1 THE GREAT CULT PARADOX: WHY PEOPLE JOIN

What compels sane, stable, intelligent individuals to sacrifice virtually everything? Why do they throw money, time, sometimes their careers, the regard of their peers, and even their families on the altar of cult belonging? Commitment—true commitment—is exclusionary. Devotion to one thing implicitly requires rejection of another. There is an opportunity cost to everything and joining an unorthodox belief system often demands a very high expenditure indeed.

Devotion to a cult brand also can require significant cost. Obviously, the degree of sacrifice is not the same as that of a cult member, but in the context of consumerism, joining a brand can be pricey, and not just in terms of cash. Why does a loyal devotee of jetBlue leave his home in New Jersey to drive past Newark and La Guardia airports, cross two Manhattan bridges and hack across the endless plains of Queens to take a one hour flight from the airline's home base at JFK? (If you don't live in New York just know that most residents would be incredulous at such an act.) Why does Sean, a student, who can't regularly afford his lunch, feel compelled to upgrade his Mac computer every time a new model is launched just because he wants "to support the company"? Why does the

same hungry student buy directly from Apple so that "they get all the money"?

Cult members are manipulated by brilliant psychopathic leaders. That is the populist explanation. And it's as poorly reasoned, and as insulting to its members, as is the idea that cult brand members have been brainwashed by cynical corporations. It assumes that consumers of cults and brands alike are bereft of free will and the powers of discrimination. Perhaps they are flawed by poor emotional backgrounds and educational and financial impoverishment. It's almost inevitable that they'll join a cult because of their faulty upbringing and mental instability.

Research contradicts this interpretation—not only my own, but data collected by scientists and sociologists who have studied cult phenomena for decades. Included among the cult members I spoke with were a senior executive in an M&A firm, managers of corporations, homemakers and students, a clinical biologist, and a financial broker. They were on the whole smart, sane individuals, often in highly respectable jobs, well aware of the choice they had made and reasoned defenders of it to detractors. They were otherwise ordinary in every respect. As Steve Hassan, one of the leading cult deprogrammers in the United States admits: "Since my departure from the Moon cult, I have counseled or spoken with more than a thousand former members of cults of all kinds. These people have come from every sort of background and ranged in age from twelve to eighty-five. Although some of them clearly had severe emotional problems before becoming involved, the great majority were stable, intelligent, idealistic people who tended to have good educations and come from respectable families."[1]

Studies of the populations of major cults by religious sociologists report that their memberships generally follow a similar profile. Eileen Barker, a sociologist from the London School of Economics, undertook a large study of the membership of the Unification Church (more famously known as the Moonies) at the

height of its popularity.[2] Her data confirmed that of other academics who had profiled other groups. The cult's recruits tended to come from "conventional and highly respectable homes in which traditional values of family life, morality, and decency were upheld. They tended to believe that their parents' relationships were happy or very happy." In terms of demographics, she found that joiners were largely middle class, disproportionately more so than the general population and that they had good academic backgrounds.

So, these people tended not be damaged by broken homes, impoverished, or rendered gullible by ignorance. But were they sane? Were they ripe meat for the vultures that preyed on psychologically vulnerable souls? Barker continues: "[There is a suggestion that] those who become Moonies cannot really be said to be in their right minds because they are particularly passive, pathetic, or suggestible people. But the evidence suggests that, although a few Moonies might fall into this category, the majority do not; indeed, it seems that, while some such people may be drawn to the workshop, it is precisely those whom one might have expected to be the most vulnerable to persuasion who turn out to be non-joiners."

Ah, but perhaps they were unfortunate enough to have been brainwashed. Anyone, whatever his or her mental state, can fall victim to the machinations of the perverted doctors of psychological manipulation. Even if you have somehow squared your conscience and have opened this book relishing the opportunity to brainwash your consumers, or potential cult members, I'm afraid you're in for a disappointment. The technique has long been debunked as a credible tactic to generate sustained commitment to anything, including cults.[3]

Mainly, those who join cults do not do so because they are emotionally, mentally, or intellectually flawed or because failings in their upbringing have propelled them into the arms of a more loving or supportive environment. Or because they have been victims of sinister mind control techniques. They join for reasons that

you or I would recognize, find reasonable, and have acted upon ourselves.

Similarly, near total information, decades of collective experience, and vast product choice make it very hard to hoodwink the modern consumer even if you wanted to. Nowadays, it's not unusual to have your carefully crafted brand strategy played back to you by consumers in a focus group. Buyers nowadays tend to be very media and marketing literate (almost 20 percent of all undergraduates received a business management degree in 2000–2001). The techniques to "seduce" the consumer are mostly open to scrutiny by everyone. Even when the marketing techniques are especially clever and elicit extreme devotion, the seller is often praised by those who have been seduced. As one loyal consumer of Snapple said admiringly in a group interview, "We've been bamboozled by The Man and we know it."

Some cult members have undoubtedly been attracted by the charisma of their leaders, and some brand purchasers are surely a little deluded and extreme. But the majority buy into their respective belief systems for very good, very normal reasons and are quite aware of the criteria that informs those decisions.

THE CRUX OF THE PARADOX

The common belief is that people join cults to conform. Actually, the very opposite is true. They join to become more individual. At the heart of the desire to join a cult, in fact any community to which you will become committed, is a paradox. It's the central paradox of cult belonging and the one that destroys this most pervasive of populist myths.

As one cult member unequivocally put it, "Belonging allows the individual to become more himself. You become more you." This is an essential "why" (the central motivation to join and belong) that

we need to understand
techniques to generate

How can this pos
Temple and Heaven's
not its development.
examples aside, how
individuality?

