

Mara EINSTEIN

The Evolution of Religious Branding

Religious marketing has risen substantially over the past two decades due to a confluence of societal changes, notably the freedom to determine one's faith and the ubiquity of mass media with its concomitant advertising. Specifically, branding—a marketing tool whereby a product is given an identity beyond its physical attributes or services—is now being employed by an increasing number of Churches. Two recent branding campaigns—one by the Church of Scientology, the other by the United Methodist Church—provide case studies of how Churches are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their use of marketing. Beyond simply promoting their products, these campaigns use branding to solve multiple marketing issues, from improving a sagging public reputation to re-positioning traditional denominations.

Key words: branding · consumer culture · marketing · religion · Scientology · United Methodist Church

Le phénomène du marketing du religieux s'en va en croissant depuis deux décennies, en lien avec certains changements sociétaux, dont l'emphase sur la liberté à déterminer sa foi et l'omniprésence des médias de masse et de la publicité. Plus spécifiquement, de plus en plus d'Églises ont actuellement recours au branding—un outil de marketing qui permet d'attribuer une identité à un produit au-delà de ses attributs physiques ou utilitaires. Deux campagnes récentes fondées sur le branding, l'une par l'Église de Scientology, l'autre par l'Église Méthodiste Unie, constituent des cas pour l'étude du degré de sophistication atteint par le marketing du religieux. Au-delà de la simple promotion de leurs produits, ces campagnes utilisent le branding afin de régler divers problèmes de marketing, tels que l'amélioration d'une réputation mise à mal ou le repositionnement des confessions traditionnelles.

Mots-clés: branding · Église de Scientology · Église Méthodiste Unie · marketing · religion, société de consommation

Religious institutions learned to promote themselves in response to the “spiritual marketplace”, a phenomenon named by Roof (1999). This marketplace arose due to a confluence of social changes: work replaced church as a place for social connection; in the cultural upheaval of the 1960s religion moved from being ascribed to being attained, as baby boomers widely rejected the faith of their families; by the 1990s religious consumers (or “seekers”) could learn about and sample an expanded range of spiritual alternatives provided via cable TV and the Internet (Einstein, 2008).

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Within this environment, seekers reject traditional Churches for more opportune practices or “shop” for a religious institution that meets their needs.¹ This market-oriented mentality is fueled by a consumer culture that has trained Americans to expect products and services to be convenient, entertaining and customized to fit their needs. Congregations responded to these expectations with marketing.² Using marketing is not new (Finke and Iannaccone, 1993; Moore, 1994); the extent and sophistication of its use is. Churches have revised their “product” (shorter, more entertaining services), provided a menu of services (12-step groups, networking classes), and employed focus groups and surveys to learn the needs of their congregants.

Fundamental to these newer marketing initiatives is religious branding. Branding changes a commodity into a named product that consumers readily remember and have particular associations with. Through a combination of symbols, language, and mythology, branding provides information to shoppers with the intention of increasing awareness, changing perceptions, or generating sales. “Faith brands” like the Alpha Course and name-brand pastors like Joel Osteen are examples of religious branding (Einstein, 2008).

The next step in the evolution of religious marketing is the use of branding to meet organizational objectives, from improving a sagging public reputation to re-vitalizing traditional denominations. Two campaigns launched in the spring of 2009—one by the Church of Scientology, the other by the United Methodist Church—provide insightful case studies.

1. Why Advertise Scientology?

Scientology is a set of beliefs created by science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard.³ Scientologists are encouraged to relive painful experiences in order to release them, a practice known as auditing. Donations are paid for these auditing sessions and for study materials, such as Hubbard’s book *Dianetics*.

The Church of Scientology is in the midst of a growth initiative. Over the last five years, it has doubled the number of churches and missions, and over the last two years, it has distributed nearly 70 million books and lectures by the Church’s founder. Two new church-owned facilities have increased publishing capacity to more than 500,000 books and more than 900,000 CDs weekly. Expansion continued into 2010 as Hubbard’s entire library of works and previously unproduced audio lectures were made available (Beccaccini, n.d.).

A media relations person I spoke with said that the advertising campaign was in support of this initiative only. In a report on Wired.com, however, another spokesperson stated that the campaign was in part a response to public attacks by an Internet-based protest group called Anonymous (Singel, 2009).

