

## **Politics aside, Cracker Barrel was latest brand misstep**

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Unless you've been hiding under a rock, you're aware of the latest brand misstep: Cracker Barrel. But let's set the politics aside for a moment.

Even set aside the \$700 million spent on the rebrand and the \$143 million loss in market capitalization (as of Aug. 26).

This latest failure by a big brand (see also Bud Light, Target, Ben & Jerry's, etc.) emanates from something much broader than which side of the political aisle you fall. The problem stems from an advertising shift into homogenization. It can be seen in logo rebrands, color usage, signage, building architecture, and interior design.

Homogenization in branding is a trend that far too many brands have followed. Such brands design their logos the same, write in the same tone and style, and even adopt the same architectural and interior design styles.

While we would suggest it is good practice to follow cultural, color and design trends, we don't believe all brands should look alike. Differentiation (aka positioning) is the key to brand equity.

A lack of differentiation means rather than standing out and connecting uniquely with audiences to build brand loyalty, customers view a sea of sameness regardless of which brand is in view.

### **Dumping the past**

Since Cracker Barrel is the latest punching bag, let's consider how homogenization is as great of an issue for this brand as is the political aspect to this story.

The logo is only a symptom of the much larger rebrand. Cracker Barrel dumped one of the most iconic logos (with very high recall) in favor of one that trends toward every other rebrand that has been done by a large brand in the past several years.

It removed its personality — the barrel, Uncle Herschel, and "Old Country Store" — and shifted from an organic down-home custom font to an institutionalized look with a soulless bold font. While the new font mildly resembles the original, it removes too much of the character from the original and uses the same design style that most large retail brands have adopted.

### **Homogenizing the future**

The real problem isn't the logo, however. It's what the logo change represents, which is removing Americana from the stores and disregarding (yet again) the red-blooded patriotic audiences that frequent Cracker Barrel locations.

This shift is seen best by reviewing the new store interiors, which lack the warmth and down-home feel that defined the brand for so long.

We remember the cluttered front, with a litany of sensory goods for sale, on the walls, at the point of purchase, and in every nook and cranny of the store. You not only smelled the food, you smelled the wood. And every so often, you heard the crack of a loose floorboard under your feet.

There were vintage advertising signs (our favorite) and cast-iron skillets. Quilts adorned the walls. It was the true definition of Americana.

Today, all those elements have been removed, replaced by the typical corporate aesthetic of clean lines and clean spaces — like almost every other corporate-owned restaurant concept. And since the big “logo launch failure,” employees have shared on social media that the food is nothing more than prepackaged contents that they microwave and hope it comes out hot.

There’s an assumption that the next generations don’t want the kitsch. But in many recent polls, Gen Zers are actively pursuing the “things of old:” knitting, crocheting, getting back to nature (in favor of staying inside all the time) ... and even, receiving mail!!

What resulted? Cracker Barrel has alienated its older customer base, and done nothing to attract a younger generation.

If the move by Cracker Barrel was to “track with the culture,” then it’s a pretty major misstep. And it simultaneously removes any differentiation it once enjoyed. Whenever someone mentioned “Cracker Barrel,” Americana came to mind.

With the speed of social media these days, that differentiated idea won’t be associated with Cracker Barrel much longer unless it reverses course.

## **Creating an emotional connection**

Hopefully, since it has now recanted and decided to return to its original logo, the corporation will take the next step and return its interiors to the cozy, comfy, wonderful-smelling stores we all know and love.

Branding isn’t about what you see, but what you feel. Our emotions connect us to memories and memories are what gave Cracker Barrel strong brand awareness and equity. It’s why families continued to eat there — rather, why they continued to fellowship there.

No one eats at Cracker Barrel for a three-star Michelin menu. They want comfort food with comfortable family and friends in a comfortable environment. Cracker-barrel, it’s your move ...

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