Actually the parad
perienced at some tin
sometimes explicitly
of the sense of belon
looking for somewhe
and even celebratory
confident enough to
space" as one cult m
mally felt among str
you are broken with
work for, your neigh
find a place where it
consider to be more

The Moonies gra
during their introd
the paradox. If a pro
a street encounter o
one of the Moonie
to foster intense int
bers. They played g
gether. If the recrui
were praised and
participants report
port in everything

The cult parado
four basic steps:

(continued from front flap)

we need to understand before we apply the multitude of "whats" (the techniques to generate attraction and loyalty) that are derived from it.

How can this possibly be? The mass suicides of the People's Temple and Heaven's Gate cults suggest the destruction of the self, not its development. Even if we put these two extreme (and rare) examples aside, how can belonging to anything result in enhanced individuality?

Actually the paradox is something that almost everyone has experienced at some time. A community of like people implicitly and sometimes explicitly endorses the individual. It's a vital ingredient of the sense of belonging that most crave when they say they are looking for somewhere to "feel at home." It can create an uncritical and even celebratory environment in which the individual can feel confident enough to find and express himself. There is a "safe space" as one cult member said to me, where the inhibitions normally felt among strangers are removed and the barriers to being you are broken with impunity. You may change the company you work for, your neighborhood, social club, and even your friends, to find a place where it is more possible to *be* yourself with people you consider to be more *like* yourself.

The Moonies grasped this concept to use as a recruitment tool during their introductory weekends. They effectively accelerated the paradox. If a prospect showed any interest in the group during a street encounter or any other social contact, they were invited to one of the Moonie camps for a weekend. The focus of the stay was to foster intense interaction between prospects and church members. They played games, sang, and prepared and shared meals together. If the recruit achieved anything (like singing a song) they were praised and complimented. The overwhelming feeling that participants reported was of unequivocal love, and absolute support in everything they did.

The cult paradox dynamic can be looked at in terms of these four basic steps:

1. An individual might have a feeling of *difference,* even *alienation* from the world around them.
2. This leads to *openness* to or *searching* for a more compatible environment.
3. They are likely to feel a sense of *security* or *safety* in a place where one's difference from the outside world is seen as a virtue, not a handicap.
4. This presents the circumstances for *self-actualization* within a group of like-minded others who celebrate the individual for being himself.

The feeling of difference and alienation I'm referring to is not necessarily extreme. Everyone feels at least some separation from the world around him. To not would really indicate that you are some kind of herd animal, perhaps even insane. There can be no sense of self unless you feel somewhat different from the world in which you live.

For some, the sense of separation can be enough to prompt them to search for a place where they "feel at home" or where the meaning system is more in accord with their circumstances at the time. The person may have experienced some trauma: a bereavement, divorce, or accident that prompts them to fundamentally reassess their worldview. For others it can simply be a low-grade dissatisfaction with the status quo. One man explained why he joined a cult: "I believed that life without some other meaning than the day-to-day routine wasn't really worth it, or there just wasn't enough lasting joy and meaning there. . . . I believed there had to be more." These less-distressed people may simply be open to an alternative when it crosses their path. Active searching or more passive openness are the two circumstances that create an opportunity for cult recruitment.

A woman I will call Joanna fell more into the latter camp. Joanna joined a secretive and currently controversial cult called

The Work. She is a successful, attractive, intelligent woman, Catherine Deneuve–ish in appearance. She was fairly typical of many of her urban contemporaries: accomplished but dissatisfied. She had significant responsibility in a major corporation in New York City. However, after years of striving in her career she had begun to feel disconnected from the "the things that were important to me." She had made a series of minor incremental decisions that had brought her to a point that she had never intended.

"I really didn't know how I got where I was," Joanna explained. "I started out as an art major. I was going into the textile design world and then I ended up being a manager of a corporate business. How did I get there? I was not aware of the sequence of events which I think happened more by default than anything else, but I ended up in the spot that I was in."

She realized that she had little in common with her colleagues and she had lost purpose, which for her was intellectual inquiry, ideas, and art. She was introduced to The Work by a girlfriend's boyfriend. The opportunity to reconnect with herself through a group of similar people was attractive enough for her to accept his invitation to attend a "class" in a downtown loft.

It focused on the philosophy of Ouspensky, who taught that most of us allegedly live in a state of "waking sleep," and that man should undertake exercises to force the consciousness to a higher level of awareness. Joanna found the group and this concept intriguing and eventually joined. She stayed for sixteen years (at considerable financial cost and time commitment).

Outside the group was a tolerable but incompatible life. Inside the group, Joanna found "people who shared the same interests, the same values. That was important." She felt a sense of "camaraderie or sense of community." This sense of belonging had a very important effect. "So in this group, although it was structured rather oddly," Joanna explained, "I felt understood, validated, supported. That the things that I was truly interested in were not just poppycock." The

"true" unexpressed side of her that had been stifled in a stiff corporate environment was able to flourish within the albeit tight confines of a secretive group.

Joanna's story simply articulates a universal experience. We all have an awareness of our own uniqueness and difference. We might feel uncomfortable or dissatisfied in an environment where it is not recognized and encouraged. Being welcomed into a group where that difference is validated and encouraged by people who are also different, but like ourselves, is a relief and even exciting. This process is recognizable as a human constant, that is, it is common to everyone and is played out daily in all kinds of circumstances whether at work, at a church, in a social group, joining the military or a fraternity, or even buying a brand.

THE CULT BRAND PARADOX

The same paradox can be found at the heart of cult brands. A Mac user I interviewed, a writer, had personal characteristics not unlike those of Joanna's. He's a successful contributor to journals and magazines, articulate, engaging, and bright. Nor was he a typical nerd. Although slightly disheveled and a little bookish, some of the women in the group clearly found him attractive. He told me that "a Mac made me creative. No, actually I was creative to begin with, and in some ways they made me more creative."

This reveals a very intense connection to a brand. Note how his statement echoes the "you become more you" comment that we saw earlier. His association with the Mac fraternity has made him "more himself," he claims. It has taken that part of his identity that he considers his most defining characteristic, his creativity, and accelerated it. That's a pretty important role he has ascribed to a mere brand.

