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TRIBAL MARKETING: THE TRIBALISATION OF SOCIETY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE CONDUCT OF MARKETING

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Abstract

This paper presents an alternative, 'Latin', vision of our societies. Here the urgent societal issue is not to celebrate freedom from social constraints, but to re-establish communal embeddedness. The citizen of 2000 is less interested in the objects of consumption than in the social links and identities that come with them. This Latin view holds that people like to gather together in tribes and that such social, proximate communities are more affective and influential on people's behaviour than either marketing institutions or other 'formal' cultural authorities. There is also an element of resistance and re-appropriation in the acts of being, gathering and experiencing together. This view of the shared experience of tribes sets it apart from both Northern notions of segmented markets and one-to-one relationship.

In this Latin view, the effective marketing of 2002 and beyond is not to accept and exploit consumers in their contemporary individualisation, as Northern approaches might. Rather the future of marketing is in offering and supporting a renewed sense of community. Marketing becomes tribal marketing. In a marketing profession challenged by the Internet phenomenon, tribal marketing is by no means just another passing fad but a Trojan horse to induce companies to take on board the re-emergence of the quest for community.

Key words

Community, Enthusiast, Postmodern, Societing, Tribe.

Introduction: a Latin view

The Latin School of Societing³, that represents the focal point for this paper, provides a basis for a retrospection of the role of marketing in 2002 and beyond (see appendix 1). The central leitmotif of Societing - *the link is more important than the thing* - leads researchers "to analyse economic activity not as an independent activity but as one embedded in a societal context, which, at the same time, encompasses it and renders it possible" (Cova, 1999, p. 80).

Consequently, this Latin view makes salient a number of societal issues overlooked or neglected in Northern approaches of marketing (Cooper and McLoughlin, 1998). The Northern school of thought sees consumption as self defining whereas the Latin School espouses the view that products and services are consumed as much for their linking value as their use value. In this paper, we will develop one of the aspects of the Latin approach, namely tribalism and tribal marketing. The aim is not to replace a Northern marketing by a Latin marketing but to engage with more than one perspective; to have a repertoire of more than one way of interpreting reality; to stir marketing imagination from its apparent lethargy (Brownlie *et al.*, 1999). The aim is also to mobilise marketing researchers and practitioners around what we think is right (Sherry, 2000; Sikka, 1999): re-socialising people more than liberating them! Thus, the urgent societal issue is not to celebrate freedom from social constraints, but to re-establish communal embeddedness. A kind of emancipation from the projects of emancipation (Firat and Dholakia, 1998). The path we follow "to catalyse moral insurgency beyond the schoolyard" (Sherry, 2000, p. 333) is to offer tribal marketing as an appealing alternative to the dominant discourse in marketing.

In this paper we will first discuss the sociological foundations of such an approach, then present a case study on the in-line roller⁴ tribe in order to investigate possible ways for marketers to support -and capitalise on- the link between members of a tribe.

Tribalism: the strangeness of postmodern social dynamics

Our era is often characterised in Northern countries by individualism (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993; Firat and Shultz II, 1997), the logical conclusion of the modern quest for liberation from social bonds. The right to liberty - unbounded in theory but until now limited to the economic, political and intellectual field - affects all aspects of daily life. Gaining ground is the idea of a social condition in which individuals, freed from the constraints of collective ideals in matters of education, the family, sex, are operating a process of personalisation as a way of managing behaviour. They do this not through the tyranny of details, but with as few constraints and as many choices as possible. It has been said that we have now entered the era of the ordinary individual, that is to say an age in which any individual can - and must - take personal action so as to produce and show one's own existence, one's own difference (Elliott, 1997 and 1999).

The fragmentation of society, fostered by the developments of industry and commerce, is among the most visible consequences of this individualism. Products and services

³ Also called the Southern School of Marketing or the Mediterranean School of Marketing.

⁴ In-line roller skates resemble ice skates with the blade replaced by four "in-line" rollers.

have progressively freed people from the many alienating tasks left behind by tradition, even shopping itself. From one's own home, and without physical social interaction, one can obtain almost everything one desires. All the technology increases isolation while permitting one to be in virtual touch with the whole world via fax, TV, telephone, Internet. The process of narcissism, induced by the development and widespread use of computers in all aspects of human existence, seems to characterise our daily life.

