

# Baba Ramdev: A Cult Brand in the Making

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*“Faith is to believe in what we do not see; and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe”.*

- St Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury

## INTRODUCTION

Lush hills around Kanungu filled with clanks of cowbells; cry of goats and shouts of children is a heavenly abode of Gods. A place where 6 years ago, the world's worst cult mass murders led by Cleodonia Mwerinde, a barmaid turned priestess took place. Cleodonia claimed to have visions that God wills to end the world at the onset of the new millennium. What began as a movement in 1990s, having adherents who led an austere life of prayer and farm labor on hearing this prepared them for the end of the world on 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1999. What came next was unimaginable. A ghoulish affair, which caused every member of the civilized society to hold his head down in shame. Many of the followers were slaughtered, some jumped off the high cliff and those left were summoned to the arc where they willingly burnt themselves because they believed that the Virgin Mary had promised to appear at the church to carry them to Heaven.

Immense is the power of 'Cult', and if marketers are able to generate these feelings for them and are able to establish themselves as a cult brand, it is indeed a dream come true. No marketer can ever ask for more after having fanatical followers who are both consumers and owners of the brand. There have always been cult brands; ones which have had a club of dedicated aficionados, they are the people who have immense faith in the brand. These are those few special brands which take popularity to a different level altogether. Building cults or strong communities is a widespread strategy nowadays as the benefits are colossal. The brands which develop a cult status are seen to encourage a sense of shared experience and belongingness. These brands are different from their rivals in distinct ways. They possess a set of clearly defined and meticulously set values which helps them in fulfilling the needs of the customers.

Baba Ramdev is also a cult brand in the making as it is one of the fastest growing brands which projects a distinct aura and has an attractive group identity. The followers of Baba Ramdev are ready to even inhale and exhale the Baba way. Upon meeting a disciple of Baba, it is seen that ninety nine percent times they talk about Baba Ramdev's breathing exercises. His devoted fan base feels empowered, attends events enthusiastically and is proud to identify with him. It seems that the customers are indeed under “his spell” (HT, 2007).

## CULT BRANDING: A MARKETER'S RAISONS D'ÊTRE

The society in which we live today is a brand- obsessed society. Name a product or service and the brands relating to them are inestimable so many that cannot be counted on fingers. Thus, creating, developing, implementing and maintaining successful brands is frequently at the heart of a marketing strategy. McEnally, M. and Chernatony, L. de (1999). Successful branding requires a strategic perspective (de Chernatony 1998) whereby strong brand concepts are presented and communicated to well targeted segments resulting in favorable brand images which reflect the brand's identity (Gardner and Levy 1955, Reynolds and Gutman 1984, Kapferer 1997).

There are innumerable brands relating to any product category and there are some brands that truly break the clutter and stand out. Brands which we love and relate to and can do anything for, brands have a stupendous fan following. These are cult brands which are more than just strong brands; their popularity is at a different level, the super-duper customer trustworthiness and evangelical supporters become like “cult”. These brands enjoy an implausible customer allegiance and dedication. And all this is achieved by a well devised strategy creation and implementation coupled with years of hard work and commitment.

The relationship of cult brand and their customer is very complex as the customers are ready to go to any extent to support the brand. This complex relationship can be understood by applying the Need Hierarchy Theory of Motivation. Abraham Maslow hypothesized that human beings have five distinct set of needs; namely

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physiological needs, security needs, social needs, self-esteem needs, and self-actualization needs in an ascending order of hierarchy. A study of human behavior indicates that human beings are attracted by brands which can impel them towards fulfilling their higher order needs of self-actualization which is the highest need of the hierarchy. Cult Brands do not target the lower level needs by focusing on selling the “attribute -benefits”, rather they try to fulfill the higher order needs of esteem, social recognition and self-actualization as these have a strong influence on human behavior. According to Douglas Atkin, people commemorate “self actualization within a group of like minded others who celebrate the individual for being himself”

These cult brands are not necessarily the biggest and the most popular brands, but they have a fanatical fan following. There are certain brands which start with a bang, seems that they will built a cult for themselves but then the frenzy frizzles away only to declare that it was just a fad. Cult brands have a proven track record of at least ten years. Another important fact is that these brands should have been started on a shoestring budget. It means that the emotional rapport that is established between the customers and the marketers is what gives a brand a cult status. There are qualities which are essential for a brand to qualify for a cult brand status; they are high involvement with the brand so much so that it becomes a habit and customers feel that they cannot do without the brand. Cult Brand customers hail from all age groups and sections of society. These brands are universal, sharing and collaborative and it is this theme that makes for fiery passion and fierce loyalty. Cult Brands use advertising to convey openness and inclusiveness. The ads focus intently on demonstrating that anyone and everyone is welcome to use the company's product or service and no one is left out.

