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Bushells and the Cultural Logic of Branding

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ABSTRACT

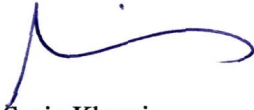
Since its introduction in 1883, the Bushells brand of tea has become increasingly identified with Australia's national identity. Like Arnott's, QANTAS and Vegemite, Bushells has become a part of the nation's cultural vocabulary, a treasured store of memories and myths. This thesis investigates how Bushells acquired this status, and the transformation by which an otherwise everyday item evolved from the ordinary to the iconic. In short, through Bushells, I will demonstrate the cultural logic of branding.

Bushells is ideally suited for an historical analysis of branding in Australia. Firstly, tea has been a staple of the Australian diet since the time of the First Fleet. So, it proves a fitting example of consumer processes since the early days of White settlement. From this, I will consider the rise of an environment sensitive to status, and therefore conducive to branding. In the late nineteenth century, Bushells was challenged to appeal to the burgeoning corps of middle class consumers. To this end, the brand integrated those ideals and associations that turned its tea into one that flattered a certain sensibility. Secondly, having established its affinity with a particular market group, the middle class, Bushells was well positioned to track, acknowledge and incorporate some of the most dominant trends of the twentieth-century; specifically, the rise of a particular suburban ideal in the 1950s, and changing conceptions of gender, labour and technology. Finally, in the last two decades, Bushells has had to concede decisive shifts in fashion and taste; as Australia's population changed, so too did tea's place and prominence in the market. This thesis thus canvasses all these issues, chronologically and thematically. To do this, I will contextualise Bushells' advertisements in terms of the contemporary conditions that both informed their content, and underpinned their appeal.

Considering the breadth and depth of this analysis, I argue that in the case of Bushells there is a cultural logic to branding. As brands strive for relevance, they become screens off which major societal processes can be identified and examined. As such, I will show that, in its address to consumers, Bushells broached some of the most significant discourses in Australia's cultural history.

DECLARATION

I certify that this work has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. The work herein is entirely my own, except where acknowledged.



Susie Khamis

March 2007

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Introduction

From theatre to thesis

In June 1996, terminally ill taxi driver Max Bell sold all his possessions, put his dog and two cats to sleep, and drove 3 000 kilometres from Broken Hill to Darwin. Max, in the final and painful stage of stomach cancer, was on a mission: to take advantage of the Northern Territory's then-new euthanasia laws. When he failed to find a specialist doctor who would carry out his wishes, Max drove back to Broken Hill, where he died alone a few weeks later. Several years on, this true story became the basis of a play by Perth playwright Reg Cribb, *Last Cab to Darwin*. Directed by Jeremy Sims, the play stretched Max's plight to encompass more than just euthanasia, and bracketed issues of reconciliation, globalisation, drought, and rural decline.¹ With a \$58 000 grant from the Australia Council, a \$20 000 grant from the Sydney Opera House, and Barry Otto in the lead role of Max, *Last Cab to Darwin* was an ambitious attempt to tackle the scope, scale and severity of recent national developments.

In many ways, the play considered the uneven effects of the information age, as what were once thriving communities struggle to stay relevant in the new millennium. As he drives through outback Australia, Max sees a sad montage of a fading society, barely sustained by little more than bittersweet memories and Tidy Town competitions. Effectively, Max's death becomes the death of old Australia. As Sims explained:

What we've aimed to do is to try and get people to see the drying up of the insides of Max almost as a drying up of the insides of Australia, of a sense of compassion, and of fair play, and all those things that in the past ten years...have gone out the window.²

In this way, the odyssean road-trip, joint winner of the 2002 Patrick White Playwright's Award, became an epic lament for a bygone era. Indeed, even the set, designed by Andrew Raymond, was a studied collage of true-blue Australia, with run-down reminders of backyard sheds and small-town milk bars. In these scenes, each prop pointed to better days and brighter prospects. One such reminder was a vintage Bushells poster from the 1930s.