In January 2008, a video of Tom Cruise pontificating on Scientology was leaked to the press.⁴ The Church claimed copyright infringement and threatened to bring lawsuits against websites that presented the video. In response, Anonymous began a negative PR campaign against Scientology. In March 2009, KESQ produced a multi-segment investigative report about the feud. Three months later, the *St. Petersburg Times* printed a three-part report that, like the KESQ pieces, contained allegations of physical abuse but also included reports of illegal activity,

notably destroying incriminating evidence to cover up the Church's complicity in the death of Lisa McPherson, "a Scientologist who died after they held her 17 days in isolation at Clearwater's Fort Harrison Hotel" (Childs and Tobin, 2009).

1.1 The Campaign

The Church of Scientology launched a multi-million-dollar advertising campaign in May 2009 called "Scientology: Know Yourself—Know Life." A series of TV ads appeared on 36 cable channels in the U.S. including MTV, ESPN2, Discovery, and CNN. These commercials, plus flash and text ads, also ran online (Scientology, 2009).⁵

The campaign consists of three commercials entitled "You", "Search", and "Life." The ads are elaborately produced using beautiful, softly lit photography, numerous edits, a gravelly male voiceover, and "New Age" music that swells toward the end of the spots when "scIENTOLOGY.org" appears on the screen. These 60-second commercials (long by industry standards) use a combination of blue and brown hues as well as black and white photography, the combination of which gives them the feel of an upscale car commercial and makes them compelling to watch. The people in the ads (and there are many) are of a variety of races and appear to be in their 20s and 30s, marrying up with the target audience of 18–36-year-olds (W. Beccaccini personal e-mail, December 31, 2009).

Each ad has a slightly different communication, but the key message is: your (young) life is not okay; Scientology can change that, or "Scientology has answers for life in the here and now" (Beccaccini, 2009). For example, the copy for "You" reads:

You are not your name.
You're not your job.
You're not the clothes you wear or the neighborhood you live in.
You're not your fears your failures or your past.
You are hope.
You are imagination.
You are the power to change, to create, and to grow.
You are a spirit that will never die.
And no matter how beaten down,
you will rise again.
Scientology: Know Yourself, Know Life

This is problem/solution advertising, like that used for laundry detergent or weight-loss products. Unlike those ads, however, these do not explain what Scientology is or how it will achieve its claims. Rather, they direct viewers to scIENTOLOGY.org.

At the website, the first thing visitors see are words scrolling on a video player in the middle of the screen. They say, in part:

It has been attacked, venerated, questioned, and praised ...
Its followers number in the millions ...
Actors, musicians and other artists are passionate about its benefit ...
It is in the news. It is talked about in the media, TV and worldwide web.
What is Scientology? Whatever you may or may not have heard concerning Scientology, we present the following as a brief overview of our beliefs, who we are, what we do and the many humanitarian programs sponsored by our Church.

When the video ends, the screen divides into three sections in which the visitor can replay the video, purchase a book, or view a biography of Hubbard. Also on the home page are a box to the left of the video player which provides a definition of Scientology and another on the right which contains information about getting a catalog of products. Along the bottom of the page are links to other Scientology information, including three hours of video content.

1.2 Analysis

Given the communication in the ads and on the website, this campaign is a combination of a sales and a branding message. The sales message directs consumers to the website, similar to techniques used by televangelists like Joel Osteen or Creflo Dollar. In addition, the campaign works as a branding effort, meant to position Scientology as hip, upscale, and mainstream by providing new symbols (young people replace Tom Cruise) and a new tagline.

The Church claims that more than 14 million people visited the *scIENTOLOGY.org* website between May and December 2009. While we cannot verify that number, according to *Alexa.com* the number of site visitors did double in the months following the campaign.⁶ The majority (42 per cent) got to the site via doubleclick, that is, saw the ads online and clicked on them in order to get to the site. Moreover, the visitors sent to the site indexed as being in the 18–24 age range.

Based on these analyses, the campaign was successful in achieving its objective of driving traffic to the site. But because branding is a long-term strategy, it cannot yet be determined whether it changed public perceptions and attitudes about Scientology.

