The craft beer revolution comes of age: But what is craft beer?

Category: Branding
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You don't have to be a world-class fan of IPAs to know that something wonderful has happened in the world of beer, lately. The industry is evolving and adapting to meet the needs and hopes of a consumer-based that are driven by a desire for "something different".

As things like experiential marketing appear in the average marketing campaign, businesses have begun to recognise the value of infusing an experience into their branding. In other words, who you are as a company is no longer just about the colours in your marketing materials, or the shapes in your logo.

The most successful brands of the era are the ones with heart and soul, stories, and backgrounds, and this is where the craft beer revolution has come to light. So, what is craft beer?

Well, the answer may be a little more complex than you'd think. One simple way of looking at craft beer is a development of independent breweries. However, there's far much more to these beverage powerhouses than simple independence. In fact, the craft beer revolution and craft beer branding have been a key disruptive factor in the way that companies present themselves today.

In a world where customer experience is a key differentiator for brands, craft breweries are leading the way with their people-first approach to marketing. Rather than designing a name, an identity, and a product, then looking for a niche

that fits, craft beer companies work backward. They find their market, then develop the answer their customers are looking for. Perhaps that's why the failure rates for new craft breweries are so close to zero.



What is craft beer? Introducing the craft beer revolution

Over the last year or so, the number of craft breweries in the UK has risen by around 8% to more than 1,700, according to research. As breweries grow increasingly more profitable and essential for acquisition, brands are discovering that drinkers are happy to pay premium prices for what they consider to be a "luxury" product.

In the world of "artisan products", craft beer has lead the way for what consumers are looking for in the search for something new, interesting, and beyond the status quo. In fact, you're more likely to see patrons clamouring for a Punk

IPA in a bar today than a standard pint of whatever's on draft.

So, what is craft beer? Well, according to the Brewers Association in America, craft breweries are defined as any brewery that's "small, independent, and traditional". Most craft breweries annually produce fewer than 6 million barrels and don't have many investments from non-craft entities. They also use more traditional brewing methods and ingredients.

But what makes craft beer so popular?

Simply put, beer drinkers, and even some non-beer-drinkers for that matter are experimenting with their social drinking practices. People going to the pub don't go there just to get drunk anymore. They go to taste something new, experience something with their friends, create memories. A bud light doesn't cut it in this world of experience-first living.

Whether you're a beer lover or not, the chances are that you're searching for flavour in your life, and craft beer companies have that by the barrel-full. That's why there's never really been a more attractive time to start drinking beer than today.

What's more, the experimental nature of beer-drinkers has prompted the experimentation of breweries. Craft beer creators are constantly emerging with limited-edition flavours and packaging to enjoy. They're searching for new hops and different brewing methods that consistently keep their customers coming back for more.

With craft beer, we're looking at a section of the market that understands the value of people-first branding. These companies are working with their customer to create something different, and customers are loving it.

What is a craft beer brand? When craft beer goes corporate

What's the difference between "big beer" and "craft beer" then? They both use the same stuff, right?

Well, not necessarily.

Lately, big-name beer brands have been addressed with plenty of scrutiny from some of the more popular craft experts in the market. Some people, like BrewDog, suggest that big beer brands spend too much time advertising, and not enough time building their brand through the value of their product and the taste of their beer.

Today branding experts will tell you that the bigger and badder you claim your company is, the less likely you are to achieve consumer trust. Today's marketplace is looking for brands that they can develop real, valuable, and personal relationships with. If you're a big company that looks to be nothing more than a corporate machine, you're going to have a bad time.