### **BABARAMDEV'S PERSONA**

Baba Ramdev is the head of a multi-crore empire whose ashram sells medicines worth Rs 3,000 a minute. The rags-to-riches story of Swami Ramdev is an orphic one. He was born of a poor farmer of Kalwa village in Haryana. He was christened as Ram Kishen and was struck by paralysis when he was two-and-a-half years old. As a child he was fat and had knocking knees. When he was four years old, he went to Swami Baldev to take his initial classes, and then he moved to Himalayas. He spent nine years in the caves of Gangotri in Uttaranchal and it was here that he was fascinated by herbs and began studying the properties of plants.

In 1992, Ram Kishen came to Hardwar and settled at the Kripalu Bagh ashram. The same year he changed from Ram Kishen to Swami Ramdev. With a vision of setting up a rival World Health Organization, he began making herbal medicines for the sick that used to come there. Some of his potions began to yield results and he eventually became famous. His work impressed the then head of Kripalu Bagh, Swami Shankardev who donated the land to Ramdev and he along with his friends on the board of trustees formed the Divya Yoga Trust in 1995.

In the year 2002, Sanskar television channel started airing Baba Ramdev's yogic classes; overnight, Baba Ramdev was a sensation. He had hundreds of followers who morphed into thousands. Then Sanskar channel's rival, Astha channel signed him. In two years, Baba Ramdev's live yoga classes became a passion. At each camp, there were staffers from the ICICI Bank and the Punjab National Bank who put the cash directly into the Trust's accounts. There was an eight-month waiting period before one could see Ramdev, he was being booked that far ahead by television channels for his live yoga classes each morning. People were willing to pay anywhere between Rs 250 and Rs 2,100 to breathe the way Ramdev told them to. At last count, about 70 lakh people had already done so. The dispensary is one of the main money-spinners in Ramdev's empire who's estimated worth is around Rs 100 crore and growing. His yoga sessions were beamed live into 170 countries (Bijay Simha, 2007)

Now in his early 40s, he says he has never watched a movie. He has been on a diet of milk and fruits since last three years. India's latest miracle man Swami Ramdev, a celibate since childhood, is well-versed in Sanskrit Grammar, Ayurveda and Vedic Philosophy. He is anti-west and a strong proponent of Indian cultural values. His practical approach to Yoga, research in the field of Ayurveda and the service in the field of cow-breeding, has won him several accolades in form of thousands of followers throughout the globe who see him as a living icon of Indian culture. His indifference to the worldly pleasures and dedication to social service has given him an unmatched persona. He strives for a 'medicine-free world' and firmly believes yoga is the cure for all illnesses. He writes books, makes formulations for shampoos, puts together cures for cancer, and says he will set up a rival World Health Organization.

## **MAKING OF A CULT BRAND :AN EVALUATION:**

Cult branders sell real products to real customers that fulfill real wants and needs.

In the book “The Power of Cult Branding”, Matthew W. Ragas and Bolivar J. Bueno, the authors have identified seven golden rules which the cult brands seem to follow. They have identified ten cult brands on the basis of these golden rules. The current study uses the same rules to explore the possibility of Baba Ramdev creating a cult for himself.

### **RULE 1 # CONSUMERS WANT TO BE A PART OF THE GROUP THAT'S DIFFERENT**

Since human beings are social animals, they have a strong need to communicate and relate to each other. Marketers of cult brands make use of this information about human character. The groups are created not only to sell the product or service but to garner support so that the customers can advocate for the brand. These customer communities perceive the brand as a life style which gives the brand a unique status and the consumers a sense of identity. These brands address the self actualization needs of the consumers and they are, according to cult brand expert Rick Ross, content “to be weird together and feel weird no more”.