The community that surrounds Apple is typical of contemporary neighborhoods. No longer dependent on geographic prox-

imity, they tend to be defined by a state of mind, or collective conviction. The Apple community is not even defined by the product itself anymore according to one student, Sean, who said, "In a literal sense, it's based around this machine, but it's based around a certain way of thinking."

Apple has built an enviably strong community based on a "certain way of thinking." Apple brand members (and they definitely see themselves as "members," not just buyers) would define themselves by their different attitude to life, and they align that attitude with that of the Apple brand and the others who buy it. Like Joanna, they have gravitated to a community of people that think more alike, and less like the rest of the world.

Apple has cleverly leveraged the feelings associated with the cult paradox described in the steps above to elevate that brand to cult status: alienation and rejection, followed by validation that in turn sets the stage for self-actualization.

Others echo the Apple ethos.

"It's okay to be odd. We're odd too."

"Like, there's nothing wrong with you . . . that you're not considered an asshole . . . that people don't say you're doing that and we're all doing this. It's okay to march to the beat of a different drummer."

Apple has long had a large community of consumers who pride themselves on their nonconformism. They've seen themselves as creative people in an uncreative world and have tended to find what refuge they can in the businesses of architecture, advertising, music, and film, Apple's traditionally strong business base (currently roughly 30 percent of its customers are graphic designers and artists). To these people, Apple's call to challenge the norm has elevated their attachment to the brand beyond the simple desire to buy a clever box of electronics.

"I spent twenty-six of my years not conforming. Why the hell should I start now? The Mac has played a big role in helping me not conform." A loyal user said this when we were talking about

the "Think Different" campaign running at the time. It celebrated famous individuals who had gone against the grain, who had been considered eccentric or even weird. Their ideas and their passion, however, had changed the world. The TV, poster, and print ads featured Picasso, Gandhi, Amelia Earhart, Richard Branson, Einstein, Marilyn Monroe, and others. It was a public declaration that their customers were not alone. In fact, they were in a community of heroes. It represented a broadcast endorsement of who they were. As one person said, "It's okay to be strange . . . it's okay to come up with stupid ideas, to be different."

The campaign broadcast validation to those who had always felt different from and uneasy in a world of conformists (as they saw it). It was the mass media equivalent of love-bombing, the technique the Moonies use to overwhelmingly endorse the individuals who attended the recruitment weekends (except perhaps a little more intelligently done). It was a classic use of the modern means of community building for those groups where geography is a barrier to bonding.

Apple CEO Steve Jobs and his advertising agency had latched upon the inherent feelings of difference and alienation of people who had probably felt separate from the rest of their worlds for most of their lives, simply because they leaned more toward the creative or the intellectual. They were the ones picked on at school for not being jocks or cheerleaders, or at least for not wanting to be. The brand made a siren call to those that felt that way and offered a virtual community of like-others. Jobs publicly validated his membership by associating himself and his fans with those heroes of society originally castigated for zigging when the rest zagged.

THE CULT PARADOX IN SISTERHOOD

Jordana is a Wiccan. It's a cult that's enjoyed a resurgence in recent decades. It's said to trace its origins back to the Old Religion of pre-

Christian Europe that was demonized (literally) by the Church into a religion of devil worship and malevolent witches. In her mid-thirties, black-haired, dark-eyed, and animated as she spoke, Jordana appeared like any other engaging woman at ease with herself.

Her road to becoming a Wiccan was long and arduous. Jordana had grown up as a Hasidic Jew, a milieu where there are rarely tighter bonds between family, cultural, spiritual, racial, and community identity. It was one in which, as she grew into a conscious adult, she wished to explore her own identity. Jordana first wanted to become a rabbi. She asked her teachers questions about the role of women in the Torah and the Bible. She probed about Lilith. "They considered these to be dangerous questions. I think I realized that as a woman my participation was [to be] very limited."

Alienation

Her desire to integrate further into this community and to express her blooming identity as a woman was eventually blocked with disastrous results. Jordana said, "You know, as a woman . . . all the education is geared toward being a wife and a mother. And I felt that was too limiting for me. Ultimately what happened, at fifteen-and-a-half, I was excommunicated by a group of Hasidic rabbis. It was a very painful experience for me."

Her community could not reconcile her ambitions for her spirituality with her gender. She interrogated her world and she did not fit. She could not belong. She could not be herself. The insult was profound enough to propel her to the edge of self-destructive behavior. Jordana said, "I was in a lot of trouble at the time. There were many places I could have turned, drugs, discotheques all night, whatever."

Openness

Fortunately she didn't. Nor did she desperately investigate other worldviews in favor of the one she had left. At just the right time however, it seemed that Wicca found her. "I wasn't consciously looking," she said. "I wasn't looking through the Yellow Pages, or flyers saying, 'what is my new religion?' Somehow, this came across my path and I embraced it. Not just the people, but also the teaching."

Belonging

When Jordana joined the Sisterhood of Wicca, she progressed through the four stages of initiation. She described a rite of passage where "it's confrontation time, it's a very difficult phase. There's a lot of stuff in your face and having to deal with and conquer your fears." Jordana's fellow witch Cynthia described how being amongst like-others allowed women to feel secure enough to really expose who they were: "I think there is really incredible strength with my own sisterhood. I've seen a lot of women tear down walls that have been in place and really get to know who they are inside. It's a safe place because they're among women."

Self-Actualization

Jordana became a senior member of the community and has even written books on Wicca. She's proud of her progress and regrets that her family has trouble with her belief system. Her words betray her sense of triumph and vindication at finally being able to have

developed herself. She concluded, "I am a Priestess. I am a Rabbi. I am a Rabbi Wicca. So it's happened for me."