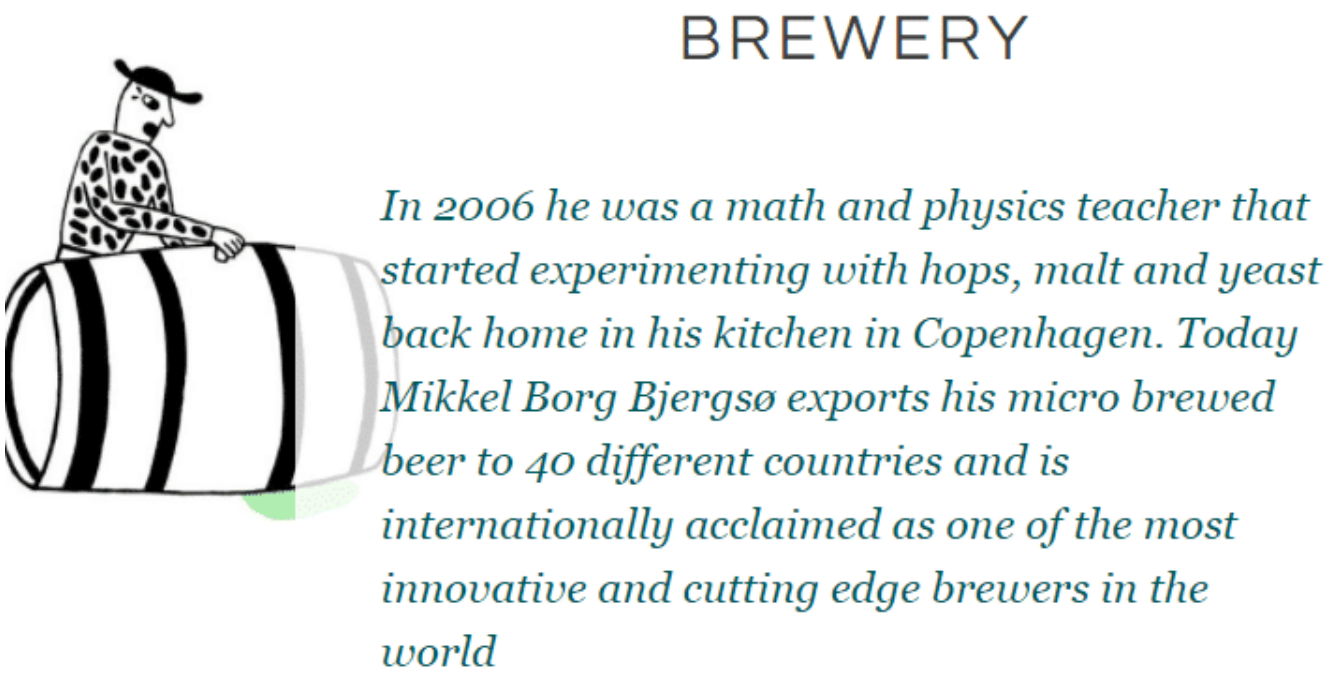
In an attempt to seem more relatable, many mainstream breweries have actually tried to jump on the "craft beer" bandwagon. Green King, Fullers, Shepherd's Neame, and various other brands have started to produce craft beers.

While these beers all taste pretty good, and they use traditional, creative, and interesting methods to craft new flavours, just as you would expect from a craft brewery, they lack some of the story that goes into making true craft beer so satisfying. It turns out that it's the branding, just as much as the flavour, that makes a craft beer so…crafty.

It's the "soul" in the branding of craft beer that helps it to stand out among the crowd, and that's why high-profile craft breweries like Mikeller can soar to astronomical heights

without losing their craft status. These companies know how to position, and market themselves like big companies, while still using the branding solutions required to keep them firmly in the craft space.

Mikeller, for instance, is incredible at storytelling. They've got a regularly updated blog, fun and fresh branding imagery, and a story that starts all the way from creating beer in a home kitchen.



Maybe the answer to "What is craft beer?" isn't in hops and flavours, but the heart, passion, and hard work that goes into trying to create the perfect beverage, or make a vision come to life. That's what makes craft beer different. Today, craft beer is associated with:

1. Honesty

From marketing strategies to the stories in their brand manifesto, craft beer companies are totally transparent. They're all about honest, straight-forward, good beverages. There's no fluff, no dishonesty, and none of the drama associated with big brands. Customers feel like they're buying

something from a friend, not a company.

2. Local pride

Check out almost any craft beer's branding and logo. You're sure to find something associated with where the company comes from. This sense of local pride appeals to people who want to support their local economy and keep spending closer to home. Plus, going local gives you the impression that you've got the opportunity to drink the freshest, most delicious beer, brewed by people just like you.

3. Sustainability

Many craft breweries have an "environmental" element to them. They try to keep their activities as sustainable as possible, using composting, eco-friendly equipment, and practices that consume fewer resources. If you care about the "green" world, then you can be a part of the environmental movement with craft beer brands.

4. Better ingredients (and better taste)

The average beer comes from four key ingredients: hops, yeast, grains, and water. Chances are that your local craft brewery takes that simple list and makes it into something special. Craft breweries want to define themselves as different, which means that they use fresher, higher-quality, and locally-grown ingredients.

5. More of well…everything

Many craft beers have a higher alcohol percentage – but that's not the main point here. When you stick to craft breweries you get more styles, more selections, and more love in your beverage than you're likely to find in the big beer world. There's a reason why we use the word "craft" rather than just calling them independent or small breweries. These companies

are creative – they've got inspiration in their bones, and they're sharing it with the world – one pint at a time.

