

The Trickster: myth and magic in great ads

Peter Cooper and Simon Patterson, CRAM International, demonstrate that there is a potent archetype lurking in much great advertising

THE TRICKSTER is one of the world's great archetypes, present in art, religion, politics, entertainment and great advertising. Great advertising employs the Trickster to entice, persuade and seduce. We are all, in spite of our rational defences, subject to the Trickster. It goes beyond the purely rational, to connect with our deeper emotional, social and cultural selves. Here we review the Trickster – 'Delight Maker' or 'Divine Joker' – and its special relevance to modern advertising. And, not least, how market research can grasp it.

Trickster origins

The Trickster archetype is that part of ourselves that secretly desires the fantastic, exaggeration, seduction and escape from the mundanities of life. It is older and more primitive than modern logic, order and rationality, hovering on the borders of the personal and collective unconscious. In neuro-physical terms, it is buried deep in the brain's limbic system where primitive feelings lie, in contrast to the rational workings of the cerebral cortex.

The Trickster is the master of flux, perpetuating old illusions and creating new ones. It breaks taboos, stretches the mind and challenges the limits of belief. The Trickster represents the oppositions and contradictions of life; how we deceive ourselves that we are rational when we are not. Its myth and magic are integral to human behaviour.

The role of the Trickster is well documented in psychological and anthropological literature. Jung identified the Trickster – or 'Divine Joker' – as his fourth archetype along with Mother, Rebirth and Spirit. Trickster figures exist in all cultures as shaman, sorcerer,



magician, fool, clown, joker, jester, harlequin and enchanter. It occurs in all mythologies. In Greece and Rome, Hermes/Mercury, god of commerce, profit and persuasion; in Hebraic culture, Jacob; in Norse myths, Loki, co-creator of the world; among the Ashanti of Ghana, Anansi, the spider-trickster; in Japan, Susano, who plunged the world into darkness by mistake; in Polynesia, Maui, who captured the sun to slow it down; among the Indians of North America, 'Wakdjunka' – 'the tricky one'.

All these myths have one thing in common: they teach what is outside the bounds of consciousness which research can often miss. The Trickster passes messages from our psychic selves, guiding us, just as with modern advertising. It appears particularly at moments of transition in the interplay between reality and fantasy, during change and life-stage crises. We see it at work when consumers

switch brands, buy on impulse and change routines in the supermarket. During this intermediate state, the mind is open, creative and susceptible.

The prince of Tricksters is Hermes, son of Zeus. As god of commerce and persuasion, he was the messenger of the gods. He received a magic wand, the 'caduceus', that could inspire and dumbfound whomever it touched. As Homer wrote of Hermes: 'He mazes the eyes of those mortals he would maze, or wakes again the sleepers' – not a far cry from great advertising. Symbolised by wings on feet and helmet, he became the god of movement. Not surprisingly, Hermes is the uncrowned prince of modern advertising.

The Trickster archetype is at once moral and immoral, good and evil, earthly and divine, outrageous and subtle, mischievous and primitive, infantile but wise, deceptive but wondrous, self-centred yet insightful. It combines these conflicting impulses in ourselves and our relationships with brands. This ubiquity accounts for its fascination and its power.

Trickster now

In the modern world, the Trickster is present in virtually every aspect of human activity. It appears in film, video, cartoons, advertising – all forms of communication, including research interviews. The filmic form and visual-verbal devices are important tools of the Trickster, now that the visual image is such a dominant mode of communication and persuasion. A classic is 'Batman', where the Trickster is both the Batman and the Joker. Bruce Wayne, innocent and bemused, is transformed into a super-hero, the positive Trickster, a black 'bat' with ➡

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amazing powers, charged with repelling the forces of evil. Jack Nicholson, the white-faced, green-haired Joker, is the evil side of the Trickster.

Other characters play important parts in Trickster stories, like Batman's 'guardian angel' (Alfred, the butler), a fair damsel (Vicki Vale), the forces of good (the Mayor and the Police Commissioner), and a chorus of evil (the Joker's henchmen).

Many public figures are 'tricksterish':

- In sport, Eric Cantona, Maradona, David Beckham, Muhammad Ali
- In music, David Bowie, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Marilyn Manson.
- In entertainment, Charlie Chaplin, Mr Bean, Ali G, Chris Evans.

Theatre and film breed new Trickster expressions, as do luxury, fashion and the arts. Illusions are commonplace, distorting, confusing and pleasing to the senses. In science, too, the Trickster is at work. Placebos are the Tricksters of medicine, creating effects well beyond pharmaceutically active ingredients.

Politics abounds with Tricksters, supported by their shamans or 'spin doctors'. George W Bush, Tony Blair and William Hague all have tricksterish qualities compacted into their public image. 'Tricksterishness' is part of political charisma – we know they do not quite mean what they say, but they engage us none the less.