A SISTERHOOD OF BRAND SALESWOMEN

The Mary Kay Corporation is a classic example of the paradox within a business, a brand, and some would say, a fully fledged cult (one that enjoyed $1.2 billion in sales in 2001, with more than 850,000 sales consultants in thirty-seven countries). Whichever it is, it provided a context for Paula to flourish. Paula has an open face and an Irish softness about her. She was neatly turned out for our interview in a business suit that matched her long, wavy brown hair. She's in her forties but looks perhaps late thirties. She was proud of her achievements, but she had a self-effacing manner that disarmed one's expectation. I expected a brassy, bullying, overly made-up cosmetics consultant.

Earlier in her career, Paula had worked for a graphics company where she ran its sales department. She had built the unit from five to twenty people and increased its sales from $250,000 to $3 million in two years. She ran her department "her way," which coincided with the company's. Its values were hers. She said, "I believe that if you keep people happy, they're going to work harder, they're going to want to work for you." She grew as a manager within the company as her confidence developed. The company rewarded her with more responsibility and greater flexibility.

There was an implicit recognition between Paula and the company she worked for. She belonged within the value system of the company. Her work community was one in which she felt recognized and endorsed and she flourished.

Alienation

Then everything changed. The owner wanted to retire and sell the company. With an eye to squeezing the juice from the company budget sheet for a plump bottom line, he became "less flexible with my expense account in terms of taking care of my guys." She refused to alter her principles and undermine the group she had built. She "wouldn't change, wouldn't cut back," and continued to motivate and reward her staff. "It was successful, and I didn't see why I needed to change," Paula said. She was fired when she returned from jury duty. "After eight or nine years making a lot of money for them. I was really heartbroken. I was really crushed emotionally. My self-esteem was just shattered."

Openness

She decided to stay home with her two-year-old son. A year later and now more cynical, a worldview crossed her path that coincided with her own, and she seized it. An old high school girlfriend called her and invited her over to sample some Mary Kay products. She was just starting her business and wanted to get her friend's opinion. Paula visited her friend with a "whatever" state of mind. She'd heard Mary Kay was a "nice company" but she assumed the products were old-fashioned and would not suit her skin. Her friend's story about how she could make money while bringing up her family impressed her and so did the products.

Then she heard a little bit more about the company. "The principles of Mary Kay's company were a lot like my own philosophies and principles in running my department," Paula said. "We're ex-

pected to encourage and praise people. So it was very, very validating for me. I was a very easy recruit."

Paula's language draws magical significance to her encounter with and entry into the Mary Kay sisterhood. She emphasized that her friend had unknowingly invited her on her birthday. The language of mysticism continues as she describes her conversion experience. "When we initially decide to become Mary Kay consultants, we come into the company," she said, "but then after not very long, Mary Kay comes into us. Then we're really there for life."

This post-rationalization of the encounter as something fated cropped up during every interview we conducted. The self-story is rewritten and retold to confer significance on what appeared at the time to be a random event. It's as if the meeting must transcend the apparent ordinariness of accident in order to bear the weight of the significance in the person's life that the subsequent events conferred.

Paula described one of the regular meetings among sales consultants to which a potential recruit is often invited to introduce them to the company. "She'll sit in. She'll be included. She's not put in an awkward position but she's included and her being there is celebrated. So she feels welcome and important and valuable."

From the first moment, the operating ethos is a free exchange of ideas and tips on how to build your individual businesses. The sales consultants are not competitive with each other. Paula's story is vindicated through the ideological fit between her view on how to run a successful business and that of Mary Kay's.

Belonging

Overwhelmingly impressed by the annual meeting in Dallas, Paula saw an unalloyed generosity and celebration of achievement that

made her feel that she was back home. She had finally found a community that she recognized as like herself, and who recognized her as one of them. And the success of Mary Kay appears to be an endorsement of her worldview. She summarizes the experience: "We're not alone. We're definitely in business for ourselves, but we have an amazing network of women all over the country. It's certainly my business but there's so much more. You just have this sisterhood and this sorority, this feeling of belonging and doing, taking care of each other."

Self-Actualization

And what did this sense of belonging do for Paula? Had it changed her? She said she had not been changed, she had been allowed to become more herself. She'd grown into the person she should have been. "All those things I think were there before, but now they're empowered to come out."

Paula's perception was that she had not conformed. Joining Mary Kay meant rediscovering her identity and potential for growth.

Why do people join cults? In these stories we've seen that the organizations Jordana and Paula joined conferred two highly motivational benefits: a community that created a sense of meaning and the possibility to express their true selves. Paula and Jordana both felt that the groups they joined and their embedded worldview allowed them to *become themselves* in a way in which the outside world did not. The core paradox of cults is that "belonging means becoming more me."

2 YOU'RE DIFFERENT, WE'RE DIFFERENT

Cults will flatter you. They will make you feel special and individual in a way that you are unlikely to have felt before. They will celebrate the very things that make you feel different from everyone else; the members will get to know you deep down, and they will love you for what they find.

And you will love them. It will feel good to be recognized for who you really are. All the little compromises that you may have made to "get along" in life—the small or large tradeoffs most of us make for social acceptance—will disappear. You can be yourself.

To generate this response cult organizations need to separate themselves from the status quo. They must exist outside the norms of the culture to appeal to those who feel alienated by those norms. The cult will provide a perfect fit. It does this by both recognizing and celebrating its potential membership's difference, and establishing its own. It needs to say "you're different, we're different too."

Now, face your fear. This means that you can't please all of the people all of the time. One of the greatest dreads of marketers is turning off any potential customers. Sometimes it seems like they have a horror of displeasing any living being. Well, to generate cultlike devotion to your brand, the kind of attachment that leads

to large profits and word of mouth, you cannot expect to secure every man, woman, and child on the planet. Instead of trying not to alienate anyone, you must target the alienated and simultaneously separate your organization from the mainstream. Harley-Davidson embraces this fact in its brand guidelines document: "Harley Truth #1: 'Harley is not for everyone.' "

Remember, creating a clear sense of separation from "the rest," and appealing to the alienated has not denied Harley-Davidson a huge business success. In fact it has pulled off dominant market leadership with a repeat purchase rate of 95 percent (at an average of $20,000 a bike this is significant). Removing your organization from the status quo does not necessarily condemn it to minor status.

