

## IMAGE, STYLE, DESIGN

# Global Blah!

THE THREE BS OF GLOBAL BRANDS:  
BLAND, BORING, & BLAH  
AND WHY PRODUCT ORIGINALITY  
MIGHT BE A THING OF THE PAST

In 1976, my uncle traveled to Switzerland while he was stationed in London for work. I was a child, living in suburban Chicago, and Switzerland seemed like a faraway, exotic world to me. The mountains, the technology, the lifestyle were all just figments of my imagination. When he returned, he brought a present for me—an authentic Swiss Army knife. The sought-after survival tool from the land of high mountains made me the envy of all of my friends. I felt great pride to own such an exclusive item from a foreign land.

Fast-forward 35 years to 2011, when a friend of mine took a similar trip to Switzerland. He was traveling to the Alps for vacation and asked me what I wanted him to bring back for me—some Swiss cheese or chocolate? A signature cuckoo clock? Perhaps a new Swiss pocketknife? I soon realized there weren't many uniquely Swiss products that I couldn't find locally. Toblerone was available in the candy aisle at my grocery store, and cheese in the fine foods section. Cuckoo clocks could be found on a specialty website, and pocketknives were available at any upscale watch or department store. Although it's the thought that counts with any gift, I politely suggested that given current exchange rates, my friend would be better off purchasing one of these Swiss items for a cheaper price at home. The sense of ownership I felt from receiving my uncle's gift was far different from my friend's offer of the same present three decades later.

Thanks to today's interconnected global marketplace, all it takes is the right amount of time, money and Internet access, and you can find nearly any product around the world, no matter how "unique" it is to that culture. Want some authentic Buffalo wing sauce from Buffalo, New York? Order it online, and you'll have it in 3-5 days. Dying to purchase another necklace from that obscure boutique you found while traveling in Europe? Check their website, and you'll find that it's actually carried in 20 stores stateside.



The fact is, most global brands are suffering from the 3 Bs: boring, blah, and bland. An item that once used to bring with it a sense of elite ownership is now commonplace. The hunt and the thrill of finding products specific to one environment has fallen by the wayside with today's "need it now" mentality. It is easy to see how we got into this situation: a local brand does well, gets gobbled up by a large multinational corporation, multinational corporation expands distribution globally, stock goes up, and it searches for new acquisition targets. The result is consumer who once enjoyed searching for a special product available only in a specific locale, and is now bored with everything readily available at his or her fingertips.

But not every successful consumer retailer has fallen prey to the 3 Bs. Upscale department store Selfridges in London still makes it an experience to come to their Oxford street location by offering designs from local

talent—but only in store. They also incite interest (and sometimes controversy) with their dramatic window dressings, including a depiction of Alexander McQueen hanging from the gallows only months after his suicide. Though macabre, consumers seek Selfridges out as a destination, and the store has ensured that whether people are coming to shop or to see its window display, it's an experience that keeps the store from falling prey to the 3 Bs.

As the world becomes smaller and Internet connections get faster, consumers are going to be even more hungry for unique products that provide them with a sense of wonder and proud ownership. And if merchants can resist the urge to expand so much that they become ubiquitous, then they'll maintain that panache that makes their merchandise special. Which means, perhaps on my next overseas travels, I can bring my godson a local gift that he'll remember and treasure for the next 35 years later, just as I do with my pocketknife. ♣