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# Americus Reed on Marketing, Brands and the Cadence of Business and Creativity

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*Americus Reed is a marketing professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He is the marketing department's only identity theorist, which means that he researches the role that consumers' self concepts play in guiding buying decisions. He spoke with Knowledge@Wharton High School about marketing, brands and how his skill at playing drums and classical guitar grooves well with the patterns of business.*

*An edited version of the transcript appears below.*

**Knowledge@Wharton High School:** Can you define marketing in the context of the business world?

**Americus Reed:** Absolutely. Marketing is the process by which business communicates [information] about our products that increase interest, that make consumers aware of our products and that really encourage them to buy our products. Marketing is the fundamental glue, if you will, of any business. Because if you think about it, marketing is essential to generating interest, awareness, opportunity to buy and purchase decisions in consumers. You can have a great product, [but] if nobody knows about it, then it doesn't matter. So marketing is that process by which we communicate and promote our products and brands and services to consumers.

**KWHS:** What is a brand?

**Reed:** A brand is essentially a set of ideas that is associated with a product. So think, for example, of Apple. What comes to mind when you think about Apple products — iPod, iPhone, iPad? Certain things immediately jump to your head, right? [You might associate them with] anti-establishment or hip or cool or sleek products or creativity — these are ideas that make up what the brand means to people. And so, a brand is essentially a set of cohesive ideas or thoughts that define what the product stands for.

Once you have a set of ideas that defines what your brand stands for, you want to make sure that your brand is different from other brands. For example, Apple tries to say that we are creative, we are hip, we are cool, we are sexy, and Microsoft is not. So Microsoft is this other sort of thing that is out there that is stodgy and less exciting and very routine. You try to create interest by differentiating your brand from other possible competitive brands that consumers might be interested in.

**KWHS:** Help us to better understand your specialty. You are an identity theorist. How does that relate to brand identity?

**Reed:** My training is in social psychology. I have a PhD in social psychology and I study how people connect with symbols. How does a person express who they are? Well, one of the things they might do is choose certain bundles, if you will, of products that create an impression that they can communicate to other people. For example, if you believe you are a skater boy, you are going to be drawn towards certain brands that you think represent that lifestyle. The types of brands that are symbolic of who you think you are, or who you aspire to be, will become very appealing to you. Those brands that then become symbols of your identity are brands that you are going to be most loyal to and deeply connected with and emotionally tied to. They're not just brands and symbols; they are a sense of who you are and they are part and parcel of your self concept. Just having those brands and consuming those brands in the presence of other people is a

very powerful way for you to express who you are. I try to study this notion of what we refer to as “identity loyalty,” which is creating this sense of connection through who you want to be and your self concept, and how a brand can develop and leverage that as a strategy to becoming popular and growing its market among consumers.

**KWHS:** What are some of the triggers that lead consumers to become loyal to a product, brand or logo? Can you give some examples that might resonate with teenagers?

**Reed:** There are lots of brands out there, and they have to be seen as authentic. So a brand has to be seen as part of this lifestyle that is connecting with consumers. [Let’s] look at a niche category of branding such as Red Bull. Red Bull tends to be associated with the extreme sports lifestyle. The people who feel they are core representatives of that [Red Bull] lifestyle must see that brand as authentic [if it has any hope of being adopted by that community]. Another [related] issue is creating a deep connection of caring about what that brand community is all about. So if a company comes in and tries to become symbolic of that group and it is seen [instead] as [just] a way of trying to make money, then [that brand] is going to be rejected. The brand has to be [genuinely] interested in the [consumer] lifestyle that it is trying to create a connection with. [Emotional connection is also very important]. When the brand advertises to its consumers, it wants to depict how it is [connected] with this lifestyle in a way that generates the kind of emotional reactions that consumers associate with that lifestyle. Those elements [authenticity and emotional connection] are the starting points by which brands can become deeper triggers for allowing consumers to express who they are through the usage of those brands.

**KWHS:** How do you develop relationships with actual corporations through your research and your work in the classroom? I know you’ve done some work with Saucony, the sneaker maker.

