

Chapter 6: The RenGen Company

-Excerpt-

Early Adopter of the RenGen Aesthetic: How Absolut Vodka Conquered a Business Category

When Absolut Vodka began its landmark advertising campaign nearly twenty years ago, the Swedish company simply wanted to move more bottles of vodka. As it happened, Absolut revolutionized the drinking habits of millions.

By 2005, beer manufacturers woke up and discovered they had lost considerable market share to spirits, in particular vodka. Advertising Age magazine sent reporters into bars to find out why. Beer is considered “a bubba drink,” they were told by the 30-something males who were sipping martinis in local watering holes. By June 2006, beer had lost its footing in its most sacred market—college campuses. In a survey of 100 U.S. universities by market research firm Student Monitor, beer drinking ranked well below iPod use and Facebook.com as the most popular things about college.

How Absolut managed to convert 10 percent of the beer drinkers in America into vodka drinkers has little to do with people’s palates. The magic was in the mind-set. Absolut built its brand based on a RenGen aesthetic, and in doing so conquered an industry and elevated its humble bottle into an icon.

By 1985, Absolut was five years into a campaign of print ads that featured its broad-shouldered bottle accompanied by simple slogans such as “ABSOLUT perfection.” Stolichnaya, the leading vodka at the time, was feeling the heat. But the campaign, although stylish, was still conservative. Rather than wait for Stolichnaya to defend itself with its own volley of ads, the creative team at advertising agency TBWA that had invented the Absolut campaign had an inspiration. To magnify the brand’s fashionable identity, they would link it with art. In his book about the campaign, Richard Lewis, one of the team members at the agency, describes what happened next.

The team met with Andy Warhol. Over dinner, Warhol said he was enthralled by the artfulness of the Absolut bottle. Warhol proposed painting his own interpretation of the bottle. He was paid \$65,000 for the painting, “a price that would establish the ceiling for all future Absolut artists’ works. In years to come, people in the agency would frequently say, about any one of a number of artists, ‘He isn’t worth more than Andy.’”

The idea was a bold one. After all, sales were humming along. Why not sit back and enjoy the ride? Indeed, some agency principals feared that the concept could bomb. The hand wringing led to a compromise: Warhol’s depiction of the bottle would be placed in only a few publications with highly sophisticated readerships.

ABSOLUT WARHOL became a smash hit.

“Absolut Vodka had become a fashionable brand, and in Warhol’s work, we saw an opportunity to accelerate the process,” Lewis explains. The next goal was to use it as leverage to entice other artists, Hollywood types, the rich, the famous, “who saw Warhol as something of a prophet, someone who would lead his friends to Absolut.”

Until this time, no major advertiser had thought to use art as a marketing strategy. So delighted was Warhol by the response to his ad, he suggested doing a whole series of ABSOLUT WARHOL paintings. But the agency had a better idea: It would ask Warhol to be their “seeing-eye dog” in the art world and to introduce them to new trends and rising art stars.

Just as Absolut commissioned artists to express the brand’s cachet among trendsetters and opinion leaders, it enhanced the product’s appeal by associating its bottle with fashion. The creative team found David Cameron, a young, talented, struggling fashion designer, who might be interested in doing something. Cameron designed a simple silver minidress with the entire Absolut bottle copy on its front. Using a blond, athletically leggy model in action poses, the ads made the brand come alive. The response was directly expressed: Nearly 5,000 people called an 800 number that appeared in the ad’s fine print. “Virtually all of the callers were women who wanted to purchase the dress. Reasoning that Absolut was in the fashion business as much as it was in the liquor business, we were momentarily tempted to reproduce Cameron’s creation and sell it to the public, but wiser heads ultimately prevailed,” Lewis writes.

In the decade that followed, Absolut would create associations with more fashion designers, as well as with film and literature. It had tapped into the isolation that bright, thoughtful people were feeling in a society that appeared to favor simplemindedness. With a trilogy of ads—ABSOLUT WELLS, ABSOLUT SHELLEY, and ABSOLUT STOKER—the brand honored the creators of *The Invisible Man*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dracula*. These were intended to be niche set of ads for a very select group that ran in literary-minded publications such as the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Book Review*. Understanding them takes a few seconds—maybe many seconds—even when the reader is on the appropriate wavelength and reading a magazine whose emphasis is on literature. Again, the risk paid off, as Lewis adds: “We hear time and again that people appreciate the challenge, particularly when they conquer it.” This was a leap, not a step, and the brand opened the door to a larger audience than it had ever anticipated.

The Absolut story is a gold mine of trail-blazing ideas. The unique ad campaign paved the way, not just for new drinking tastes but also for a new sensibility among people hungry to define themselves by an aesthetic of smart. If you believe, as I do, that we have become consumers of advertising messages as much as of the products they promote, then you can see how Absolut’s brand has itself become iconic, predisposing people toward a new point of view.