Our era can therefore be understood as a period of severe social dissolution and extreme individualism. But, attempts at social re-composition are also visible: people who have finally managed to liberate themselves from social constraints are embarking on a reverse movement to recompose their social universe. They are increasingly gathering together in multiple and ephemeral groups, and such social, proximate groupings have more influence on people's behaviour than either modern institutions or other formal cultural authorities. Our era then, does not crown the triumph of individualism but rather heralds the beginning of its end. We can speak of the emergence of a reverse movement: a search for maintaining or (re)-creating the social link (Maffesoli, 1996a). In fact, it is sometimes claimed that the social dynamics, characteristic of our postmodern era, are made up of a multitude of experiences, representations and emotions that very often are not properly understood. Although most of the time such dynamics are explained by individualism, we can readily observe the emerging of "tribalism" (Bauman, 1990; Maffesoli, 1996a).

Why is it relevant to use the tribal metaphor in order to describe these social dynamics? If we accept with Maffesoli (2000, p. 13) that "postmodernity is synergy between archaism and technological development", we should recognise the movement of "re-rooting" of the individuals that comes with their continuous "uprooting" caused by progress. What they seek through the experience of shared emotion may be considered a return of the pre-modern imagination which has been rejected by modern thinking. This pre-modern imagination values notions contrary to progress, such as community, locality, nostalgia... The word "tribe" refers to this re-emergence of quasi-archaic values: a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, group narcissism and so on. It is borrowed from anthropology which used it in order to characterise archaic societies where social order was maintained without the existence of a central power. The notion has been used largely in politics to describe any collective behaviour, in these archaic societies, that resist the construction of modern state institutions. Finally, the word "tribe" conveys the same characteristics as the notion of "ethnic group" but on a smaller scale: local, linguistic and cultural homogeneity. In the same vein, it conveys the same characteristics as the notion of "clan" but on a larger scale: kinship, lineage and other blood-related attributes.

Postmodern social dynamics can metaphorically be defined as "tribes" because, much like the tribes of the archaic societies:

- they cannot rely on central power to maintain social order or coerce their constituency into submission to collective rules (seldom do they have clearly codified rules to which submission could be demanded);
- they constitute a collective actor that represents a counterpower to institutional power;

- they do not rally people around something rational and modern –a project, a professional occupation, the notion of progress- but around non rational and archaic elements –locality, kinship, emotion, passion;
- they are close to clans and other ethnic-flavoured groupings in the sense that they participate in the re-enchantment of the world (Maffesoli, 1996a).

These tribes do not limit themselves to teenage groupings as shown by the number of adult tribes where people gather around shared "ordinary passions" (Bromberger, 1998). In fact, the common denominator of postmodern tribes is the community of emotion or passion. So, why not to call them "communities"? Bounds (1997) looks at the variety of uses of the concept of community in the US. For her, "community serves a metaphor for those bonds among individuals that the market is eroding and is a reaction to globalisation... They are reactions to a sense of uprootedness which is countered by seeking/roots connections through forms of associations which preserve particular memories of the past, a measure of stability in the present and particular expectations for the future" (Bounds, pp. 2-3). This is particularly in tune with postmodern social dynamics, but the concept of "community" as used in the English language suffers from an excessive modernist bent since it characterises a body of people with something in common (e.g. the district of residence, the occupational interest) without implying the existence of non-rational and rather archaic bonds. This is completely different in Latin countries where the word "*communauté*" in French or "*comunità*" in Italian conveys the existence of blood-related bonds. Furthermore, with the development of Internet, it would appear that the concept of "community" is now conjoined with that of "interest". The latter has little to do with archaic values which is why we do not use the concept of "community" to define postmodern social dynamics, even if they can be described as "temporary or momentary communities" (Firat and Dholakia, 1998, p. 155).

Postmodern tribes are inherently unstable, small-scale, "affectual" (Maffesoli, 1996a) and not fixed by any of the established parameters of modern society. Instead, they can be held together essentially through shared emotion and passion. They exist in no other form but the symbolically and ritually manifested commitment of their members. They cannot count on the strength of neighbourly bonds or the intensity of reciprocal exchange. Tribes are constantly in flux, brought ever again into being by the repetitive symbolic ritual of the members but persisting no longer than the power of attraction of these rituals and of their cult-objects. In fact, the (re)construction or (re)possession of meanings through shared experiences and their enactment through rituals is the most potent form of maintaining tribal identity in our postmodern societies.

