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Staging authenticity in the cellars of Champagne

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Abstract

◦**Purpose** *The research objective is to identify the most powerful markers of authenticity utilized by the champagne industry in order to emphasize the genuine nature of their products – authenticity being a key representation of the product.*

◦**Design/methodology/approach:** *A participant-observation approach was used with one researcher visiting nine champagne houses on public tours and video-recording and photographing aspects of the tour as well as keeping field-notes. The data were analyzed using a grounded approach to discover key themes underlying the discourse of the tours.*

◦**Findings:** *Two major themes emerged. The first is that the champagne house operates as a “theatre in action” staging the presentation of the authenticity of its product, and the second is that the effective authenticity is given a human face. There is, however, a conflict between personifying champagne and presenting “factual” authenticity about its production.*

◦**Practical implications:** *Our research suggests the necessity of finding a balanced way of “staging authenticity” by presenting it in both a theatrical and a genuine way. In addition, we underline the importance to the houses of the “personal touch” as opposed to the prevalent emphasis on an objective description of champagne production.*

Key words: Authenticity, Champagne, personification.

1. INTRODUCTION

The cellars of the Champagne region in France inform this work as representations of a product claiming an authentic nature. Although the authenticity of champagne is legally defined and protected, from the marketing perspective this authenticity does not translate into a uniform product category. Produced in the same geographic region under strictly enforced rules and procedures, the sparkling wines of Champagne boast five thousand brands, all of them equally authentic. This has prompted the authors to turn to champagne in order to better understand the multifaceted nature of authenticity.

The global marketplace is often seen as a world of fakes, dominated by copycats and counterfeit goods masquerading as the real thing (Leigh, Peters and Shelton 2006). In such a deceptive world, claims of authenticity have a powerful marketing voice. A good example is a print advertisement in the magazine *The Economist* urging readers to protect champagne from a non-authentic product bottled in the US. The strong rhetoric in the ad (“deceptive,” “cover-ups,” “misuse,” “unmask the truth”) hints not only at the power of authenticity, but also at its vulnerability. Because today’s consumers engage more and more in a sensible search for authentic goods and services (Pine II and Gilmore 2008), authenticity becomes “a cornerstone of contemporary marketing” (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink 2008, p. 21).

Academic research proposes several typologies of authenticity: existential (Wang 1999), indexical and iconic (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), literal, approximate, and moral (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink, 2008). Yet “staged authenticity” was one of its earliest discovered forms (MacCannell 1973). Defined as a type of authenticity purposely made-up in order to appeal to tourists, such staged authenticity is viewed as a marketplace bow to postmodern consumers actively pursuing real and exotic fun and pleasure (Firat and Venkatesh 1993). The marketing side of this postmodern activity is the focus of our study.

The research objective is to identify the most powerful markers of authenticity utilized by the champagne industry in order to emphasize the genuine nature of their products. Two research questions will inform this purpose: 1) how do marketers communicate authenticity through the product presentation in champagne houses? and 2) what types of authenticity cues may connect to consumers on a deeper level?

2. METHODOLOGY

Our ethnographic study is based on observational work in the setting of nine champagne houses in Reims and Epernay in France conducted within a six-week period in the fall of 2010. The data were collected by employing the “participant observation” method when one of the authors took part in the tours of champagne houses as a regular tourist. The houses visited include: Pommery, G. H. Mumm, Taittinger, Lanson, Veuve Clicquot, Moët & Chandon, Ruinart, G. H. Martel & Cie., and Charles de Cazanove.

During the tours, this author took photos and did video filming, which enhanced the data with visual material. After each visit, the author recorded her detailed observations on the structure of the tours, the content and delivery of information, the presentation style of the tour guides, and the appearance of the premises shown to the visitors. This produced about thirty pages of field notes, fifty photos, and five video segments.

These tours were deliberately taken by the author, who does not reside in France and who had significantly limited exposure to and knowledge of the champagne industry. The tours were expected to provide us with a fresh perspective on champagne and its authenticity cues. The collected data were discussed and analyzed by both authors after each tour, with the second author offering analysis as a means of triangulating the interpretation of the data. Overall, a search for the most powerful markers of authenticity has been guided by grounded analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998), the results of which follow in the next sections.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Champagne house as theatre in action

We approach champagne houses open to visitors, as stages for theatrical performances on the common theme of authenticity. The mere term “staged authenticity” poses an inherent conflict. On the one hand, the nature of authenticity implies an unrefined, unpolished and spontaneous experience. On the other hand, staging indicates perfected, embellished, and scripted action. Thus, it was meaningful to see how champagne houses deal with such conflict.

As a product category, champagne is an excellent prop for theatrical performance because it provides marketers with the necessary tools for staging. Its two-hundred-year history is rooted in wars and peaceful celebrations and offers stories with drama and romance, rivalry and intrigue, death and birth (Kladstrup and Kladstrup 2006). Its theatrical ingredients include fairytale-type characters of monks, widows, kings and queens, the smell of victories and bloody defeats, mystique and the darkness of chalk cellars, and beauty and the light of royal palaces. The atmospheric cellars of the houses in particular (some of them in the original chalk pits carved out by the Romans) offer a perfect setting on which to stage a performance. It is our premise that all of these factors can be creatively used for marketing authenticity.