Long before Starbucks, online advertising and soy cappuccinos, numerous shopfronts around Australia featured a similar Bushells poster, to the extent that its inclusion in *Last Cab to Darwin* was far from random. The poster appealed to a lost sensibility, or at least – according to the key characters – lost in contemporary Australia, one that seemingly valued a ‘cuppa with friends’. In fact, in the play, cappuccinos actually become harder to find the further Max travels through red-dust Australia. This cues a semiotic slide, as cappuccinos come to symbolise the affluent, sophisticated and exotic, whilst Bushells, for its part, marks a very different mindset: modest, low-key and Australian. More than just a prop, then, the poster spoke of the emotional attachment many had made with the brand, by virtue of its cultural salience over several decades, and the degree to which its associations intersected with the aims and interests of ordinary Australians.

This thesis looks at how Bushells accrued this kind of resonance. Its main contention is that the brand’s biography provides a surprisingly edifying case study through which to explore key aspects of Australia’s evolving identity. This is, from the outset, an unusual turn in the study of Australian media history, or even Australian history generally. It is far more common, for example, to track a nation’s past through the growth and development of landmark subjects. From the study of military giants and political luminaries, through to epochal industries and life-altering inventions, there is a strong scholarly tradition of plotting ‘big’ ideas like nationhood and modernity alongside processes and personalities of an ostensibly appropriate stature. What is argued here, though, is that a seemingly minor item, or at least minor in terms of conventional academic recognition, can also communicate a rich and complex history. It will be shown how the Bushells brand has helped illustrate and narrate monumental moments in the nation’s past. That is, in both its marketing and its operations, Bushells has consistently documented major changes in Australia’s social composition, cultural tenor and economic climate.

Since its introduction in 1883, Bushells has showcased the essence of modern marketing. Namely, a product that had become a staple of everyday life could be imbued with any number of ideals and associations. In its appeals to glamour, prestige and progress, all in the semiotic space of a single tea cup, Bushells proved a fitting

harbinger of contemporary brand culture. If the right *tea* could offer cache and class, there was virtually no limit to the transformative powers of the branding process, or the extent to which brand logic would mesh with the pace and character of modern life. Bushells' strength was its associational pull, the various ways it convincingly lassoed broader aspirations and inclinations. That said, then, it is possible to plumb Bushells' promotions, from its inception to the present, and to examine the company's attempts to overlay an otherwise unremarkable product with the airs of an emerging demographic – the urban middle class. In this way, the Bushells material is a useful portal into a changing Australia, as it matured from the clumsy colonial outpost of the pre-federation period, into the markedly more sophisticated and internationalist player of the modern era.

Aims, Argument & Approach

For the past twenty years, Bushells has relied on those images and narratives popularly identified as 'distinctly' Australian. Interestingly, though, and as it will be shown in this thesis, its biography actually involves far more ambivalent tangents and trajectories, with ironic turns that betray the Australianness with which it is now associated. Importantly, though, this is not highlighted to debunk any underlying myths. On the contrary, these other images and narratives are an integral part of Australia's consumer history. In turn, 'consumer history' is not demarcated as a sideline show to History proper, but regarded as a surprisingly under-acknowledged feature of it. After all, Australia may have been, as Donald Horne argues in *The Lucky Country* (1964), 'one of the first nations to find part of the meaning of life in the purchase of consumer goods.'³ So, to play down one of the more 'iconic' examples of these consumer goods would be, at the very least, academically remiss. What need to be seen, then, are the paths by which this brand came to signify one discourse in particular: national identity. As Richard White suggests in *Inventing Australia* (1981), 'When we look at ideas about national identity, we need to ask, not whether they are true or false, but what their function is, whose creation they are, and whose interests they serve.'⁴ Subsequent chapters will both draw on White's position, as well as apply this approach to others aspects of cultural identity, especially class and gender.