Take the Lomo tribe as an example (exhibit 1). The whole tribal phenomenon around Lomo is an ephemeral joint construction of the reality: a shared feeling about what is going on around the tribe supported by numerous rituals and the collective (re)construction or (re)possession of meanings. Because the newly appropriated sign given to the Soviet camera is common only to the tribe, its apparent secrecy lends added identity to the Lomo tribe.

Exhibit 1: The Lomo tribe

L.O.M.O. stands for *Leningradskoye Optiko-Mekhanicheskoye Ob'edinyeniye*. The Lomo is a small, low-tech camera - there is no need to focus, set a light meter, use a flash, or, for that matter, look through a viewfinder. *"Photography is heavyweight: serious, demanding and difficult"* says Stephan Pauly, a Lomo tribe member from Berlin. *"Lomography is charming, easy, nice, happening. Fun."* In 1991, Austrian student Matthias Fiegl found an old metal Russian camera in a dusty shop in Prague and brought it back to his Vienna flat. During one of the wild, open-house parties he and his room-mate Wolfgang Stranzinger used to throw, Fiegl began snapping pictures of everyone and everything. He held the camera at his hip, or above his head. The results were blurred, distorted, abstract - and exciting. Lomography was born. What began as a parlor trick has become a tribal movement across Europe. Fiegl and Stranzinger tacked their new images up on a kitchen bulletin board and called it LomoWall. They founded the Lomographic Society. They started bringing more Lomos from Eastern Europe, and once 100 people had the cameras, the group mounted its first exhibition, in Vienna. Now, about 35,000 people own the cult-object, including David Byrne and Brian Eno, and the most enthusiastic preachers have been designated Lomo "ambassadors", running "embassies" everywhere from Cuba to Japan. In 1998, the first Lomo Congress was held in Madrid, with 15,000 images on a 108m long LomoWall, while a Lomomobil (a schoolbus) toured Western Germany, displaying pictures and renting out Lomos to curiosity-seekers. *"Lomo creates a shared feeling about what is going on around you. In the end, Lomography is a product of communication"* explains Gerald Matt, director of Vienna's Kunsthalle, a contemporary art space. Lomography *"has an anarchic approach to the world of pictures"*, says Matt. *"It's about fast shots, impossible perspectives, gloomy and spectacular colours, anonymity. The whole Lomo thing doesn't care if it is art or not"*.

So, postmodern tribes present some clear differences with archaic tribes (such as Indian tribes in the US):

- They are ephemeral and non totalizing groupings. Archaic tribes were permanent and totalizing;
- A person can belong to several postmodern tribes. In an archaic tribe a person could only belong to one tribe;
- The boundaries of a postmodern tribe are conceptual. They were physical in the archaic tribes;
- The members of a postmodern tribe are related by shared feelings and (re)appropriated signs. Members of archaic tribes were related by kinship and dialect.

Indeed, for postmodern people, the fact of belonging to a tribe does not exclude the possibility to live a "normal" life: "instead of constantly remaining within their singularly preferred countercultural domain, they participate in mainstream life, behave and dress differently and work in mainstream jobs, they participate as students, staff or faculty in educational institutions. They also occasionally cross over and participate in other countercultural-scapes" (Firat and Dholakia, 1998, p. 144). Here, it is interesting to note that Firat and Dholakia (1998) prefer to use other terms to describe these social alternatives: "life-mode communities" (p. 156) or "life-mode-cultures" (p. 158). They position these social alternatives as "enclaves" (p. 160) outside the society. This is not the Latin way of seeing things. Tribes are more than a residual category of social life.

They are the central feature and key social fact of our own experience of everyday living – even, and maybe because, they are difficult to catch. Therefore they can exist, often unnoticed, side by side with modern society in a complex and intertwined fashion.