The difference between the Trickster's role in the past and now is that the Trickster was more overt, a way of understanding and learning about the world. Today, the Trickster helps us cope with the pace of modern, digital, dehumanised life. It makes life 'fun'. Since brands and advertising are the secular equivalent of religion, we need the Trickster to make sense of the complex, time-driven world.

The Trickster creates heroes and then causes their downfall. Powerful tales – Hercules, Odysseus, King Arthur, Ziggy Stardust – describe the hero's rise and fall.



Above: Hermes, 'uncrowned prince of advertising' (Giambologna, 16th century)

- Heroes are often born from humble origins, show early signs of superhuman powers, rise rapidly to prominence and struggle triumphantly against evil.
- The hero invariably has a 'guardian' – the Trickster – who protects, guides and helps him perform tasks that cannot be done unaided – Merlin for Arthur, Alfred for Batman, 'Q' for James Bond.
- With all this success, heroes become over-confident and fall from grace, betrayed by hubris and the people they came to save.

This parallels the life cycles of brands and advertising.

- They often come from humble origins, show early promise and triumph over competition, often with the aid of a Trickster ingredient or 'USP'.
- They too over-reach themselves and are betrayed – frequently by their own management, then by consumers.

Marketing history is littered with brands that were once hero Tricksters of their time such as Rinso, Fry's chocolate and Austin cars. Each market has its own

graveyard of fallen famous brands and the future will see more.

Trickster advertising

We have noted the presence of the Trickster in many advertising studies. The Trickster often takes on an animal form, as in ancient cultures. Our continued fascination with the half-animal, half-human is clear in Disney characters, cartoons, and a multitude of anthropomorphic Tricksters in advertising. These range from past advertising, like PG Tips' chimps and Esso's tiger, through to more modern examples like Budweiser frogs, Peperami, Boddington's cow, Motorola's tortoise. The Trickster exploits the primitive power of animals within us. This was a favourite device of storytelling in native American cultures, where the Trickster was portrayed as coyote or raven, performing amazing and extraordinary sexual feats. Elsewhere it is monkey, hare, fox, spider, bat, chameleon, fish, bird or dragon, again with fantastical appearances and magical properties, or a human with animal mask or clothes. Physiognomy and phrenology are critical to the Trickster – the brand's inner character is expressed through outward appearances.

The Trickster regularly appears in

'The Trickster creates heroes and then causes their downfall'

exaggerated human form, like Levi's Flat Eric, PlayStation's Alien, the Metz 'Judder', or super-human figures like Pirelli's Carl Lewis. The brand takes on their playful or serious image, suspending disbelief. Nowadays, too, we see the Trickster bringing machines alive, as in Thomas the Tank Engine and Bob the Builder.

Modern advertising incorporates the Trickster's oppositions or conflicts. In the 'good' role, the Trickster brand is saviour and hero, as in household and



personal care, or OTC medicines. In the 'bad' role, it represents the enemies – dirt, sickness or sheer boredom. The Trickster recognises the complexities and dualities of modern life: we are neither good nor bad, but both at the same time, composites of happy and sad, hero and rogue. This increases credibility and empathy, e.g. Kronenbourg 'menage à trois', the Mars 'Man' whose partner leaves him, and examples like those in Oxo and Bisto advertising.

The Trickster makes great use of irony. In medieval times, the Fool's Pope satirised papal pomp at the Ass's Festival. The congregation brayed like asses and the more ridiculous the noise the more this 'pleasurable blasphemy' was celebrated. Humour and irony permeated the Trickster's antics. The same is true in the modern world, as we satirise, caricature, and lampoon our leaders and institutions. Modern advertising is rife with satire and irony, including satire directed at itself and the brand being advertised, for instance Tango, and the famous parody by Carling Black Label of Levi's 'Laundrette'. Instead of claiming to be absolute authorities on

their product area, successful Trickster brands are almost 'therapeutic', recognising popular hopes and fears. Focus groups themselves have been satirised, as in Rover's 'rejected by focus groups' ad, and in New Labour politics.

The Trickster manipulates our minds in many ways, for example, by bringing elements into the foreground, marking, emphasising, stressing and contrasting, and creating new visual and linguistic structures. It is also accomplished at 'backgrounding' – making the background to pictures seem to disappear from attention. Yet we know background or context play crucial parts in subliminal communication, working below attention thresholds. The set, props and music are all critical to creating mood, style and involvement. These are the 'silent' Trickster persuaders.

The Trickster has always been master of illusion. Modern film techniques, pop videos and music change cause and effect, and create new concepts of space and time. The modern Trickster uses advanced techniques of illusion (e.g. Peugeot 406 where we 'see' the driver's emotions and memories, Stephen

Hawking 'Specsavers', Volvo 'Babies'), just as Hermes' caduceus 'mazes the eyes' and 'wakes again the sleepers'.

