

How to Build Your Brand “Gangnam Style”

More than three quarters of a billion people – Over 880 million as of this writing – have watched the #1 YouTube video “Gangnam Style” since its release on July 15, 2012. That means that more than a third of all people on the planet who are on the Internet have laid eyes on that one video. Talk about powerful, low-cost branding! What marketer wouldn’t love to reach that kind of awareness and engagement with their own brand message?

If you’re one of the few people who haven’t yet watched this video, it’s a song by a Korean rap star called PSY who had, up to now, only been well-known in his native country. This single four-minute video has launched PSY into international super-stardom in a matter of weeks. So, what can marketers and brand builders learn from branding “Gangnam Style?”

Be catchy. The Gangnam Style song is clearly what they call an “ear worm.” It’s the kind of song that gets into your head and stays there. So, when working on your own brand messages, think powerful, memorable tag lines – phrases that are strategic but catchy, that represent what you want your brand to stand for, and that will easily stick in the minds of your customers.

Be “eye entertainment.” The Gangnam Style video is very visual and includes a variety of unique scenes in colorful environments. It’s attention-grabbing. Since our eyes are responsible for 70% of our human experience, visuals in branding are fundamental. Combine memorable, ownable visuals with your catchy strategic taglines, and your brand will have sticking power.

Be unexpected. One thing you have to say about the Gangnam Style video is that it’s not what you expect. PSY is hardly your average handsome, hunky rock star. He’s unusual, unique, and different. He’s funny and quirky. All of these elements make his video even more memorable because it’s not at all what we anticipate. What can your brand do that is unexpected?

Make an emotional connection. Watching the Gangnam Style video is an emotional experience. It reaches beyond your eyes and ears and engages you at a deeper level. All that, and the song is sung ... in Korean?! I estimate more than 95% of all the people watching the video have no idea what is being said! It just goes to show that the words you use in your marketing messages are important, but you build a powerful brand by forging an emotional connection with your target customers. How well do your existing marketing materials connect emotionally with your current and prospective customers?

Inspire action. The Gangnam Style video makes you want to get out of your seat and move. Indeed, when PSY performed the song at the annual American Music Awards, the entire audience rose to their feet within seconds and began dancing. How can you inspire your customers into action through your own marketing materials?

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Repeat, repeat, repeat. The melody and rhythm of the Gangnam Style song itself are very repetitive. To add to that, PSY has created his own dance style – the “horse-riding” move – that is also repeated throughout the video (and which has been parodied across the globe). Repetition and consistency are key to remembering a brand message and to helping solidify with customers what you want your brand to stand for. How repetitive and consistent are your own brand communications?

Leverage word of mouth. I found out about PSY’s Gangnam Style video from a Kiwi colleague who lives in Australia. Think about how you heard of it – through a friend, family member, or work mate? That’s the strength of word of mouth! Just how powerful has this form of marketing been for Gangnam Style? For perspective, the previous #1 video on YouTube was Justin Bieber’s “Baby” video that reached 804 million hits in 34 months. Gangnam Style reached more than 830 million hits in *135 days!* (Can we say “Bye Bye ‘Baby’?”) I don’t know how much money PSY spent on the video, but his return on investment must be enormous. It just goes to show that word of mouth is still the lowest-cost, most effective marketing that exists. It’s essentially ‘free media.’ How can you make your brand message something that your customers want to share with others?

Don’t forget name recognition. One problem with the Gangnam Style video is that most people watching the video remember the name of the song but not the name of the artist. In fact, I admit I had to do some research to figure out who the singer was. Effective branding requires a good, solid link to the brand name. No matter how good your communications, if potential customers can’t remember your brand name, you aren’t spending your money wisely.

Avoid the “one-hit wonder” syndrome. Another potential problem PSY may have in the future is repeating this phenomenal success. Will he be a flash in the pan, a one-hit wonder? How does he come up with a second video that’s just as memorable? That remains to be seen, but it’s a great challenge to be faced with – the kind of challenge that we would all like to have as brand-builders.

All of this points to good news: You don’t have to spend a fortune to build a powerful brand. So, get to the drawing board and think about how you can build your own product, service, company, or personal brand using “Gangnam Style” strategies.

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With an MBA from Harvard Business School, Brenda’s career has spanned more than two decades and has included developing mega brands for Procter & Gamble and Bristol-Myers Squibb across four continents and 50 countries. Now, as President of Brand Development Associates (BDA) International, she travels the world speaking, training, and coaching individuals and companies to greater success through creative, yet practical, corporate and personal brand development.

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