In a Latin approach (Club de Marseille, 1994; Maffesoli, 1996a), society resembles a network of societal micro-groups in which individuals share strong emotional links, a common subculture, a vision of life. In our times, these micro-groups develop their own complexes of meanings and symbols and form more or less stable tribes which are invisible to the categories of sociology. Each individual belongs to several tribes, in each of which he might play a different role and wear a specific mask; this means that the rational tools of sociological analysis cannot classify him. And belonging to these tribes has become, for that individual, more important than belonging to a social class or segment. The social status, that is to say the static position of an individual in one of the social classes, is progressively replaced by the societal configuration, that is to say the dynamic and flexible positioning of the individual within and between his tribes.

On this Latin analysis of society we can build a view of marketing as a vector of the tribal link (Cova, 1997a and 1999; Rémy, 2000). In other words, we can hypothesise that consumers value the goods and services which, through their linking value, permit and support social interaction of the tribal type, products or services that support AB and not the fact of being A or B. Ephemeral tribes which need to consolidate and affirm their union are, in fact, on the look-out for anything that can facilitate and support the communion: a site, an emblem, the support of a ritual of integration, or of recognition (Thompson and Holt, 1996). Thus, to satisfy their desire for communities, consumers seek products and services less for their use value than for their linking value (Godbout and Caillé, 1992; Godbout, 2000). Consequently, we see marketing as the activity of designing and launching of products and services destined to facilitate the co-presence and the communal gathering of individuals in the time of the tribes: a kind of "tribal marketing". The credo of this so-called tribal marketing is that today consumers are not only looking for products and services which enable them to be freer, but also products, services, employees and physical surroundings which can link them to others, to a tribe.

Tribal consumption: worth a second look

The Latin view of marketing proposes to put into play such notions as that of "tribes" and "linking value" in order to bring into focus blurred or fuzzy groupings of people in today societies. In this way, it participates in the interpretive trend in consumer research (Sherry, 1991) which focuses on the consumer experience to interpret it with as many approaches as there are possible related theories. One of the relevant approaches to consumption today is the ethnosociological approach (Dibie, 1998) which offers a useful counter to the dominant psychosocial approach (Moscovici, 1998), that of the vast majority of marketers. Where psychosociology focuses on the influence of A on B (A being a person or a group), or on the power of A upon B, or on the contamination of B by A or on the imitation of A by B, ethnosociology will focus on what makes the glue between A and B, or the shared emotion between A and B, or the being-together AB. Ethnosociology will focus on the tribe as an actor capable of collective action such

as industrial districts or inter-firms networks in business-to-business markets (Brito and Araujo, 1993). Thus, the Latin approach to marketing is more distinguishable from other forms of marketing by its more holistic and less individualistic way of looking at consumption rather than by its territory. In this way, it is not without link with ethnoconsumerism (Meamber and Venkatesh, 2000; Venkatesh, 1995) which studies consumption from the point of view of the social group or cultural group that is the subject of the study. The meanings of tribal symbols do not exist in isolation, but are constructed within the tribal culture, negotiated and interpreted by individuals in that specific subculture. The meaning ascribed to products and services is related to collective experiences that constitute opportunities to affirm, evoke, assign, or revise these meanings. Consequently, the objective is to pin down elements of an intangible nature which are imperceptible taken one by one, but which can be discerned in collective experiences taking place in a subcultural context.

The Latin view looks at consumption from a micro-social perspective (Figure 1).