**Reed:** One of the high points for me as an academic is the opportunity to marry research, teaching and interfacing with real world companies. Typically what I do in my courses, both at the undergraduate and the graduate level, is partner with a company. The company will come into my class with their problem. I will then teach [my students] about the tools associated, for example, with understanding why consumers do what they do, and these tools will be applied to the company’s particular situation. As we go throughout the semester, the students are learning how these tools work, why they work, but they’re [also] getting the opportunity to learn by doing and applying these tools to a difficult, real-world situation — a situation that matters.

The company typically comes to us with a mission critical issue that it is dealing with. Companies get exposure to the top talent in terms of the young minds that are going to be coming out soon, potentially looking for jobs with those companies. The students get a big boost from this project idea because they actually feel like what they’re doing is not isolated in some ivory tower, but it’s learning that is being applied [and] that matters in the real world. And thirdly, by interfacing consumers and my students, there is an opportunity to teach consumers more about marketing and more about how business works in the real world.

**KWHS:** How did Saucony become involved?

**Reed:** Last year, Saucony was very interested in trying to understand how to make its brand particularly relevant to high school kids who are scholarly students and athletes. The question that they came to me with was, ‘Americus, we want to understand how to deeply connect emotionally with this particular group of consumers.’ The job of my class was then to do a very thorough analysis of how scholarly high school student athletes make decisions about purchasing shoes. Saucony was interested in understanding that and figuring out a way, then, to brand and communicate a message to that particular group that would make them interested and excited and potentially loyal to the Saucony brand. It was a very nice interface of my students being able to go out and talk to high school students and understand how they make decisions about buying shoes, what brands they like and where Saucony fits [with] their list of popular brands [when they think] about purchasing shoes. And how you can make Saucony jump to the top of that list over competitors such as

Reebok, Nike, Adidas, Puma [and so on]. It was a great project in the end and again, it had this sort of win-win-win aspect to it in terms of myself, the company, my students at the University of Pennsylvania and the high school students who participated in the research.

**KWHS:** What were your interests in high school and how did that set you on a career path toward marketing and college-level instruction?

**Reed:** I was actually more interested in music and art. I found myself [most] interested in understanding how patterns work, and music is really about patterns. You take particular parts of notes and you put them together and create a pattern that sounds appealing to people. So I've always had this idea of what makes patterns stand out and what makes particular patterns work as a good piece of music versus not. When I got into my musical career, I started understanding that I liked to figure out how these patterns emerge and how then these patterns play out in a larger place.

The [business] marketplace is an analogy that works with this. There are different consumer groups, and they are doing different things that are different patterns. Your idea is to try to understand how these patterns come about. What are the combinations of patterns that describe how that market works? There's an interesting interface between business and creativity. Marketing is a huge piece of this because a lot of what is about marketing is about the creative aspect. You analyze, but you also have to create something that is appealing. It has this interesting mix of right- and left-brain skill sets. What I really like about that is that marketing — going back to the original discussion that we were having — is so fundamental to what anyone wants to do. Brands are products [and they] are also people. You are a brand. You are trying to convince people to give you a job or persuade someone to go out with you on a date. You are your brand, so you have to figure out — how do I market myself? How do I do these different things? Because marketing has such huge creative aspects to it and is so fundamental to the human existence, [I was drawn] to try to learn, study and understand this set of concepts associated with marketing more clearly and how the patterns play out in a business setting.

**KWHS:** Fascinating. Did you play an instrument?

**Reed:** I play two instruments. I play classical guitar and I also play drums and percussions. I've done drums and percussion for the longer of those two types of music and again, that ties into this notion of patterns. In our marketing department at the Wharton School, we actually have a band. It consists of my colleagues and me, and we play for the students, too. I'm still doing music in a slightly different way [and] still excited about having that side of creativity that I can express as part of my own identity.

#### Related Links

- [American Marketing Association](#)
- [Fast Company: It's a \(Red\) Bull Market After All](#)
- [The Intersection of Art and Business](#)
- [Saucony](#)
- [The Street: 10 Brand Names Gone, but Not Forgotten](#)
- [Forbes.com: Who Knew? Turns out Google Is a Killer Brand Marketer](#)
- [KWHS: Marketing Student Margot Stern on Pizza, Gatorade and 'Legit' Brand Awareness](#)