

Anti-Americanism and the implications for marketing

Tom Woodnutt and **Fiona Jack**, Green Light International, examine the way anti-US sentiments can affect the global prospects of US brands

ACCORDING TO THE Pew Global Attitudes Survey from March 2003, favourable views of the US have dropped 27% since mid-2002 (1). In February 2003, more than a million people took to the streets of London, protesting against the US-led war in Iraq, accompanied by a further six million people in 600 cities throughout the world (2). Some sources also suggest that this discontent is affecting the fortunes of US brands. For example, Roper ASW found that only one US brand had increased its market strength in the last year, compared to nine non-American brands.

However, some 69% of the top 100 brands in the world are American (3) and 76% of the ticket sales from the top ten films in each of the last seven years have come from American productions (4). Similarly, 40% of the top ten best-selling singles from the 1990s were by US artists (5) and 36% of terrestrial TV dramas in 2001 were American productions (6). Britain consumes American cultural and economic products at a phenomenal rate, yet opinions of America are at an all-time low.

What are the implications of anti-American sentiment for marketing? To try to answer this, Green Light conducted a series of focus groups, a survey of around 600 people and an analysis of academic and media coverage on the subject. This was in addition to interviews with the UK advertising planners for key global American brands, and with trend experts. The results give cause for both concern and reassurance to the strategic guardians of American brands.

Apolitical consumerism

The good news for US brands is that, currently, most consumers remain apolitical in their purchasing decisions. This is largely down to the 'contradictory consumer' that the research identified. While some might resent America and certain US brands at an attitudinal level, Coca-Cola and Justin Timberlake are still top of the pops. As one respondent said: 'I am

very anti-McDonald's. It is terrible that I compromise that. I do not go to McDonald's all the time, but I will go there.'

This can be better understood by looking at recent attitude theory. From a discourse analytic perspective, attitudes are not considered, stable and consistent judgements. Instead, they are granted flexibility by emphasising the role that context plays in their determination: 'given different purposes or a different context a very different "attitude" may be espoused' (7). The same person can vocally condemn McDonald's for dietary reasons on Monday morning, while being willing to tuck into a Big Mac late on Friday night. Similarly, someone can resent Hollywood for stifling the British film industry, and poaching talent with its superior funding and distribution-led approach, while still appreciating *American Beauty*. Just because people adopt anti-American attitudes in one instance, it does not necessarily follow that these attitudes will guide their behaviour or be expressed in other situations.

Other factors increase the likelihood that people will remain apolitical in the way they buy things. First, consumption is often benefit-driven: you buy a drink

because you are thirsty. Political or ethical considerations are subordinated to more immediate concerns. Also, anti-American sentiment can lack intensity, so world politics get eclipsed by more everyday considerations. Finally, the idea of boycotting can seem futile when US brands are so ubiquitous.

The way US brands are marketed also makes this tendency to remain apolitical more likely. A brand can come from America without necessarily being associated with the 'negative' facets of the US. Laurence Green, head of planning at Fallon, works with US brands as diverse as Starbucks and Ben & Jerry's, and he makes the following distinction about US brands: 'Many US brands have become more than just America. For them "American-ness" is just a detail on their brand map, whereas for others it is central to it. There are brands from America and then there are American brands.'

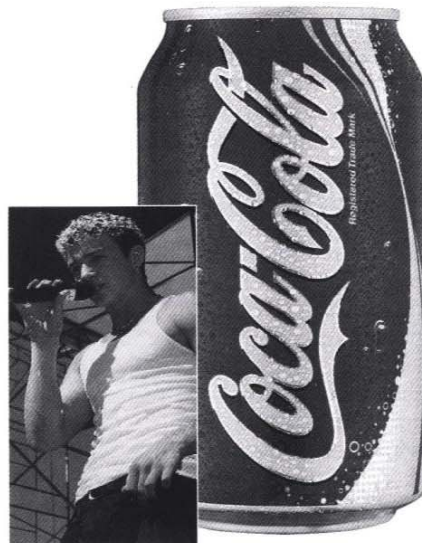
In other words, American heritage or ownership does not necessarily determine people's perceptions of a US brand. Ford, Heinz and Kellogg's are good examples of this, as they are US brands that are barely considered American in the UK. The way people identify with and consume US brands also makes it less likely that they suffer. George Bryant, head of planning at Abbott Mead Vickers, said: 'People appropriate American brands and make them their own. You can identify with American brands' values without necessarily identifying with America.'