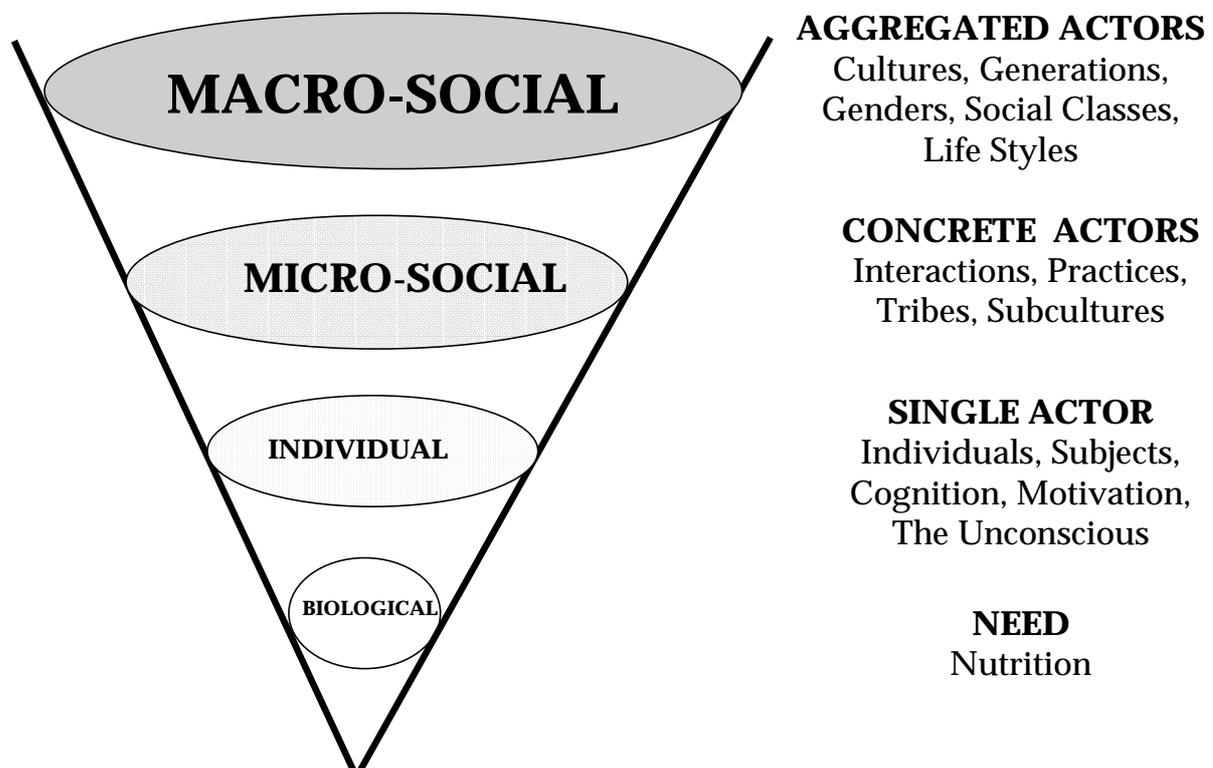


Figure 1: Levels of Observation of Consumption
(adapted from Desjeux, 1998)

This micro-social level is one of interaction between people, whether face-to-face or in large gatherings. It is the forgotten level in consumer research which has been mainly devoted to the individual and macro-social levels of analysis; “consequently both group and non-problem solving behaviours have been neglected” (Sherry, 1995, p. 12). This is the “societal” level as named by Maffesoli (1996a), that is to say the level of the primary sociality (Godbout and Caillé, 1992) which is made up of everyday interactions and

daily emotions and which differs from the secondary sociality that deals with more official belongings and participation such as occupational ones. "At this micro-social level, to consume is, above all, to create social links, to build a societal frame" (Desjeux, 1998, p. 48).

This micro-social perspective of consumption has been positioned by Ostergaard and Jantzen (2000) as "consumption studies" one as opposed to "buyer behaviour", "consumer behaviour" and "consumer research". In this perspective, "the consuming individual should be conceived as a tribe member" (Ostergaard and Jantzen, 2000, p. 18) and not only as an "animal" (buyer behaviour), a "computer" (consumer behaviour) or a "tourist" (consumer research). The consuming individual as a tribe member "exists beyond the emotional and narcissistic project described in the consumer research category. The tribe members still have some of the tourist's emotional aspects, but the individual is no longer viewed as an independent self who is trying to collect ever more experiences. Instead of being based on personal emotions, the consuming individual is a member of a tribe where the product symbolism creates a universe for the tribe" (Ostergaard and Jantzen, 2000, p. 18).

The Latin approach makes an epistemological choice to look at consumption at the micro-social level. This does not mean that other levels are useless. It only means that the Latin approach is focusing on something relatively neglected in Northern approaches.

Tribal marketing versus transactional and relational marketing

So, the Latin approach of tribal marketing has virtually rejected such concepts as consumer segments, market niches and life styles, i.e. the very macro-social constructs that underpin Northern marketing management. Neither do Latin marketers attach too much importance to coherent consumer groupings, because their belief is that such groupings are based on imagined, implausible consumer profiles. The unit of reference used in tribal marketing is more a micro-social cohort of individuals who share similar experiences and emotions, and who bond together in loosely interconnected communities, e.g. tribes. Examples include: Lomo fans (exhibit 1), Magic The Gathering players (the card game), 2CV enthusiasts (the old Citroën small car)...

