluded. "When it came to Michael Jackson, it was 'I have a piece of Mike!'

There are very few people on this planet that don't have a piece of this man in their lives, whether by picture, song, article of clothing or the way he affected their environment and the music and entertainment they enjoy today. To an entire generation (and to the entire world for many, many years), Michael Jackson was EVERYTHING. And after all of that, once the dust settles, we will go on with our lives as if he was never here. Of course, we won't forget him. The music will live forever. But that feeling we had when he was on top of the world, or that feeling we had at his immeasurable lows... where will those feelings go? At the end of the day, all that will be left will be the songs future generations will dance to... or maybe not. After all, how often do we dance to the music of a previous generation?

"All of which takes me to this key question: How does a person who means EVERYTHING to us also mean NOTHING at the same time? I caught a post on Twitter that summed it up in just a few words: 'We enjoyed Michael's life more than he did.'" That's how his life and death touched me at the time of his passing, and I put it out there for all to see, but now, all these months later, I'm still thinking about it. His passing is illustrative, I think, and certainly relevant to our branding discussion. Look back at Michael's brilliant career, and you'll see that he went through each of these basic stages on his way to his iconic "King of Pop" status, first with his brothers, and later on by himself: item, label, brand, lifestyle... just like any other product or phenomenon.

All these years later, it feels like Michael magically burst on the scene as a fully-formed, fully-realized entertainment giant, but of course, that's not how it happened. He went through the motions, the same as everyone else. He went from being a talented little kid who could blow—an "item"—to a reliable, relatable, remarkable piece of the Motown machine that defined a certain scene and sound for so many of us at the end of the 1960s, the "label" period for the Jackson 5.

From there, with a series of hits and breakthrough appearances on shows like "American Bandstand" and "Soul Train," Michael and his brothers became a certifiable brand. (Hop onto eBay and you can still find a Jackson 5 lunchbox from that period, so you know these kids were making some serious moves!) By the time Michael's great "Off the Wall" and "Thriller" albums seeped all the way into our national consciousness, with those trademark videos and bass lines and dance moves, it was "lifestyle" time – big time, all the time, for all time.

Now, it's possible to look on Michael Jackson's life and career as an item-label-brand-lifestyle transformation in the extreme, but the compelling piece here is how he'll be remembered in the future. Like I said, Michael had some tough times, and as I write this it's probably a little too soon to assess what his enduring legacy might be, but there's no denying that in the days and weeks following his death he was vaulted onto the kind of pedestal we don't often see for our cultural icons. And it all had to do with when he died, don't you think? I mean, if Michael's untimely death had occurred when the storm of controversy surrounding some of

his questionable behavior was at its loudest, he might not have been treated as such a beloved or tragic figure. His memory might have been permanently tarnished – or at least painted in some lastingly negative way.

We tend to think of this type of brand-progression as a forward-going process, but there's some back-and-forth to it, too. Yeah, the idea is to move forward, to grow the public perception of whatever it is you're doing or making or selling in such a way that you make more and more of a dent in the consumer consciousness. But that's not always how it goes, and Michael Jackson stands as a powerful illustration of the ephemeral nature of the brand growth cycle.

Surely, if Michael's death had come at a different time, his memory might not have been so warmly or overwhelmingly embraced by so many different people, all over the world. Just as surely, there'd be no denying his gifts or his genius, but if things had played out another way, there might not have been any denying or setting aside of the controversy, either. And if he had lived to a ripe old age, never again reaching the heights he'd achieved as a young superstar, it's possible his memory might have simply faded to where his passing would have made hardly a ripple on the world stage. Something to think about.

Again, nothing against Michael and his family and his millions of fans. My heart goes out to them. Really. And yet for my money, the great lesson of Michael Jackson's life and death is this: our legacies can be flash-frozen, trumped up and highlighted by timing and circumstance. You can be seen one way one moment and another way the next and a whole bunch of different ways after that, but it's the last picture that tends to stick.

No question, Michael had been a great big deal for more than four decades. No question, his planned comeback could have been a great success, and Michael could have returned to the public stage bigger and better than ever. He was primed to be a great big deal all over again. But he hadn't been too current or relevant in a long while, and he'd fallen from grace and out of favor along the way.

The fact that he just happened to check out at the front-end of all those London concert dates, at a time when we were apparently ready to forgive or look past his failures and celebrate his accomplishments, set things up in such a way that Michael left us in a freeze-frame moment, thereby assuring that his enduring legacy, his music, his signature style and his boundless talents will be allowed to live on in the lifestyle-type ways he enjoyed when he was at the very peak of his career.

The preceding text is an excerpt from

The Brand Within: How We Brand Ourselves, From Birth To The Boardroom

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