In this way, consumers can appreciate what an American brand stands for without being influenced by negative associations that stem from its country of origin. This further reduces the likelihood that US brands get targeted.

So, does this tendency to remain apolitical mean that US brands can simply ignore anti-Americanism? A closer analysis reveals why this is not the case.

Cynicism

We found that anti-Americanism is underpinned by an increasingly wide-▶



Justin Timberlake and Coke: still top of the pops

spread trend of cynicism. From a cynical mindset various facets of America are more likely to be judged as lacking integrity, whether these be certain US brands, US policies or US values. This cynicism contributed to some people's unwillingness to accept the US and UK governments' justifications for the war in Iraq, as people simply refused to trust the reasons given, instead suspecting them of being driven by ulterior motives.

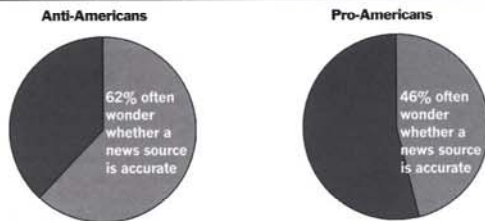
The link between cynicism and anti-Americanism is reinforced by the survey finding that the more anti-American someone is, the less likely they are to trust the UK government and media. Of consumers with mostly negative feelings towards America, 62% often wonder about whether a news source is accurate or not. Only 11% of them 'trust the UK government to do what is right most of the time' compared to 46% and 37% of the 'pro-Americans' respectively (Figures 1 and 2).

People are more informed, and more cynical, than ever before. This is largely attributable to the increased availability of information that undermines the integrity of various institutions. With the media's willingness to expose government and corporate dishonesty, people are now much more likely to question their agendas and trustworthiness. The success of books such as *No Logo*, *Fast Food Nation* and *Stupid White Men* has spread ideas that deepen this tendency. With the rise of the internet, access to, and propagation of, this type of information has also escalated. The result has been that, over time, society as a whole has become less willing to trust government, brands and marketing in general. This cynicism and tendency to question agendas is empowering for people because it makes them feel less like ignorant and manipulated victims and more like aware and autonomous individuals.

The pervasiveness of cynicism is something that some companies have started to acknowledge. Neil Hourston, head of planning at TBWA said: 'Companies are becoming more and more aware of the fact that a lie, or an untruth of some description, will be found out. And, increasingly, will think twice about saying something that is not entirely true.'

FIGURE 1

How often do you wonder whether news stories are accurate?



The empowered cynic

How does this apply to consumerism? This new breed of consumer can be described as the 'empowered cynic', who feels empowered through knowledge and cynicism. The empowered cynic feels more like a master of consumerism than a victim of it. In today's consumer society, people are willing to pay a premium for a particular brand that provides them with a degree of reassurance and confidence. However, they do not want to feel like victims of the relationship, as if marketing and advertising have somehow manipulated them. Instead, most people prefer to feel like masters of it, through a cynical awareness that a brand's ultimate agenda is to make money, as well as their knowledge that they can always exercise their rights as a consumer and choose a competitor.

Brands that acknowledge the empowered cynic by treating consumers as autonomous and discerning individuals whose attention they need to earn, as opposed to passive and easily manipulated walking target audiences, are more likely to be identified with and therefore consumed. So, advertising that engages people at aesthetic and comical levels is more likely to work than more typical, patronising approaches, which seem to work on the assumption that a product shot, smiling model and snappy end-line are enough to convince people to part with their money. By making the effort to appeal to individuals through creative marketing, brands are implicitly acknowledging that power lies with consumers, because they are actually

making the effort to understand and please them, and communicating this through their advertising.

The importance of brand integrity

In the face of so much cynicism, communicating 'brand integrity' at both marketing and business operations levels becomes of paramount importance and can be a positively differentiating brand attribute. After scandals and exposés involving global US companies, American brands need to work even harder to win people's trust and be perceived as operating with integrity. But what is brand integrity?

Brand integrity can work at various levels, but ultimately involves functioning with a consistency between what a brand claims to be about through its marketing and how it is experienced by consumers. This could mean advertising in ways that acknowledge how consumers really see a brand (for example, Skoda and Super Noodles). In so doing, the brand is acknowledging the discernment of the empowered cynic and is more likely to gain their trust and appreciation than if it were merely to project some unbelievable ideal of how it wants consumers to see it.

