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King of Pop had no peers in the artistry of branding

Posted on July 28th, 2009 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



There are moments you never forget – like where you were when you learned about the death of a family member or friend, or someone you never really knew, but whose passing shook you to your core.

I recall with amazing clarity walking home from elementary school in Washington, D.C., when a kid screamed from a passing school bus, “The president is dead!” As I dashed home in confusion, I ran into the arms of my mom, who had gathered with neighbors on the front lawn, all sobbing and all consoling one another over the assassination of President Kennedy. Later, I sat glued to the black-and-white TV, watching tearfully as John-John saluted the flag-draped casket. “My” president had died. I mourned for the first time.

But not the last.

I’ll never forget the call early one morning from my parents’ next-door neighbor – an hour before I was to have left for vacation – telling me my daddy had died.

Or when my husband roused me from a deep sleep to inform me Princess Diana was gone.

I was a college newspaper columnist compelled to write about the senseless tragedy that was Jonestown, Guyana, as the self-proclaimed prophet Jim Jones diabolically directed his followers to guzzle poison. Those ghastly TV images still haunt me.

And who can forget the gut-wrenching horror of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks? I was in a client conference room when a phone call came, telling us to turn on the TV. Who could have possibly prepared us for the collapse of the Twin Towers, or the billowing black smoke that rose ghoulishly over New York City?

Each of these incidents affected me profoundly and personally, but not professionally. That is, until now.

I grew up with Michael Jackson. He was near my age, the cute, chubby-cheeked kid next door, my generation’s pop star. Next to the Beatles, his were among the first lyrics I ever learned (A-B-C, do-re-mi), while his later trademark moonwalk was the first dance step I ever tried to master. I loved his music, his incredible showmanship, his unique fashion sense and his amazing moves. I’ve followed his life and career from a distance – his ever-changing facial shape and skin tone, his ill-fated associations and troublesome allegations, his family strife.

For weeks after his death, we were all exposed to endless hours of media coverage about his life and music. But I'd like to recognize an area that has been overlooked – his marketing genius.

First, he was the epitome of branding. He did it long before anyone knew what it was, other than perhaps his own idol, Elvis, who was the only other entertainment icon to be publicly crowned a “king” (of rock ‘n’ roll). Branding is all about creating an image – a memorable look, personality and perception – impacting people in a profound way and connecting with them emotionally.

Michael understood that. He found ways of distinguishing himself from every other star. There will never be another Michael Jackson. He owned his brand.

Second, he remained elusive and mysterious. We caught rare glimpses into his life, but we never fully understood him. His reclusive nature and his masked escapades intrigued us and grabbed our attention. When he spoke, ever so softly, we strained to hear him. When he dangled his baby precariously from a hotel window in a show of misplaced affection for the crowd below, we watched in horror. When his hair caught fire during the filming of a Pepsi commercial, we saw him extend his bejeweled hand to the cameras as he was whisked away on a stretcher. Intrigue worked.

Third, Michael taught the world how to package entertainment and messaging. His sheer creativity, reflected in his extraordinary, well-orchestrated dance and music videos, thrilled us. His custom stamp forever changed the music world and how it markets itself, and has reached far outside that niche to a vast array of corporate product and service sectors.

As the Rev. Al Sharpton claimed during the memorial service, it was Michael's undisputed talent that enabled him to transcend the color barrier that had long existed in this country. Lyrics to one of his chart busters succinctly proclaimed the message: “It don't matter if you're black or white.” He paved the way and crossed over, creating a new platform for minorities. Who would have thought 30 years ago – even 10 years ago – that we'd have a black president? Did Michael's footwork and brand messaging contribute in some way to this historic achievement?

Finally, Michael was the ultimate trailblazer in cause marketing. Who can forget the emotionally stirring “We are the World” Live Aid concert he co-produced with Lionel Richie? Through the power of his celebrity, he drew attention to deplorable conditions affecting the lives of children throughout the world. His passion, his charity and his resources indeed made a difference and set a pattern for later stars.

As a public relations practitioner, I would criticize the Jackson marketing machine in only one respect. While Michael glittered like magic each time the spotlight hit the stage, the glaring lights of one-on-one interviews with savvy journalists blemished his profile and told another story. He was clearly uncomfortable and grossly unprepared for this aspect of the media limelight.

Any PR professional who allowed him to be interviewed without proper preparation and coaching, or to show up disheveled and clad in baggy pajama bottoms for a critical court date, should have been fired on the spot.

Much more can be said about Michael Jackson, but whether you're a fan or a critic, he deserves credit for achieving a worldwide recognition few will ever duplicate. His success is particularly remarkable when you consider the obstacles he faced as a child star of color from a relatively poor working-class family under the thumb of a highly critical, domineering father. I like to think of him as a burst of bright, meteoric energy that exploded onto the global stage and set the universe on fire for nearly 50 years.

Like the fabled Peter Pan and Neverland, which he idolized and tried so desperately to recreate, Michael

will continue to flit back and forth into our public consciousness and to capture our imagination, as he eternally holds the power of his brand in a simple gloved hand.

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