How to make the most of craft beer marketing

By this point, we've established that there's more to advertising incredible craft beer brands than most people think. Often, craft beer branding and craft beer marketing are the elements that help to make these companies so inherently interesting, and so easy for customers to connect with.

But, when it comes to branding, what makes craft beer brands different? What can the everyday company learn from the craft beer branding revolution? Well, here are a few pieces of education that you can take away with you today.

Lesson 1: Show your brand values

Making delicious beer is an essential part of running a successful craft beer company – but it's only one part. In a market where customers are constantly sifting through a barrage of similar companies, looking for something that really "stands out", values are what shine through. It's becoming increasingly important for breweries to put more thought and time into the kinds of brands they want to build, and what they want to be associated with.

At Fabrik, we focus on your "brand image", and manifesto when it comes to rebranding, or developing your brand. Craft breweries know the value of those things perhaps better than anyone. For instance, the Urban Chestnut Brewing company centre their brand entirely around "urban efforts", which include not-for-profit donations, sustainability, and more.

Whether your values are all about sticking to tradition, or contributing to your local community, the value that you have

to offer the world should be the first thing on your mind when determining your brand image.

Lesson 2: Find a niche

After you've outlined your values for the world to see, you'll need to think of the niche that you want to fill. Importantly, "craft beer" in itself, isn't a niche. Now that the area is so popular, and brimming with competition, it's not good enough to make great beer that's designed for everyone.

A broader, and more discerning market of consumers has begun to search for something new in its craft beer, and that gives you plenty of opportunities to experiment with specialties. Perhaps you only use locally-grown ingredients, or maybe you're going to market your beer to people who don't abide by the rules, like BrewDog. The choice is yours, just make sure you know who you're marketing to.

Lesson 3: Make an emotional investment

We spoke a little above about how people want to have a "connection" with the brands they encounter today. For most companies, this means telling a story with your branding initiatives. Unfortunately, the tale that you started a craft brewery because you were bored of working a desk job, or you wanted to make more money probably isn't going to cut it. Great stories like the Pfriem family setting up a legacy brewery for their son, are what make your company more appealing.

A great story creates an emotional investment. It lends authenticity to your company and gives readers something to latch onto about your brand that focuses on more than just the beer.

Lesson 4: Colour strategies and logos

We'll look at branding and craft beer marketing logo examples a little bit later. For now, it's important to remember that colour and branding is important to your overall image. Often, they're issues that are taken for granted in macro beer, but you can use flavours to have emotional and psychological effects on your buyers.

Certain colours evoke thoughts of certain flavours, and the way that you use colours in combination with each other can also lead to other effects like nostalgia, or quirkiness. Since humans have such a strong memory for colour, the way that you use yours could mean that customers no longer have to read the name of your beer to learn which six-pack they need to grab next time they want something delicious.

Lesson 5: Product naming

Last, but not least, branding can be incredibly powerful when it reflects the ideals and needs of the customer. Matching the psychographics of your beer and craft brewery imagery to the craft-beer consumer is key for having a marketing impact. Most of the time, this means designing for an individual who craves authentic experience, adventure, and exploration.

Craft breweries have learned how to tickle the taste buds of their audience, and excite a group of previously bored, overwhelmed, and uninspired consumers. If you can do the same with your brand, then you're sure to see instant results.

Craft beer branding and logo examples

To give you a deeper idea of what craft beer branding trends might look like, we'll need to explore some of the big names in the industry right now. Here, we're going to list some of

the most iconic brands around today, and how their branding appeals to a specific trend in the world of craft beer marketing.

1. Nostalgic regional: Transmitter Brewing Farmhouse Ales

We all love nostalgia. For some reason, a certain part of our brain craves the days' past where things seemed to be simpler, more organic, and more beautiful than they are today. The nostalgic-regional branding trend combines the idea that things from the past are naturally better than their modern adaptations, to the standard joy of local pride. These unique labels and logos use nostalgic images and colours associated with a specific area, to make consumers feel as though they're getting a taste of their very own history.

> *We are excited to offer cans for the first time! "Can Conditioned" to keep our carbonation up @ saison levels. S4 is a classic fruity Saison and G1 is a hop forward Belgian Golden Ale. These are beautiful, crushable beers in a pretty, crushable package. pic.twitter.com/vuWIYLxDGu*
>
> *— Transmitter Brewing (@TransmitterBrew) January 31, 2018*

The New York City Transmitter Brewing company is a perfect example of this nostalgic/regional concept. All their branding centres around farmhouse styles that consumers automatically correlate with tradition and "American" pride.