2. Why Advertise the United Methodist Church?

The United Methodist Church (UMC) is the second largest Protestant denomination in the United States and has more than 11.5 million members internationally. Like most moderate (and liberal) Protestant denominations, UMC is experiencing a membership decline. According to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, membership decreased by 27 per cent between 1965 and 2005, although this descent has slowed as membership declined by only 3 per cent between 2000 and 2005 (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, n.d.).

A recent study “shows that 7 out of 10 regular churchgoers in the United States would be at least ‘somewhat open’ to switching denominations if they could no longer attend their current church” (Ellison, 2009). Churchgoers lack “brand loyalty” because denominations no longer act as brands, something they once did. Instead, churches have increasingly become nondenominational (Einstein, 2008). Even in denominational churches, this identity is not promoted. As Karen Smith of Ginghamburg Church, a Methodist church in Tipp City, Ohio, said, “Including United Methodist in our church name does not help prospective attendees achieve a clearer picture as to who Ginghamburg is and what we are all about” (Jacobs, 2009). This quote demonstrates the fundamental issues facing denominations: churches are looking to attract seekers (prospective attendees) and, in this case, “Methodist” does not have an identified brand that aids in attracting them.

Moreover, according to research commissioned by UMC, “66 percent of young adults surveyed were searching for meaning and purpose in their lives and 62 percent considered themselves ‘spiritual’.” However, church was not where they were looking to fill this void, as “78 percent said they never attend church, or only attend once in a while.” Thus, the campaign’s goal was to communicate to young people that there are a number of introductory ways to get into the Church which may not mean physically going into the building.

2.1 The Campaign

In May 2009, the UMC launched “Rethink Church” with a reported budget of \$20 million over four years. This advertising was the latest step in the Church’s “Igniting Ministry” campaign that began in 2001 with the tagline “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors,” which remains the brand line for UMC. The advertising consists of more than a dozen 15-second commercials, which appeared on cable networks such as TLC, Animal Planet, and Discovery and on broadcast programs, notably on *American Idol*, according to Kerry Graham, president of Bohan, the advertising agency responsible for the campaign (personal interview, January 4, 2010). Ads also appeared online (on Google, YouTube, and Facebook, among others), in magazines (*Newsweek*, *National Geographic*, *Parents*, and *Good*) and on radio (Ryan Seacrest).

“Rethink Church” targets 18–34-year-olds for whom organized religion has become irrelevant. Using “non-church language,” the ads use “positive landmines” to attract young people to UMC by inviting them to look at the institution with fresh eyes. These “landmines” are issues like Darfur, the theology of ecology, and homelessness. As an example, the commercial called “Tents of Hope” opens with a light-blue wooden door in front of a tent city outside the Capital building in Washington, D.C. The picture fades to black, then fades up on a hand painting a palm print on a tent. A female voiceover says, “What if church was a chance for your voice to be heard on Darfur? Would you come?” The camera pans through the tents, shows a young woman erecting a tent, and finishes with a group of about 20 people amassed in front of the completed tent. The commercial ends (as they all do) with a mosaic of doors of various colors morphing into a single red door and the UMC logo with the “open hearts” line, followed by the tagline, “Rethink Church at 10thousand doors dot org.”

This commercial outlines the template for the campaign. A brightly colored door appears at the beginning of the spot situated within a static visual related to the issue being addressed. There is a question about the issue and then the question “Would you come?”. While most issues are serious (literacy programs for homeless children, ecology, malaria and AIDS), some are more light-hearted such as the one about skateboarding (“What if church was a real social network?”) and basketball (“What if church was a sports program?”). The ads finish with the call to action to go to the website (www.10thousanddoors.org).

The site is visually striking with a black background covered by many boxes framed in white, which are titled with large white type placed next to different-colored doors. The areas include larger sections labeled NOW (twitter feeds), WATCH (video player where you can view the ads), LISTEN (audio player), and TALK (discussion forums) and smaller boxes for US (information on UMC), FIND (ways to help others), and GO/DO (ways to give).

