



# Will Your Brand Still Be Sexy at 100?

## 100-Year Old Brands: How Do These Ageless Beauties Do It?

Brands that have been around for a century or so are rare indeed. But not quite so rare for Coca-Cola, GE and Mercedes-Benz. They among Businessweek's top-100 global brands still rank in the top 10.

What's the secret? In this age of ever shorter attention spans, what enables some brands to stick around, while others flare brilliantly (think Atari and Commodore), only to burn out nearly as fast on the ash heap of brand history? And why do some brands that survive for decades (icons, really, like Pepsodent and Plymouth and Oldsmobile) go into cardiac arrest and die?

Experts like to talk about product life cycles, as if the birth and death of brands were the most natural thing in the world. Yet there are dozens, perhaps hundreds of global brands, big and small, that manage to remain young and vital, well into their tenth decade and beyond.

How do they do it? Is there a common theme to their longevity? Some fountain of brand youth they, and they alone, share?

Some survive by virtue of scale. Think of those lumbering giants, GM and Ford. In America, market of their birth, their free fall seems beyond escape. Thanks to Latin America, Europe and now China, however, they may yet rack up another century. For new generations, and other lands, the GM and Ford monikers resemble the trust marks that graced so many American garages for two-thirds of the 20th century. Bigness, in this case, contributes to longevity.

Yet scale isn't everything. Harley Davidson, a global icon if ever there was one, isn't bigger, in numbers, than, say, Honda, and it's certainly not cheaper (some "hawks" and "fat boys" tip the scales at 20 grand). For many (including women), Harley ripples with

machismo and, the fair sex would argue, plenty of machisma as well. Rebellious. Individualistic. And, oh, that sound. It's American, all right, but totally at home around the world.

For all its sexiness, let's not forget that Harley faced in mid-life a deepening crisis that could have spelled the end. Japanese bikes, then the up-and-comers, were killing the English motorcycle industry, and were well on their way to eradicating America's cycle brands, too. Harley, like so many other centenarian brands, found a way to re-invent itself, improve its reliability and remain true to its roots. It was one of the few to overcome the Japanese juggernaut.

A key to survival, then, is the ability to re-invent. But some brands—and not just global brands—survive as a consequence of their constancy. Perhaps that's why among our 100-year-olds, we find brands—not huge, but ever reliable—passed from one generation to another. When was the last time you thought of Aunt Jemima's pancake mix? 20-Mule-Team Borax? Or the ubiquitous Fanny Farmer Cookbook? I remember when a Southerner told me that the best way to cure a ham was to cover it with Borax and that his family had been doing it that way for three generations. Talk about constancy. The brands are still going strong.

**"You don't need to be big to be global. Scale isn't everything. One of the keys to brand longevity is the ability to re-invent."**

Beyond constancy, consistency—especially of quality—has enabled some brands to become timeless symbols of the best money can buy. Montblanc, celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, is recognized the world over for fine writing instruments. Recently, premium watches, leather, fragrance and eyewear have begun to share the Montblanc logo. These global extensions, you can bet, display the



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same spirit of perfection of its forebear. Consistency and devotion to quality dominate the DNA of global brands—and never more so than among symbols of genuine luxury.

Listerine and bad breath. That marriage has made Listerine a basic part of the global medicine chest. So entrenched in the minds of global consumers is Listerine, that it's virtually impossible to finish a meal with garlic or onions and not think of grabbing a Listerine cocktail afterwards. Decades of well-honed messages—yet another key to longevity—have kept Listerine ever fresh in our after-meal psyches.

Nothing runs like a deer—John Deere, that is, which uses that slogan worldwide to describe how its machinery operates. John Deere began as a one-man blacksmith shop in 1837. By dint of integrity and ingenuity (today, we call it innovation), Deere has grown into a global brand and the biggest maker of farm equipment, employing 47,000 people. Those two qualities, integrity and ingenuity, are the hallmarks of many great global brands.

But, again, you don't need to be big to be global. You just need a niche that never seems to go away or attract an 800-pound gorilla. Take a few brands that many Americans never heard of. Nedo, for one, of Germany, is the leading maker of survey equipment. Trangia is a Swedish outdoor stove beloved by hikers. Dal Negro, a producer of fine playing cards, has been making them in Italy since 1756.

**“Other keys to becoming a centennial brand? Consistency of quality. Decades of well-honed messages. Integrity and ingenuity.”**

Breakfast fads come and go. Nabisco Shredded Wheat and Quaker Oats, the essence of breakfast minimalism, seem to go on forever. They've been around for 100 years or so. Thanks to new research and Baby Boomers' avid interest in health, these heart-healthy (and so labeled) cereals enter their second century resurgent with life. And a staple on supermarket shelves.

Celebrating your 100<sup>th</sup> birthday is no guarantee of continued success, especially in the global arena. Hershey and Wrigley exhibit

the products and numbers to suggest they'll continue to lead their categories. They've been resilient over many recessions, advertised year-in and year-out. Always they seemed to come out on top. Not so with Kodak. Can the brand re-invent itself for the digital age? Does it have the agility? Stay tuned.

Other centennial brands? Heinz, Pepsi, Bloomingdale's, Bosch, Sabatier (French cutlery), Peugeot, Swiss Army Knife, Coleman (outdoor equipment), Royal Doulton (china), Avon, Square D (electrical equipment), Evian, Staub (English cast-ironware), Levi's, Bayer. And, without getting into names, because there are so many, add to the list a host of British beers and Scotch whiskey.

So what is the brand blueprint for living 100 years or more? And, if you're lucky, gaining a global footprint? Develop a reputation for trust, consistency and quality of product and (again, if you're lucky) great management. Since no brand can be 100% recession-proof, learn to be resilient and agile. Be innovative—but not always (remember what happened to “new” Coke). And when things look bleakest, out-spend rivals. Leading brands tend to exit recessions with more market share for just that reason.

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