This thesis was inspired in part by the use of the Bushells prop in *Last Cab to Darwin*. For at least one audience member, the fact that a faded diorama could speak of issues and ideas outside of tea suggested that this was one facet of Australian culture that required more in-depth consideration than had been hitherto granted. Namely: the extent to which cultural phenomena could be read off certain brands; and the means by which such brands assumed this capacity. To this end, then, this thesis considers both the content and context of Bushells' advertising campaigns, and will advance an intertextual analysis, identifying those instances where promotional discourses have either complemented or coincided with various cultural ones. Obviously, advertisers try very hard to guard closely these perceived differences, and to monitor every aspect of the promotional process with all the knowledge and control that market research can muster. Yet, sometimes a brand's meanings depart from these top-down efforts. Sometimes, this departure is catastrophic, and kills whatever charisma an advertiser had achieved; sometimes, it is relatively benign, within the well-worn bounds of damage control; and sometimes, it is a PR boon, and gleefully reined into the brand's official image. The point is that brands do eventually free-fall, unhinged and unpredictable. In short, for all of the advertisers' efforts, the meanings that any one brand can generate are neither static nor secure.

For reasons to be considered throughout this thesis, the ways Bushells has come to encode and enact certain associations are anything but linear. It has been an unruly progression, which only underscores just how tenuous and arbitrary the link between product and brand really is. If anything, Bushells now capitalises on the sort of nationalist imagery from which it once distanced itself. What this shows, though, is the haphazard ways by which brands come to communicate certain messages, as changing cultural conditions affect the interpretative frameworks through which these messages are read. Therefore, to really make sense of a brand like Bushells, its advertisements need to be read alongside the contemporary conditions which rendered their contents meaningful and relevant.

What follows is a chronological look at the Bushells brand, with the focus on the various advertisements used to promote the product to Australian consumers. Due to branding's emphasis on qualitative difference; these advertisements implicate a variety of issues, either obliquely or otherwise, and thus shed some light on

contemporary culture. As it happens, in the case of Bushells, this spans over one hundred years of Australian history, from the brand's 'birth' in 1883 to the present. Consideration of the Bushells brand involves surveying a generous sweep of Australian history, not least because the brand has paralleled monumental changes throughout, and been compelled to acknowledge these changes for the sake of market relevance. This is what is meant by the term 'cultural logic', the elusive but necessary 'fit' that brands offer; an affinity, illusory or otherwise, between what is promised and what is pursued. For this reason, brands make an especially apt site for analysis: they can be situated within an institution that is, by most accounts, in the business of persuasion (that is, advertising); and, more often than not, their marketing incorporates the ideals and aspirations of a given market segment (like leisure, youth, freedom and such). In turn, one brand's catalogue says something about its target market's interests and inclinations – and therein lays the cultural logic at the heart of this exchange, and indeed this thesis. So, in a bid to supplement existing literature on Australia's advertising history; and to expand understanding of how brands operate, this thesis interrogates this subtle dynamic.

As a caveat, it is stressed here that, throughout the thesis, the focus will remain on how the Bushells brand emerged and evolved. To this end, the emphasis is on adaptation. There is a constant tension that will be addressed: between the differentiating features used by Bushells' marketers to distinguish the brand; and extrinsic developments that risked rendering these features either redundant or inferior. So, this thesis does *not* promise a thorough overview of Australian history per se. Nor does it maintain a spotlight on any specific aspect thereof – say, the history of class in Australia, or of gender relations, national identity, race, or consumer practices. To be sure, these areas *are* raised and discussed, but only when, at the analyst's discretion, they have triggered a discernible change in the Bushells brand. That said, though, it is also argued that, insofar as this brand addressed a significant share of the Australian population, in terms of both market size and demographic breadth, it provides a useful prism through which numerous complex developments *can* be approached, considered and explained.

Put simply, this thesis looks at how the Bushells brand has both paralleled and constituted key cultural processes. If nothing else, Bushells' cultural significance

stems from the fact that it has been inscribed with, as well as grafted onto, stories and symbols that are also and already significant for Australians. Moreover, the fact that these stories and symbols have changed so often (in ways to be examined in depth and detail) goes some way in demonstrating the cultural logic of any brand: as Australian culture changed, so too did the chain of associations that Bushells used to appeal to its consumers. In this way, and for the purposes of this thesis, the biography of an otherwise ordinary commodity can in fact communicate a richly textured history.

Notes to Introduction on p. 255.