The nine champagne houses visited for the purpose of this study, however, used these theatrical building blocks rather modestly, revealing a preference for a more rational approach that favors the technical side of wine making. Thus, all the houses generously presented visitors with information on grape varieties, harvesting techniques, and stages of production. In three cases, this information was delivered in an artful way, when visitors were first shown a short documentary about champagne making. In one of them, the whole process was metaphorically presented as the art of painting. In two others this process was paralleled with music and described as “mystique.” The themes of mystique and art, however, didn’t find further development and abruptly ended with the film. For example, after visitors’ expectations of “mystique” were set up in one house, they were shown modern pieces of machinery in sterile looking production facilities that completely lacked mystique.

We propose that a focus on production may appeal to those consumers who perceive authenticity literally and judge it by the product’s unchanged place of origin and its absolute fealty to historic traditions and methods of production (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink 2008). However, centering tours around production may fail to connect to consumers who define authenticity iconically and link it mentally with the product essence which they subjectively judge based on emotional feelings about the nature of the brand (Grayson and Martinec 2004). Modern technology used for champagne making does not deliver the authenticity message unless it is skillfully incorporated into the overall theatrical performance. Finding the correct balance between modern and traditional while staging authenticity is a challenge to be addressed by marketers.

3.2. Authenticity with a face

Contemporary consumers in the developed world are widely disconnected from their products in a sense that they only vaguely know where they come from and who makes them. Commercially mass-produced, even the most authentic products such as champagne are in danger of becoming faceless. This is where the emotional connection with the product may strengthen its authentic nature. We propose that adding a “personal touch” to a brand while hosting visitors in champagne houses, not only highlights the guests’ experience, but powerfully communicates the products’ authenticity. By personifying the brand, marketers make it appear less commercial and more real.

Our data show that as a marker of authenticity, personification is present in many champagne houses in various forms – through the personalities of their founders, historical figures connected to the brand, and family members behind them. However, the extent of the use of these personalities varies widely. Portraits are often displayed, but stories are not told. Or they are told in a cursory way, as secondary information, without the dramatic details that add human interest. For example, a big portrait of Louise Pommery is the first thing a visitor sees when entering the cellar at Pommery. Her strong look promises an intriguing story behind the brand which nevertheless gets lost among the other useful but less emotional pieces of information about champagne making. A portrait of monsieur Mumm in the G.H. Mumm House can only be noticed after the tour, during the champagne tasting, when all the stories are over.

There were two sound examples of how personification of the brand can emotionally captivate the visitors. A tour guide at Veuve Clicquot Champagne House talked about the widow (“veuve” in French) Clicquot in a very personal way, playing with the tone of her voice while emphasizing the widow’s human characteristics. The guide’s passion for dramatic stories from the past was present in the delivered content and in the manner of its delivery. For example, the widow, it was said, allowed her daughter to get married a man who had no interest in the champagne business. Though this fact may add nothing to the taste of today’s champagne, it does create emotional attachment to the product through the personality behind it.

A nicely scripted incorporation of the “personal touch” with an old branded wine was evident in Ruinart Champagne House. The tour started and ended in the tasting room that exhibited three big portraits. The guide guided the attention of the guests to the portraits in the very beginning, and after the tour of the cellars provided detailed information on two of them. The figure in the last one, she said, was unknown, and the House was investigating what kind of family member he was. This little piece of information again emotionally connected the past and the present. The guide herself was very personable and demonstrated a nice combination of scripted and unscripted information. While taking guests for the tour, she warmly presented one cellar as her “favorite.” During the tour, she made an unplanned stop when she noticed a hole in the stack of the bottles where one champagne bottle had exploded. This unscripted evidence of imperfection was also a powerful marker of authenticity.

The personification of the wine in this way operates at two levels. The most obvious is the incarnation of the product as the founder or ancient personage who symbolizes the wine. The second is the re-personification of the old in the contemporary; the dramatic or sympathetic guide who is the modern face of the wine. This allows a duality of “old” (literal) authenticity and contemporary (approximate) authenticity (Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink 2008). However, even this form of authenticity comes with a hidden deception. The people who have the ancient link with the house often belong to families no longer associated with it.

Veuve Clicquot is now a part of the luxury goods conglomerate LVMH, and G. H. Mumm is owned by the multinational drinks group Pernod Ricard. The old families have no connection with these contemporary owners.

It is the authors' proposition that while all Champagne Houses represent literally authentic products, some of them offer consumers stronger authenticity cues because of the "personal touch" created by the reference to the founders or other historical figures. Populating products with "real people," skillfully adding drama to their lives, and romanticizing their hard work may transform faceless (even if authentic) champagne into a product truly perceived as authentic.

4. CONCLUSION

Our study lays the foundation for further theoretical investigation of the multifaceted nature of authenticity. Because it is set in the context of champagne, it also has empirical significance and is expected to help the industry in the delivery of its authenticity message. Specifically, we see several major themes worth in-depth investigation.

Recent studies of consumer perception of authenticity stress its less commercial nature (Rose and Wood, 2005), which highlights the necessity of understanding the balanced way of staging authenticity while presenting it in both a theatrical and a genuine way. Appealing not just to the minds of consumers, but also to their hearts stresses the importance of providing detailed information on authentic production methods, as well as emotional triggers for stimulating consumers' imaginations. This is where the personification of champagne – by linking it with real people – can add to the personality of champagne, an important marketing task in the competitive world of five thousand brands. Our findings underline the importance of the "personal touch" as opposed to the prevalent emphasis on an objective description of "fine" wine ingredients. For this reason, the "personal touch" as a proposed major marker of authenticity invites further research, and it also needs to be the focus of implementation by the champagne industry.

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