Cult brands don't become successful only by celebrating anti-social values and behavior, like Harley Davidson. Nor does a cult have to appeal to a marginal group of social discontents in order to grow and flourish. Within one of the most conformist institutions on the planet—a bank—lurks a cult in the making. Citigroup, the world's largest financial institution, is partway through a well thought out, carefully crafted effort to nurture a cult brand—one that focuses on the alienation felt by 51 percent of America's population: women. They are generating cultlike attachment to their brand Women & Co. amongst the well-heeled and the socially connected.

Let's look at one of the world's most famous religious cults to illustrate the dynamics of difference. Neena felt very different from her immediate surroundings when she joined the Hare Krishna movement in the mid-1970s. She was looking for people interested in more spiritual lives when she transferred to UC Santa Barbara and was sorely disappointed by the prevalence of sex, drugs, and rock and roll among her fellow students. Having recently become abstinent from such indulgences, she felt she needed friends to help support her decisions. She found those friends when she was introduced to the Krishna movement through an acquaintance at an alternative bookstore. She had found a group that, in stark contrast

to the climate of the times, believed spirituality to be a priority in their lives. They didn't drink or eat meat. They followed strict rules of behavior, and performed rituals in their worship of the divine.

After graduation, she moved to the cult's compound, gave away all of her possessions, and wrapped herself into the sari that she was to wear for the next twelve years: "I always wore my sari, I always followed all the principles, I went to all the programs, I chanted all my rounds every day. I mean, I was a really serious follower."

It is an all or nothing commitment to the Krishnas that forces its members to give up their former lives. Most members live in Krishna temples and adopt an ascetic and monastic life. These devotees take on new names and vow to abstain from intoxication, gambling, illicit sexual behavior, and the eating of meat, fish, or eggs. They shed their Western clothes to don traditional Indian robes and carry a set of beads for chanting. The Hare Krishna mantra must be chanted sixteen times a day and every morning members apply clay markings to the forehead and nose as a sign that the body is a temple of the supreme lord. Male devotees shave their heads except for a small tuft of hair at the back that symbolizes surrender to Krishna, their spiritual master.

The Krishna movement has never been fully accepted by American society. The strangeness of its doctrine and the necessity of its devotees to cut off their connections to the outside world have sparked the ire of the establishment. The families of Krishna recruits frequently assume that their children have been kidnapped and brainwashed. In their minds, it is the only plausible explanation for the defection of their children.

But the Krishna community doesn't seem to mind society's scorn. They have a well-defined sense of group identity that very consciously separates itself from the establishment. Neena recalls, "There was a real strong thing about us and them. That, basically, we're good and they're bad. We would talk about how bad the

outside world is and how bad the people are, and how nobody out there believes in God, how they're all meat eaters, how they're all going to Hell. Before you met your guru, you were a dog, like literally, that's what they would say."

These black-and-white distinctions translated into a common feeling of superiority among members. A feeling that reached "holier than thou" proportions and climaxed for Neena one day when she was driving on the freeway. "I just believed that everyone else in all the other cars were going to Hell and that I was the only one who knew anything about God on that whole freeway. I felt so sorry for everyone."

Alienated individuals are the raw food of cults and cult brands. They feel different from everyone else. They feel that there is not a "fit" in their present environment, and that prevents them from expressing their true identity. Cults are a home for such people by offering "fit" where the outside world cannot. The individuals are different, and so are the cults. They are a match for each other.

To attract the Neenas of the world, cults and cult brands need to be "beacons of difference." Cults need to cultivate separateness and home in on those who also feel separate. To create a mutual sense of separation your organization will need to:

1. *determine* your potential franchise's sense of difference,
2. *declare* your own difference with doctrine and language,
3. *demarcate* yourself from the outside world, and
4. *demonize* "the other."

The Krishna movement declared their difference with a polarizing ideology. Their movement was clearly demarcated in its doctrine, its members' behavior, and their appearance. And the cult created an acute sense of the other by demonizing it as a world of lost souls (a tendency of many cults).

We will now look at these four D's of difference and examine how some cult brands have successfully employed them.

1. *Determine* Your Franchise's Sense of Difference

Harley-Davidson has capitalized on a feeling of difference felt by enough people to drive it to market leadership. Here's how one Harley rider I spoke to defined it. He said he hated the "rigamarole": "Everyday things. You brush your teeth. You put on your underwear, you go outside. You empty the mailbox. You look through the bills. You go to work, get off at a certain time. You come home; she's got dinner on the table. It's a beautiful night. Maybe I'll watch *Married . . . with Children*, I don't know. That's rigamarole. It's all definitely not me."

Harley is a "pied piper" brand. It calls out to discontents with an accurately pitched song of recognition. It advocates commitment to a community that is familiar in the most profound way possible, one that is aligned with characteristics that the prospect considers are the "real me."

The real me in this case is the individual who feels that he doesn't quite feel at home in the so-called rigamarole of traditional society. At heart he believes he is a rebel. He loves the freedom of the road and the company of others who also feel trapped by suburbia, job, and family. It's taboo not to like those things because they are the sacred cows of society. But that's the point. Harley riders are free and individual. They are the Gullivers who unleash themselves from the bonds of day-to-day-ness.

A Harley rider I spoke with in a focus group described what made them all different: "The 'bad boy.' It's that part inside you that nobody else knows. Whether it's greasing your weezer, or you're out there taking some girl to the limit, or taking the bike to the limit.

Because you've got a little thing inside you sitting on this shoulder saying, 'go for it!' Everyone at this table's got the same guy, I know."