In consumer terms, the notion of tribes is not particularly revolutionary. It can be said that they have always existed under various names (e.g. even the Mods, Teddy Boys or Skinheads of the 60s and 70s can be called tribes) but the difference is that nowadays, "individuals can belong to more than one neo-tribe whereas with earlier youth subcultures it would have been impossible" (Shankar and Elliott, 1999). Indeed, former groupings were more stable and more constraining than today's. The major difference lies in the dual identity of postmodern tribal groupings; they are simultaneously primary and secondary group structures. As in the primary groups, members are bonded by shared and concrete experiences of everyday life. But, these tribes do not withdraw into themselves because, similarly to secondary groups, the very condition of their existence is to interact with other collective actors, to influence the public domain through the valorisation of the shared emotion of its members.

Of course, tribal groupings are not directly comparable with reference groups or psychographic segments. On the one hand, they differ from reference groups in that they do not focus on the normative influences of the group or of individual group members on each other. Instead tribes concentrate on the bonding or linking element that keeps individuals in the group. Tribes differ from psychographic segments by their short life span and their diversity. It is fair to say that postmodern neo-tribalism translates a need to belong not just to one but to several groups simultaneously, and that tribal membership does not involve set personality traits or same values, but expresses a shared experience of maybe only some aspects of a person's personal history.

Where the notion of tribe achieves a break with Northern marketing is in the comparison with the concept of segmentation, which until recently was thought to provide reliable consumer profiles to the marketer:

- A tribe is defined as a network of heterogeneous persons -in terms of age, sex, income, etc. - who are linked by a shared passion or emotion; a tribe is capable of collective action, its members are not simple consumers, they are also advocates;
- A segment is defined as a group of homogeneous persons -they share the same characteristics- who are not connected to each other; a segment is not capable of collective action, its members are simple consumers.

Tribal membership arises from a shared experience of reality and is not derived from an ordained consumer identikit based on quantitative analysis or otherwise. Tribal analysis may defer to a kind of behavioural segmentation when all tribe members display similar behaviours or attitudes with respect to a given product or service, but in general multiple tribal membership virtually precludes consumer segmentation, since membership of one tribe is hardly meaningfully discriminating.

Finally, the tribe is more than an all pervasive vogue or society-engulfing trend (Morace, 1996). Vogues and trends tend to ignore the shared emotions and interactions amongst individuals, but tribes in contrast set great store by them. This is why Latin thinking is uneasy with some concepts such as "life mode communities" (Firat and Dholakia, 1998) that are positioned at the crossroads of trends, communities and lifestyles. Are they aggregated actors without shared emotions or are they concrete actors ?

The key concern of tribal marketing is to know which tribe(s) to support in marketing terms. The tribal marketing approach places less emphasis on the product or service for a "specific", "average" consumer, or indeed a segment of consumers. Instead it supports products and services that hold people together as a group of enthusiasts or devotees. This includes anything that strengthens community links and fosters a sense of tribal belonging and membership. The key word here is the "linking value" of the product/service (Cova, 1997b). This refers to the product's, or service's, contribution to establishing and/or reinforcing bonds between individuals. Such linking value is rarely intentionally embedded in the use value of the product/service concept, yet it is a quality that merits our careful attention. The greater the contribution of a product or service to the development and strengthening of the tribal bond, the greater its linking value will be.

The Latin approach to marketing is also challenging the way customer loyalty can be built. In this alternative view, one-to-one marketing and other relationship marketing panaceas can be criticised on two fronts (Cova 1997a):

- they are limited in their attempt to be the closest to known customers, without sharing any emotion with them. They confuse proximity and intimacy, and base everything on customer service. In fact, increasingly people do not want to be simply the object of an individualised service in terms of customisation of functions. They also want a personalised link in terms of emotion;
- relationship marketing approaches are shortsighted in how they look at what they call the "relation". Whereas the individualistic approach to relationship marketing aims at creating and developing a relation between the brand or the firm (even a member of the firm) and a customer, the tribal approach to marketing prefers to recreate and support the relation between customers. Products, services, physical supports and employees, are dedicated to supporting the tribal link, not substituting for it -an often unfeasible and counterproductive task.