Ramdev Baba has been successful in making customer communities who are recognizably unique. Meditation and yoga provides for a healthy life style. Baba Ramdev makes people look different and feel the difference, a must for any cult brand. Baba Ramdev, like any other successful cult brand, has faced adversities. He has fought hard to create and maintain his fan base. There are many so called 'babas' who teach yoga, but the technique of Baba Ramdev is insanely different. No use trying to compare any other brand because they are all dwarfed in his presence.

### **RULE 2 # CULT BRAND INVENTORS SHOW DARE AND DETERMINATION**

A multi-million rupee venture, Ramdev's dream project, the Patanjali Yogpeeth is set as a rival to World Health Organization (WHO). It is indeed a courageous attempt and till this far, a successful one too. Divya Yoga Mandir Trust in Haridwar, Uttaranchal, armed with all the latest and most sophisticated gadgets sees a regular stream of devotees who wait to be called by a doctor in the Out Patient Department (OPD). There are forty doctors in the OPD. They deal with 2,000 people every day. Some days, the dispensary sells medicines worth Rs. 3,000 a minute. It takes up almost 100 acres and has been designed to have buildings, car parks, and a landscape to rival the best of Delhi's rambling housing projects. It is indeed the result of determination of this one man army.

Like other cult brands, this brand also dares to challenge the system of allopathic medicine and tries to be different. This challenging attitude has become Ramdev Baba's Unique Selling Proposition (USP). He knows that every human being wants to be healthy; he also knows that allopathic medicine have side effects and therefore he offers a system of medicine that offers little or no side effects and this is what makes him stand out. He has dared to take the risk of challenging conventional wisdom. His “never say die attitude” and his incredible enthusiasm and conviction in himself has helped him emerge a winner.

### **RULE 3 # CULT BRANDS SELL LIFESTYLES**

Looking good is everyman's dream. In the era when cosmetic surgery is the order of the day; getting good looks by just adjusting the way one inhales and exhales is something everyone would prefer doing. With his deep-seated credence that we all are a part of a beauty conscious world, Swamiji's unique contribution has been in helping ordinary people solve their problems and lead a healthy life through the practice of Pranayama. He has devised a set of six simple Pranayama or breathing exercises which have been readily embraced by the general public as evidenced by the following facts: Swamiji's educational show is broadcast on Indian national TV (AASTHA channel) from morning 6-8 am and evening 8-9 pm (IST) several times a week and he also has dedicated shows such as Total Tandurusti airing on Zee Network, a show on Sahara One at 9:00 am, Yoga Science on IndiaTV at 7:30 am and 1:30 pm. Total viewers are in millions and people latch on to the television sets to watch and practice the exercises.

Swamiji is invited to hold monthly training camps in cities all over India. There is an eight month waiting period before one can see him as he is booked far ahead. Total attendance in these camps exceeds tens of thousands. Viewers of the TV show and attendees at the camp have reported significant improvements in their health - citing relief from many deadly illnesses ranging from diabetes to cancer without the use of any medicines. Therefore, it

is evident that he has a medicine free lifestyle in offering; a life style which is happily embraced by his ardent admirers.

He understands that people need something more from life than mere fulfillment of their physiological needs. And every individual, devoid of his area of profession at the end wants to eat healthy and live healthy. This is then the basic need as every action is motivated by this need and an urge to fulfill this need. He makes people feel empowered and there lies the secret of his success.

#### **RULE 4 # LISTEN TO THE CHOIR AND CREATE CULT BRAND EVANGELISTS**

As human beings, we all get pleasure from sharing our thoughts, ideas, experiences, and discoveries with others, and we are naturally drawn to people and organisations that value and appreciate what each of us has to share. We are even more drawn to people and organisations that actually take our input and act upon it. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of cult brands- all have a strong 'sharing' and 'collaborative' component associated with them. Undoubtedly, this theme of collaboration and sharing is a prime driver behind the fiery passion and fierce loyalty of Baba Brand also.

A company cannot expect to build strong relationship with its customers, if it ignores what they have to say. In every shivir Baba organizes, he takes the opinion of one and all. He has mastered the art of keeping the customers happy. He even gives 'rudraksh mala' to the entire donor community which ingratiates them to do more charity. Psychologists would agree that recognition is one of the biggest motivators and Baba uses this dexterously. He thus creates brand evangelists who support the brand in good times and bad.