It is not quite expressed in these colorful terms in the company's marketing plans, but it is a powerful statement nonetheless of what Harley means to its riders. It's the unifying manifesto of its brotherhood.

The Harley bad boy was first palpably defined by *Life* magazine in its July 21, 1947 issue. On page 31, there was a photograph of a drunk, fat man sitting astride a Harley with two beer bottles in his hands and dozens of empty ones at his feet. The caption underneath only added to the outrage:

> On the Fourth of July weekend four thousand members of a motorcycle club roared into Hollister, California, for a three-day convention. They quickly tired of ordinary motorcycle thrills and turned to more exciting stunts. Racing their vehicles down Main Street and through traffic lights, they rammed into restaurants and bars, breaking furniture and mirrors. Some rested on the curb. Others hardly paused. Police arrested many for drunkenness and indecent exposure but could not restore order. Finally, after two days, the cyclists left with a brazen explanation. "We like to show off. It's just a lot of fun." But Hollister's police chief took a different view. Wailed he, "it's just one hell of a mess."

What started at Hollister was reinforced in the public mind by the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club and movies like *The Wild One* and *Easy Rider*. Images of chopped Harleys on the open road and black leather became the epitome of the new American rebel.

These icons, and the role of the Hells Angels as unappointed High Priests of the cult (they have never been officially endorsed by the company, but you can be sure the brand manager covertly

prays to the god of benevolent serendipity for such outstanding 'product placement'), have communicated to the cult's membership its removal from society.

Here's how Harley *does* express how the brand speaks to the members' sense of separation. The defininition comes from its brand guidebook that's given to all of its communication agencies to ensure "consistent marketing communications . . . that will fit the Company's global image." It outlines ". . . three essential elements to the Harley-Davidson experience, which riders feel for the first time they ride: *the joy of individualism,* the chance to be free, to make choices; *the commitment to adventure,* the opportunity to change, to discover new experiences and emotions; *the reward of fulfillment,* an intense, personal and consuming bond with the bike that means a richer fuller life." I think the rider above expressed it a little more vividly, but it's clear all the same.

The last part of the statement is an acknowledgment by the managers of a large and successful cult brand of the intensity of commitment and the profound role their brand can play in their customer's lives. Note also the commitment to accelerate the sense of each customer's individualism within one of the most cohesive "community" brands in the world. It's an expression of the cult paradox.

2. *Declare* its Difference

You've identified your franchise's source of alienation. Now you need to declare your organization's removal from the status quo in order to be a siren for discontents. And declare it clearly. A Declaration of Difference will be made by your cult's doctrine, its defining belief system. And it will also be made by the nature of the communication between the cult and its members.

THE DOCTRINE OF DIFFERENCE

Declaring what you believe should, by implication, declare what you do not. An organization's belief system should proclaim what it holds to be right and true, and equally, either explicitly or implicitly, what it rejects. There is only one God, Jesus was a space traveler (Heaven's Gate), you can baptize the dead (Mormons), God has a feminine and masculine nature (Moonies). Even the ideology of the embryonic United States was framed in the language of separation. The Declaration of *Independence*, both in name and content, overtly removed itself from prevailing world thinking. Framing a clear system of ideas that depart from cultural norms provides the sharpest delineation between the organization and the rest of the world. And it provides a beacon to the disenfranchised.

Most brand doctrines generate as much excitement as wilted cabbage. They are often forged by a corporation's senior officers during expensive offsite retreats. This "brain trust" spends days trying to differentiate their brand by devising their missions, visions, and values. For virtually every example I've seen, the outcome of these retreats has been exactly the same: what was intended to be a bang ended up as a whimper. In the attempt to please everyone and offend no one most of the ideas were compromised, their destiny to be relegated to dusty laminated sheets on cubicle walls and the odd coffee mug in the company kitchen.

Passionate commitment is often in proportion to the strength of the vision and ideas contained within the organization's theology. Members will want to commit to *something*, and the less distinct and the more content-free its belief system, the weaker the buy-in is likely to be.

THE DIALOGUE OF DIFFERENCE

An ideology only gets you so far. It is in the day-to-day interaction between the cult brand and its members that a true bond of difference can be made.

Much of the communication of difference within the Harley community has actually been undertaken not by the manufacturers and marketers of the brand, but by and for its users. The cult brand's identity has been formed over decades by its membership. Consider the focus group that we conducted. Around the table sat an ex-con in need of dental work (he wouldn't give his address), a suit (as the ex-con defined him), an African American (he said he was "sitting around the table with a bunch of white guys, very relaxed"), and several others from diverse backgrounds.

Whether you are a rider who's on the lam, or one who's a lawyer by day and a rebel on the weekend, the singular thread within the Harley community is the desire to express the "bad boy." And where did that bad boy imagery come from? It started on that day in Hollister, it was sealed by the behavior of the Hell's Angels, and reinforced by *Easy Rider* and *The Wild One* and countless media depictions since. The recent management has been smart enough to exploit what has happened serendipitously. The history and the values that the membership itself created have been incorporated into the declaration of difference that the brand now proudly trumpets.

Harley-Davidson has built a huge business on the bad boy. Harley had a dominant market share of 36 percent and sales of $3.3 billion in 2001. In the same year, its market value increased 40 percent while the S&P fell 15 percent. It has an owner's group numbering 640,000. Harley executives have become the envy of many other business people in the United States. They've leveraged their potential and existing customers' sense of alienation and in the process pulled off the creation of a market leader, a mass cult.

3. *Demarcate* the Cult from the Status Quo

Another crucial element in the demonstration of the community's removal are the actions it takes to draw a line in the earth between itself and the rest of the world. They are the daily acts of demarcation. Moonies get married at mass weddings. Jehovah's Witnesses won't accept blood transfusions and refuse to salute the flag. Christian Scientists avoid medicine. Mormons don't drink coffee, tea, or alcohol, or smoke, they wear strange underwear, and really do give 10 percent of their income to the church. Krishna followers are vegetarian, chant a lot, wear saris, and the men shave their heads.