2. Blue collar industrial branding: North Brewing Co.

In a world where everything seems to be run by robots and computers, it's easy to romanticise the idea of something that

was built by hard-working employees. The industrial craft beer branding trend evokes the idea of simplicity, modern development, and good old-fashioned hard work.

If you take a look at the North Brewing Co.’s branding initiatives, you’ll see a company that’s all about pride. You can read about their origin story on their website, and discover why they only produce a core range of five beers to ensure that their flavours are always exceptional.

3. A taste of luxury: Pfriem Family Brewers

We all can’t afford to drive the latest Rolls-Royce or buy the most expensive house, but that doesn’t mean that we don’t crave little tastes of luxury. Craft beer brands that use the “luxury” branding technique focus on the fact that they put quality first in their beer. The idea is to develop something that customers can naturally associate with the high-life. You pay a little extra, but what you get is something that can’t be compared with a standard pint.

4. The artistic craft beer brand: Vocation Brewery

This is a craft beer branding trend that you’re likely to see quite frequently on your local shelves. It’s a fun, interesting, and artistic approach to marketing that stems from the idea that craft beer is all about creativity. These craft beer brands use screen printing and illustration, combined with hand-drawn typography to create labels and logos that are raw, textural, and easy to connect with. The look suggests something more experimental, less traditional, and completely brand-new.

Keep your eye out for Chop & Change at our taprooms this

> *weekend. You definitely don't want to miss this hoppy cask exclusive.*
>
> *Have you tried Chop & Change yet? pic.twitter.com/AQBESGhTEz*
>
> *— Vocation Brewery (@vocationbrewery) May 21, 2022*

Vocation Brewery uses the "artistic" style in their branding initiatives. Rated by drinkers as one of the best craft beer companies in England, Vocation pride themselves in specialising in drinks that are modern, bold, and distinctive. You can see those words in every part of their branding, from their hand-drawn logo to the bright colours on their cans.

5. Simple and effective: Redchurch Brewery

A stark contrast to the craft beer branding technique above, simple branding is all about embracing the transparency of craft beer. We mentioned above that consumers love the honesty that's involved with craft brewing companies, and the brands that expose themselves completely to the public are often those that do well.

On every bottle produced by Redchurch Beer, you can see the logo, where the beer comes from, the type of beer you're getting, and the alcohol percentage. There's no illustrations, no bells, and whistles, just, simple and effective labelling.

6. The grunge look: BrewDog

Now we come to yet another of the most popular options in the craft beer branding world, the DIY grunge aesthetic. Again, this branding technique evokes the idea that the company is getting back to the basics of raw beer.

Though it can look terrible when done badly, BrewDog shows us just how incredible the grunge look can be when it's mixed with the right branding initiative. The interesting thing about BrewDog is that they're not using the "grunge" look just because it's edgy and "cool". Their grunge appearance blends in with their whole brand story, as a company that's for "Punks". It's that deeply-infused storyline that makes this branding so effective, and memorable.

BrewDog emerged from people who were "bored" with the stuffy brewing market in the UK, and you can see their rebellion in everything they do.

7. The little local brewery that could: Brooklyn Brewery

Finally, we come to the craft beer branding technique that's all about that "Made in Britain" appeal. Many different craft beer companies have made an effort to show where they come from in their marketing strategies. After all, it's this devotion to sustainable, local growth that helps to make craft breweries so distinctive. However, some businesses have taken the notion a step further, by making locale a fundamental part of their image.

Check out Brooklyn Lager for instance. It's all about local image, no more, no less. The company is effective because it is true to its roots, and it offers people a taste of a specific place.

The craft beer revolution: We love craft beer

Ultimately, we love craft beer because of its story.

We can see every step that these breweries have taken on the path to success. From brewing drinks in garages and kitchens

to changing the world with new flavours. These are the people who scraped the money together for their first pieces of equipment and still managed to make something that tastes better than most of the big-name brands.

It's that dedication, that brilliant branding, and that backstory, that makes us root for craft beer in all its different forms. Craft beer is unique, cosy, and inherently new in a world of copy-paste autonomy where you can get thirty different brands of bread that all taste the same. These companies, no matter their background, have put story and branding first to show their customers that they have something different to offer, and that makes us fall in love with them, just a little.

Sure, craft beer companies want to make money – just like any other business. However, it's the way that they've built themselves up from the ground that makes them so appealing. The most important thing for brands to remember is that this style of growth isn't limited to the craft niche. If you can learn how to make the most of the craft branding revolution, then you can achieve the same level of loyalty and success.

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