Does Your Brand Have an Intellectual Alibi?

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When people ask me why El Tesoro is my favorite tequila, I always respond by sharing a bit of the brand's lore on how they're one of the last remaining distilleries to employ the traditional method of using a volcanic tahona stone wheel to crush their agave piñas, which unlocks the true flavors of their blue Weber agave plants.

I don't truly understand any of that, but it's a great intellectual alibi to rationalize my decision with people who ask why I choose it over other tequilas. It not only makes for good bar talk, it makes me sound a lot more like a tequila aficionado than "I chose it because the bottle looks cool." And yes, the bottle is quite eye-catching – in fact, the cork has a replica of the tahona stone on it.

The bottle is literally topped with the brand's intellectual alibi. It cues that the drinker is sipping a tequila as it's meant to be, the traditional way, the right way.

An excuse for emotional decisions

Intellectual alibis are used by brands to help consumers rationalize a decision that is driven by emotion, helping consumers present it instead as a carefully thought-out and logical choice.

Research indicates that key drivers of brand preference, like impulse, initial attraction and final choice, are swayed much more by emotional factors than by rational ones. But those decisions are made all the easier when they can be backed up with a good reason. El Tesoro and other great brands understand this helps tell a better brand story.

Few categories are more rational than batteries, yet the No. 1 battery company in the world is Energizer, whose marketing in the U.S. is dominated by a cheeky, sunglass- and flip-flop-wearing pink rabbit. Though a brand mascot, the Energizer Bunny is part of our cultural consciousness; tune into an NFL game and you might hear an announcer compare a player to him. The Bunny is so beloved that he even has a paw on the Madison Avenue Walk of Fame.

The Bunny drives brand choice, and the vast majority of the brand's advertising celebrates that the Bunny is still going, but the intellectual alibi — representing "the world's longest-lasting battery" — provides a simple rationalization as to how he is still going, which strengthens the entire brand story.

No brand in recent memory has taken the marketing world by storm quite like Liquid Death. Few brands have as powerful, or impactful, a brand story, as evidenced by its recent $1.4 billion valuation. There is nothing innovative or special about the water in the can; it's everything around the can, including its intellectual alibi, that makes the brand so magnetic.

The brand eschews all the usual bottled water marketing codes and cues, like water source and purity, in favor of an approach that feels like an over-the-top SNL parody of corporate marketing. Everything from the slogan “Murder your thirst” to the skull imagery on the can, to celebrity partnerships like Steve O getting a real “water tattoo” with Liquid Death water instead of ink, is deliberately unhinged — the exception being the brand’s intellectual alibi of killing plastic pollution, “80% of which ends up in landfills,” according to its website.

It’s quite a worthy cause, and one easily telegraphed via the can, which is not only the vessel for a bigger emotive brand story but also a physical manifestation of their intellectual alibi: Cans are better than plastic, so drink out of a can. It’s a great justification for a purchase decision that is 100% triggered by the brand’s aura and zany acts.

Finding your brand’s intellectual alibi

A brand’s intellectual alibi is sourced from a simple yet irrefutable brand truth. It exists in what I call the brand’s 5 Ps: its Provenance, Product, Process, People and Proprietary attributes.

1. **Provenance = the place:** where the brand is from, its origin story, where it’s made, even the source of the brand’s spirit. No beer transports you to the beach like Corona.
2. **Process = the work that goes in:** the steps, the methods, the science that goes into making the product. Coors Light is the perfect brand to “chill” with because it’s cold filtered.
3. **People = the brains behind it:** the inventors, the tinkerers, the workers that make the product special. Chipotle is “as real as it gets”—that’s why those are real employees doing real food prep in their commercials.

4. **Product = the parts and pieces:** the ingredients, what the brand puts in (or leaves out), the secret sauce. RXBar uses as few and as simple ingredients as possible. There is "No B.S."—they tell you what's on the inside on the outside of the package.
5. **Proprietary = the only:** the first, the sole, what no one else can claim. Dyson's Hyperdymium motors spin at 125,000 RPM—five times faster on average than a jet engine. That's why only a Dyson works like a Dyson.

Permission to stand for something bigger

The intellectual alibi – regardless of which of the 5 Ps it is sourced from – needs to be based on a truth that is truer to that brand than other brands in the category. Consumers don't need to understand the intellectual alibi, they just need to be aware of it to justify their brand choice. Does anyone know what "triple distilling" vodka really means, beyond connoting something that is probably clean and smooth?

A great intellectual alibi isn't over-explained; rather, it's used as a source of authority for a brand to claim something bigger.

In the era of the influencer, many brands try to manufacture deeper brand meaning through borrowed interest and association. It's transactional instead of truthful, and the effect is often temporary.

Great brands understand the power of turning brand truths into intellectual alibis. They use them to tell more epic stories and to imbue their brands with more meaning—long-term, differentiated meaning. They rationalize why a brand can claim, or own, a state of mind, a place, moments, a feeling or

an emotion, and even a belief system.

And most importantly, it grants consumers permission to choose a brand on an emotional whim.

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