These are the things that immediately separate the cult and its followers from the rest of society. The rituals, appearance, doctrine, and behavior of its members draw a boundary between the cult and the norm.

Simply declaring that "we're different" is obviously not enough for a cult or cult brand. It needs to *be* different. It needs to look and feel distinct for it to be credible to those outside who seek difference and for it to function convincingly for those inside who want to experience difference. In everything it or its membership does the cult needs to demarcate itself by its actions and appearance. The cult needs to separate itself from its surroundings by "living its difference."

How is this done? Many of the tools available have several functions within the cult, of which creating difference is but one. The proper use of ritual, iconography and symbols, rules and regulations, sacred texts, language, and appearance will simultaneously reinforce the memberships' feelings of solidarity, create group identity, communicate its ideology, and encourage advocacy, among other roles, and these will be covered later in the book. But we will

look at just a few of these available tools and in this context, examine how they serve to demarcate the cult from the status quo.

An important point is that these tools serve to emphasize the cult's otherness not just by the strangeness of the acts or things themselves, but also by the foreignness of the meaning they carry. They are nearly always manifestations in one form or another of the doctrine of the cult. For example, Krishnas don't eat meat because they believe that such physical indulgences could taint their spiritual quest for Krishna consciousness. Further, the congregational chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra is more than just a community-building exercise. It is believed to be the most effective means of self-purification. Only Mormons can enter some parts of the Temples and only "endowed" members (those who have been qualified as "worthy" and undertaken a ceremony of acceptance) can enter those places where marriages and other vital rituals are performed.

EXCLUSIVITY—NOT EVERYONE QUALIFIES

Limited access draws the most definitive boundaries between a cult and the other. At Harley rallies, certain bars are effectively for members only. In a vivid example of "you're not welcome," Tom, a young and enthusiastic employee of Harley-Davidson, had been fraternizing with the membership earlier in the day, riding his own bike and wearing the distinctive Harley leathers. However, he was rejected by the membership when he walked into a watering hole to relax with what he thought were his fellow bad boys. He had made a critical mistake that night. In some moment of lunacy he chose to wear khakis and a polo for the evening. He walked up to the bar to order a drink and the salty bartender refused to serve him. He said that the whole bar suspected that he was "a cop or something." There was a gap between him and the membership as wide as the Grand Canyon in that bar. It was a replay of those classic scenes in

the movies when the bar goes silent and its occupants turn around to look at the outsider with hostile mutterings as he makes the walk of death to the counter in the futile hope he'll be accepted. Tom confessed that, "I think I know, pardon the expression, what it feels like to be a black man at a Klan rally. It was the most uncomfortable experience I'd ever had." Among the three hundred or so people there he even spotted some Hells Angels he'd helped earlier that day. "Here I was. I was not in uniform, and I was not comfortable."

APPEARANCES AREN'T DECEIVING

Tom's demarcation experience also identifies another important delineator: appearance. The Marines, Krishnas, Mormon missionaries, Deadheads, and Trekkies—all, in one way or another, demarcate themselves by their distinctive appearance. Not all cults employ a uniform to separate themselves from the other; some often employ more subtle cues. Garrett, a young Mormon I talked to from Salt Lake City claimed that members of the Church distinguish themselves from the rest of the population by their "countenance." He said, "We consider ourselves to be a happy people." Some wear a "CTR" ring (short for "Choose the Right," a daily caution to the wearer whenever temptation crosses their path). And if members know where to look, it is possible to detect the sacred undergarments bestowed at the endowment ceremony, that are designed to preserve the wearer's modesty. Some cult brands can be more blatant in their members' declarations of allegiance via appearance. Some tattoo brand logos onto their heads, arms, necks, and ankles (Nike and Apple logos are often the most pervasive). Others wear brand T-shirts or have logos stickered on bags, clothing, and cars. An Apple user I spoke to wore an emblazoned bomber jacket with Apple logos plastered everywhere. "I wear that damn thing proudly," he claimed, almost daring me to condemn him for it.

The Harley cult membership has its own distinctive markings. Tattoos, leather, bandannas, beards, and ripped and dirty jeans.

Tom, the employee who was not decked out in the requisite garb that night, described the uniform, and its significance to the wearer. He said, "First of all, it's almost like a school uniform, blue jeans, black leather jacket. It has some individuality, but there's safety and there's comfort in seeing that everyone else is dressed like each other."

The Harley uniform is a flag that declares the cult's outlook on life, and its separateness from the polite society. According to one Harley rider that I talked to, "What we wear is essentially a 'fuck off' to the outside world. It says 'stay away from me' and it does keep people away." In fact, in a moment of startling literalness, he told me that his favorite shirt says, "Fuck off" in huge letters across the entire front. He also intends to buy another shirt that says, "Fuck off, I have enough friends."

Iconography is a critical delineator. Iconography also plays a dual role in separating a cult from the norm. It is a visible mark of distinguishability, whether for a product, or a religion. But it also connotes difference as a carrier of meaning. The cross, the apple, the Harley roar (iconography can also be aural) all infer the cults' various belief systems that distinguish them from those of their environments.

The famous Bar and Shield, according to the Harley Brand Guidelines, is equated to a "design on a knight's battle shield, it is the Harley-Davidson coat of arms." This is the official cult iconography and it certainly connotes the status of being mythic warriors of the road.

But Harley has a wealth of unofficial iconography created by the membership itself. Much of it is specifically designed to distance the cult from society. It repels outsiders by fetishizing society's taboos. Most of it is borrowed from that inner circle of members, the High Priesthood of the cult: the Hells Angels. The ubiquitous skulls and wings that adorn biker's jackets are imitations of the

Hells Angels "Death's Head" (their official symbol of a skull with wings). It's within this upper level of the hierarchy that much of the real meaning system has been created and its associated iconography of the outlaw removes the cult from the culture at large.