George Bryant, head of planning at AMV said: 'Brand integrity is about being true to what you are in the eyes of your audience.' Achieving brand integrity through synchrony between marketing and experience requires consistency throughout a company. As Neil Hourston said, 'Brand integrity is about

living a promise. Making sure your values are true to the company as a whole.'

The importance of local sensitivity

Another feature of anti-American sentiment is the tendency to resent certain reminders of US supremacy and the notion that the US is trying to impose the American way of life onto the rest of the world. This can be in terms of the 'McDonaldisation' of the world through globalism, or even the propagation of democracy and free-market economics through militarism and unfair trade arrangements.

US brands that ignore individuals' need to be treated as if they are discerning do so at their own risk. From the qualitative phase of the research, it became clear that some US-style advertising fails to do that. One consumer described 'typical US advertising' as being 'that typical, cheesy American family with shiny white teeth eating apple pie. It is like they are telling us "This is what you want", "This is what you should be like." Like "Gillette - the best a man can get" - as if you have to have this as part of your life.'

US advertising that rides roughshod over individuality and cultural differences, projecting an 'American ideal' of how people should be, is likely to fall foul of the more negative side of people's feelings towards America. This is particularly relevant to global US brands whose supremacy is highly obvious (for example, Starbucks and McDonald's).

Accordingly, American brands need to try even harder to communicate integrity

and treat consumers as discerning and sophisticated, rather than passive and controllable. Their advertising has to be sensitive to local culture and individual discernment, and their business practices should support the local area. In this way, consumers are more likely to identify with and trust these brands and view them as having greater integrity, thus increasing the likelihood of their appropriation.

'Some US brands can be like bad tourists,' said Becky Barry, planning director on McDonald's at Leo Burnett. 'They come over here without understanding the language. They have got bad dubbing, bad ads, bad packaging and do not feel as though they fit. McDonald's did a lot to become part of Britain. Through its advertising it carefully tried to understand British culture and become part of the community. The 1990s were their most successful decade, in part as a result of that. McDonald's went from being a tourist to a citizen.'

The future

Several factors affect the likelihood that anti-Americanism will lead to more mainstream political consumerism in the future. These include:

- ▶ people's perceptions and media representations of US foreign policy
- ▶ exposure to anti-American arguments and the availability of substitutes to US brands
- ▶ perceptions of how worthwhile boycotting is as an expression of this sentiment.

The future of American brands can also be influenced by opinion formers.



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Trends expert Sean Pillot de Chenecey (aka Captain Crikey) says: 'There is the notion that 5% of culture leads the rest of it. Now if the opinion-formers are harbouring anti-American sentiment and therefore avoiding the likes of Nike, that can have a drip-on effect. So, further down the line, although style and cost might still be the highest ranking factors behind a purchase decision, ethical and political considerations could become more relevant.'

The fate of anti-Americanism is largely in the hands of those behind US foreign policy. Its relevance to US brands is largely in the hands of those marketing them.

People are currently apolitical in the majority of purchasing decisions. However, the more the US administration is seen to be acting without integrity and imposing its will, the more likely it is that people will both seek out and be supplied with information that further undermines US integrity. This feeds a self-perpetuating spiral of cynicism and anti-Americanism. If, as a result of this, the US is condemned with sufficient intensity and boycotting is viewed as a worthwhile expression of this resentment, then avoidance of US brands could become a more mainstream behaviour.

For the moment, as long as a can of Coke is still fizzy and the price doesn't change, most consumers are unlikely to take out their resentment of American supremacy on American brands - but for how long? ■

1. Pew Research Center: America's Image Further Erodes, Europeans Want Weaker Ties. 18 March 2003.
2. D Nosowicz: Marching Facts and Figures. The Guardian Observer, 16 February 2003.
3. The Top 100 brands - Special Report. Business Week, 08 October 2003.
4. Based on UK film box office figures (1996-2002) provided by Dodona
5. BBC-Online March 2003: Best Selling Singles from the 1990s.
6. Based on UK TV viewing data (2001) provided by DGA.
7. J Potter and M Wetherell: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour. Discourse and Social Psychology, Sage Publications, 1999.

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FIGURE 2

How often do you trust the UK government to do what is right?