Degrees of Tricksterism

Brands and ads vary in their degree of 'Tricksterishness'. Some ads offer little beyond overt information. There is little of the Trickster in this – maybe a touch of exaggeration. At the other extreme, the Trickster can make advertising obscure and unrecognisable to most. An example a few years ago was Rutger Hauer in 'It's not easy being a dolphin' – Guinness commercials that left most consumers bewildered and frustrated, but meant a lot to 'insiders'. Some pop video forms have the same effect. What is important is that their consumers struggle to understand because they enjoy the challenge, eg Bowie and Peter Gabriel, or Pot Noodle's 'Ace of Spades'. Between the extremes the Trickster works at shallow or deep levels, the former more transparent and playful, the latter more demanding, and more effective as a result.

The Trickster also exploits different media, as outlined below.

- Cinema – there is a detached-from-reality experience in the cinema for the Trickster to appear on screen and from within ourselves, playing in the darkness.
- TV – the TV is a 'companion in the living room', enabling the Trickster to enter our lives, sometimes by stealth as defences lower, sometimes through sheer entertainment. It is at the transition between programmes, and between work and leisure.
- Posters – the Trickster is strikingly present, to attract attention through verbal and visual tricks.
- Magazines – mental involvement through reading allows the Trickster to emerge through the pages of ads, using the principles of eye movement and the halo effects of editorial.
- Internet – here the Trickster is still embryonic, but has already shown his power in dot.coms and 'dot.gones'. We may expect more Tricksters online.

Creativity

The Trickster can be discerned in ad agencies. Like shamans, creatives engage in mysterious rituals. Their thoughts emerge from dark recesses, only ➡



Above: The Trickster has always been a master of illusion (painting by Carlo Maria Mariani, // *Mano Ubbidisco all'Intelletto*, 1987)



Above: Like shamans, creatives engage in mysterious rituals

recognised when they appear. They respond strongly to competition, as does the Trickster. Deadlines force out ideas. They have an intense conviction they are right and need an audience, chiefly their own kind, to praise and award. They resist control and research, for fear it will strangle their creations.

Creatives have a priestly quality about them, and once fed with research and marketing objectives, emerge with creative executions. Their aim is to stretch consumer credulity in as compelling a way as possible, just like the Trickster. Much of what these modern-day shamans do is not deliberate, but draws on unconscious ideas, fuelled by contacts with the Trickster within themselves.

What can we learn from this? Great Trickster advertising:

- Transforms ordinary 'stuff' into something extraordinary, a brand; the physical product is entwined with symbols and meanings so the real and created worlds are as one
- Breaks taboos and conventions; the Trickster deliberately pushes, questions and extends the boundaries of logic and rationality
- Fascinates and compels; we know we are being sold to, but we also need to enjoy our irrational selves; we become accomplices to our own seduction
- Is at the same time childish and adult, simple and complex, foolish and serious, exaggerated yet practical; the Trickster is satirical, including satire on itself.

Consumers respond negatively to slick, bland, predictable ads from faceless corporations. They prefer ads that create new rules. This is precisely what great Trickster ads do – they break the rules and create new ones, where the Trickster works by stealth, or is so outrageous as to be acceptable. There is undeniable mystery here, but such ads are intrinsically motivating, playful and engaging. This is not to say that all ads that break the rules are effective, since they can also be deceptive, subverting the brand's values. How the Trickster is used depends on the brand, category and target market, but its presence is necessary to achieve great advertising.

The Trickster in market research

The Trickster is central to the creative processes in advertising. However, it is difficult, complex (and slippery) for market research to access and capture. The Trickster is also at work in research interviews as interviewers, consciously or unconsciously, influence the data they collect, respondents lie, invent or create 'worthy' responses, and clients engage in self-deception, wittingly or unwittingly, when interpreting data. This is why there are so many criticisms of advertising research. They apply methods that cannot 'see' the Trickster. Due to the mindset in such tests, the Trickster elements are destroyed in favour of rational claims, which are often dull or bland, lacking persuasive power.

For research, the Trickster presents a challenge. It is clearly wrong to use methods that cannot recognise it. Data collection and analysis – quantitative and qualitative – must be freed of the constraints of rationality or prejudice, and use approaches appropriate for detecting Trickster effects. For example, freer, more open interviewing, fun and playfulness, identifying the negatives of slickness and blandness, patterns of unconscious Trickster effects that go beyond superficial appearance. All this, of course, in the context of the brand and its vision.

The future

The Trickster has a long history, and will continue to appear in different guises in the future with new media, brands and advertising to delight us. In fact in our view, the Trickster will become

increasingly important, as brands move from functionality to emotion. Branding and advertising appeal to our desires to be enticed, convinced and seduced, in spite of our rational defences. We are seeing a shift towards increasingly high consumer expectations of advertising.

The consequences of the Trickster are:

- Creativity in marketing, branding and advertising has more opportunity to express itself than may be suspected
- Specific Trickster mechanisms – anthropomorphism, illusion, irony – can be developed to achieve greater effect
- Research methods, quantitative and qualitative, must acknowledge the Trickster in data collection and interpretation.

The upshot is a compelling model of the modern consumer mind, by which we can obtain a deeper understanding of brands and great advertising. ■

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