Swami Ramdev was in the eye of a controversy as Communist Party of India-Marxist MP, Brinda Karat claimed that the yoga guru's medicines contained animal extracts. His supporters alleged that Karat was an agent for multinational companies and that she was after him because he opposed MNC products. Things came to such a pass that the swami's supporters clashed with CPI-M cadres in New Delhi. It isn't just politicians who are found defending him there are industrialists, doctors and professionals too who stood up to support him.

There are two qualities that are essential for a Brand to qualify for a cult status; firstly there should be a high involvement of the followers which is evident as the followers are sentimentally attached to this brand. The second quality is habit, a feeling of incompleteness without the brand so much so that they feel that they are a part of the extended family. And we find that Baba Ramdev stands strong on both these pretexts.

#### **RULE 5 # CULT BRANDS ALWAYS CREATE CUSTOMER COMMUNITIES**

Every year, there is an annual meeting held at the Patanjali Yog Peeth to commemorate and review the progress and reward the dedicated members. This makes members feel special for one and they get an opportunity to meet Baba, the biggest and most talked about celebrity of the day. Apart from this, there are memberships which are offered and anyone can for a charge become a member of Patanjali Yog Peeth. The community is getting stronger day by day.

#### **RULE 6 # CULT BRANDS ARE INCLUSIVE**

The need for the feeling of self-empowerment and self-fulfilment is timeless and ageless. These are universal qualities that all human beings share. A rebellious young teenager and an aging baby boomer, while separated in decades by age, both want the same feelings of being fit. In fact, their customer bases are so diverse that their followers generally cut across all ages, races, genders, creeds, and socio-economic backgrounds. 'Vasudev Kutumbakam' is the catch line of Baba and he practices it, as evident from the fact that nearly one thousand people have turned out for Swami Ramdev's sessions at the Walkers Stadium. Yoga-enthusiasts flew in from different parts of the world such as Canada, Holland and the United States, for the chance to see their spiritual icon. Like other cult brands, this one is also incredibly open and inclusive.

#### **RULE 7 # CULT BRANDS PROMOTE PERSONAL FREEDOM**

Cult brands eliminate 'command-and-control' thinking. These brands stand for personal freedom and encourage their fans to break from the cast and pursue their own trail. 'Desi' slogan of Baba and his thoughts on 'Imagine India That Can Be' makes one feel nostalgic about their own assets. A feeling of pride is evoked for their culture and people vow to keep up their heritage. Like Linux followers, followers of Baba Ramdev strongly feel that they are



fighting multinational companies. These feeling further endorse the belief of the fans in the Brand they support.

## CONCLUSION:

The common belief that most marketers have is that great brands are built upon product exclusivity and targeted marketing. The better targeted and exclusive the brand, the better the results in terms of sales. Marketers have been following this dictum like the Pied-Piper and many large companies have bought into this strategy. Print and broadcast advertising copy for many major brands is now peppered with both direct and subliminal messages asserting their distinctiveness. Our message inboxes, magazines, and TV sets overflow with this same message. Exclusivity has become the order of the day and all highly targeted, of course!

But here is a Brand which has mass customized itself, believes in mass marketing and has been successfully able to build a 'cult' for himself. This brand has universal appeal, is sharing and collaborative, and the customer range hails from all age groups and regions. All the marketing mix elements are fine tuned to support and strengthen brand personality. This Brand is a result of consistent hard work and carefully and meticulously followed strategy and can be, without hesitation, called a "cult". So far so good but "Will it last the course".

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*(Cont. from page 19)*

## THE ROAD AHEAD...

Reality Shows have had their share of controversy along with their popularity. Surprisingly, even controversy has paid dividends to the marketers. Over the years, there has been a constant debate that whether reality shows are real-enough! But the matter of fact remains that reality shows have hit big-time in India and are here to stay. Marketers have also hit a jackpot with such shows, churning huge revenues for their respective companies. But this may be only tip of the iceberg. The advantages of using reality shows as a marketing and promotional vehicle outweigh most of the traditional marketing mediums. And in the years to come, we may see a spurt in using reality shows as a huge marketing tool.

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