2.2 Analysis

While the ads are arresting (the door incongruously in the middle of the shot creates cognitive dissonance), the communication can be confusing: not the commercials themselves, which use limited copy, but rather the last frame, which contains the multiple taglines of “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.” *and* “Rethink Church” *and* “10 thousanddoors.org.” This is because the ads are trying to bring people to Christ (whether they come to UMC or not) *and* promote UMC. As Kerry Graham has said, “Christianity is really the brand [...] The denominations are sub-brands” (Jacobs, 2009). In traditional advertising, the strategy of bringing people to a category is appropriate if you are the leader in the category. For example, Coca-Cola can get people to drink more soda and by default people will drink more Coca-Cola. UMC is not in that position. Moreover, because they are not in that position, they have to brand themselves individually. This creates a tug-of-war between evangelizing and branding which acts to obscure the message and is reflected in the numerous taglines as well as the different visual styles between the TV commercials and the website.

Bringing young people to UMC through “good works” is a good strategy. A recent study by the National Conference on Citizenship noted that today’s 18–34-year-olds are more likely to be volunteer-oriented than their predecessors (NCOC, 2009). In addition, Bohan found in their research that this group is looking to “give back.” But, they also wonder “Are other people doing this?” By showing young people various ways in which they can help and presenting ways to do so in community makes sense for a traditional denomination, as service is a part of traditional church “mythology.”

3. Conclusion

The Church of Scientology says that the objective of its campaign is to answer the question “What is Scientology?” While this may be true, it is also true that the organization is an incorporated centralized institution whose ultimate objective is to sell L. Ron Hubbard books and CDs. In a three-page, bullet-pointed fact sheet, only two bullet points address membership. The rest highlight international property holdings and renovations, book sales (including mention of the updated publishing facilities), DVD sales and live events (Church of Scientology International, 2009). Thus, “Know Yourself—Know Life” is a not simply an awareness campaign. It is a hip, elaborately produced, integrated branding campaign meant to improve a negative public perception in order to drive sales.

In contrast, the issues faced by the UMC are more complex and reflect the problems faced by an older, established institution that must answer to a variety of stakeholders. One issue is that the denomination can try to control the message, but they do not manage the “product” on the local level. For example, Wal-Mart is the same no matter what store you go to, but each UMC church will have its own personality and that fights against the image an advertising campaign attempts to create. In addition, because of its spiritual commitment, the UMC believes they are required to promote Christianity and not just the UMC. Trying to advertise a category *and* a brand is no easy task. However, it will be important for them to

have a distinguishing brand as the category becomes smaller (only 13 per cent identify as mainline Protestants) and more commoditized.

Religious branding will continue to be an important marketing tool for faith institutions. As in other categories, it does not have to be used simply to offer consumers a particular and identifiable choice; it can, and will, be used for a variety of objectives depending on the needs of the institution.

NOTES

¹. Religious belief has not waned (90 per cent of Americans believe in a higher power), but how they practice their faith has (only 36 per cent attend weekly religious services (Harris Interactive, 2003)).

². “Marketing” is defined broadly to include product, pricing, distribution, and promotion.

³. While Scientology is recognized as a Church in the U.S., its status as a religion remains a matter of debate internationally (See Beit-Hallahmi, 2003).

⁴. Tom Cruise is well known as a celebrity Scientologist. This video can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFBZ_uAbxS0.

⁵. Ads can be viewed at www.scientology.org or at the Scientology Channel on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/user/ChurchofScientology>).

⁶. Alexa.com is a website that tracks web traffic based on those who have its toolbar. Because of this, Alexa information is helpful for directional purposes, but not for hard numbers. Visitors were below pre-campaign numbers by year’s end.

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Mara EINSTEIN has been working in or writing about the media industry for the past 20 years. Her last book, *Brands of Faith* (Routledge, 2008), is a social critique of the marketing of religion. Her first book, *Media Diversity: Economics, Ownership and the FCC* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), was the cause of much debate when this research was used by the FCC in redefining media ownership rules. Prior to academia, Dr Einstein worked as an executive at NBC, MTV Networks, and major advertising agencies. Her new book, *Compassion, Inc.*, will be published by University of California Press in 2012. ADDRESS: Queens College, CUNY, 65-30 Kissena Blvd, Flushing, NY 11367, United States. [email: mara_einstein@hotmail.com]