Without a doubt, however, Harley's greatest icon is not the bar and shield or the skulls, it is the great Harley roar. According to Graham, another biker that I interviewed, "Everyone knows that sound. You can hear it from three blocks away. People who can't see the difference between bikes can tell which one is a Harley just from the sound." He went on to explain that the Harley sound acts in a very similar manner to the clothes of the Harley rider. "You can ride a Harley quietly or you can ride one loud. I was riding through town last Sunday morning and decided to make some noise and wake some people up. It was great, it was a great 'fuck you.' "

THE SPECIAL ARGOT OF CULTS

Language can provide a sense of solidarity to members and exclusion to outsiders. Just as marketing jargon or "consultant speak" can serve to distance and intimidate those not in the fraternity, cults will have a language which only members will tend to get. To bikers, all of us who drive cars are called "cagers." According to Harley-speak, a "yard shark" is a pet that barrels into the street and tries to take a bike down. An "iron butt" is someone who has ridden a thousand miles in twenty-four hours, and within the Harley community, "pipes and slippers" are bikers who demand respect because of their age.

Krishnas believe in the "samsara" (the eternal cycle of reincarnation) and inherit the "karma" (positive or negative consequences) from the religious works or "dharma" one has or has not performed. The goal of a Krishna's life is to break away from eternal reincarnation and achieve "mukti," or liberation, allowing them to return to the natural state of Krishna consciousness. The only way

to achieve mukti is through "bhakti," a state of active worship, service, and devotion to Krishna, the Supreme Being.

Cults such as Harley-Davidson and the Krishnas use language as a means of bonding, conveying meaning and separation. Much like some ethnicities develop distinct dialects that are incomprehensible to foreigners, the language of cults is a tool that serves to delineate the boundaries between those who belong and those who do not.

4. *Demonize* the Other

Pagans, IBM, Islam, Microsoft, the West, Communism and Capitalism, Axes of Evil. They have all been identified as an enemy by communities large and small, whether countries, companies, terrorist groups, or brand communities. Demonization is a highly effective means of creating separation and a distinctive group identity. A threat from an enemy, real or artfully crafted by the community's leadership, will generate solidarity and a potent sense of difference.

Steve Jobs has identified, variously, IBM, Microsoft, Dell, and other PC manufactures as malignant, threatening forces bent on destroying freedom of choice (the choice to buy his computer). Richard Branson has painted "No way BA/AA" on the side of his Virgin Atlantic planes in a swipe at the big carriers' attempts to dominate the skies at the expense of entrepreneurial challenges to their hegemony.

Here is part of a famous speech given by Jobs at Macworld in 1984 to launch the Macintosh. It's an astonishing performance in the art of demonization. He was introducing the commercial that has since been sanctified by the Apple community as defining what Apple is all about. You've seen it, it's the one where a young woman

throws a hammer at a screen on which a Big Brother figure is ranting at his oppressed followers. I've reproduced some of the audience's responses to Jobs's Churchillian invocations to fight on the beaches of computer freedom. Their amens recall those heard at an Evangelical church rather than an audience's response to the launch of a box of electronics.

"It is now 1984. It appears IBM wants it all. Apple is perceived to be the only hope to offer IBM a run for its money. Dealers, initially welcoming IBM with open arms now fear an IBM dominated and controlled future. They are increasingly and desperately turning back to Apple as the only force that can ensure their future freedom. IBM wants it all and is aiming its guns on its last obstacle to industry control: Apple. Will Big Blue dominate the entire computer industry? [Shouts of "no!"] The entire information age? ["Never!"] Was George Orwell right about 1984? [More exclamations and cheers]."

The sense of group identity and separation was palpable in the hall that day. Maybe Steve Jobs tilted at windmills during his leadership at Apple. Was IBM really out to get his company? It doesn't matter whether it was or not. Real or imaginary, identifying an enemy and dramatizing a threat will galvanize the community's sense of separation, unity, and identity.

A second very efficient outcome of antagonism is that by defining the other, the cult defines itself. If IBM is characterized as huge, lumbering, dull, and intent on gaining a monopoly, then Apple is agile, creative, and fighting for freedom. If British Airways and American are also huge, unimaginative, malevolent institutions, then Virgin is piratical, fun, and also fighting for freedom. Demonization allows the cult to define itself (and its essential difference) by condemning the other as a photographic negative of itself.

And demonization is versatile. The more usual object of denigration is a thing: a competitive religion or a company such as IBM. But you can also demonize an intangible. You can demonize a

state of mind or action. The Christian Church has persecuted other religions in its history of demonization, but it has also created a sense of identity and solidarity by castigating intangibles, such as "worldliness."

Brands can do this, too. Apple has not just demonized Microsoft, but the intangibles of dullness and bullying. Circumstances change, and when Apple realized it was time to form a crucial alliance with Microsoft, its former archenemy, it had to revise its demon. It put its negative emphasis on conformity, which it very effectively dramatized in the "Think Different" campaign.

Intangible demons can allow a cult or brand to dramatize threats that have no time limit on them (conformity will always exist). Intangibles also have no size limit. If Apple ever grew to be the size of Microsoft or IBM, those organizations would lose their credibility as threats to the Mac community. But intangible demons are as large as the human race. Nike can invoke a collective sense of identity as the brand of self-achievement even from its position as market leader by demonizing "not doing it," a fear for millions of fitness conscious consumers.

A cult or cult brand needs to be a siren to those who are discontented with the status quo. To do this well, it needs to identify the source of its potential franchise's sense of separation. This feeling is not limited to the socially or psychologically damaged. Harley-Davidson calls to those trapped by the claustrophobia of the everyday—a feeling we can all identify with at some time. It needs to plumb our deep wells of alienation. To call to the discontented, an organization must remove itself from norms of the culture and declare and demonstrate its separation to those who feel separate.