As a consequence, it is possible to oppose a tribal way of building customer loyalty to an individualistic one:

- Whereas the individualistic approach focuses on the customer/company relationship, the tribal approach focuses on the customer/customers relationship;
- Whereas the individualistic approach positions the company as a pole of the relationship, the tribal approach positions the company as a support of the relationship; company's members, products, services and servicescapes are there to support the link between customers;
- Whereas the individualistic approach uses such cognitive means as loyalty cards, bulletin boards and so on, the tribal approach relies on rituals and cult places;
- Whereas the individualistic approach develops cognitive loyalty, the tribal approach aims at building affective loyalty.

Identifying the Tribe: seeing the ordinary with fresh eyes

Compared with consumer segments, tribes are not easy to identify using modern marketing variables. Perhaps a metaphor from quantum physics can be helpful in illustrating this difficulty. Tribes are like elementary particles: hard to measure because they exist but do not exist. Tribes are fuzzy; more societal sparkle than socio-economic certainty. They are shifting gatherings of emotionally bonded people, open systems to which a person belongs and yet doesn't quite belong. It takes a disruption in marketing know-how to understand tribes. Modern, rational analysis likes to define the scope of a thing, to describe its specific characteristics. But tribes will not brook this approach ; their logic is too frail.

Take the tribe of Citroën 2 CV⁵ enthusiasts. How many 2 CV enthusiasts are there? According to the Citroën Car Club, the official international club, there are around 120,000 members. But what is the significance of the response when you know that there are more than 500,000 2 CVs still in circulation? It is the difference between the number of individuals that form the hard core of the community, actively contributing to

⁵ The 2CV is the cheap car launched by Citroën at the beginning of the fifties. This "ugly" car was in production until the end of the eighties. It is now a cult-object.

its organisation and life, and the total number of individuals who still drive this legendary car. How many people identify or sympathise with the 2 CV when, for example, there is a special gathering in Canada or in France? And participating in these 2 CV gatherings does not exclude being a Beetle enthusiast either. So what are the characteristics of the 2 CV tribe members? Who are these people gathering together and chatting about this ugly old car? Are they all old guys? Are they young and nostalgic for a lost world? The Citroën Car Club gives some indications about their profile: people are anywhere between 18 and 76 years old. They are students, white-collar workers or retirees. The analysis is meaningless. The one significant fact is that 2 CV enthusiasts tend to be found outside big cities. Maybe not such a coincidence, after all, since big cities are rather dangerous for such a car! In fact the bond of the 2 CV tribe - its underlying logic, its shared experience, interpretation, representations, discourse and action - goes unnoticed through statistical surveys. Everything unquantifiable and qualitative slips through the filter. What the 2 CV tribe members have in common is the pleasure of driving a car with a maximum speed of 85 kilometres per hour and so to experience, as soon as they sit in it, a sudden break with today's high-speed world. 2 CV enthusiasts are weekend warriors of sorts. The shared experience of breaking free from the stressing work-week is a more powerful selector than any socio-demographic category.

Tribes convey signs that members identify with. Such signs, or traces of identity, cannot express the totality of belonging but provide helpful hints and put us on the path of understanding. We would argue that there are at least two types of "tribal traces": temporal traces and spatial traces. In temporal terms tribes emerge, grow, reach their zenith, languish, then dissolve. Their underlying logic is timeless and fragmented. For example, in the funky music scene (Cathus, 1998, p. 92) "the tribe exists when it springs to life with the crowd. The coteries, rock groups and possees, each with their own identities dissolve in the crowd for a brief moment of existence. All differences vanish for an instant. Even the most exclusive coteries join the flow and allow themselves to be swept away by the flood". Tribes also exist and occupy space physically. The tribe - or at least some of its members - can gather and perform its rituals in public spaces, assembly halls, meeting places, places of worship or commemoration. These spaces are "anchoring places" (Aubert-Gamet and Cova, 1999) which provide a momentary home for the tribe. None of these time and space traces exhaust the full potential of tribes. Tribal belonging exists on a daily basis at home, as well as occasionally and informally with others anywhere. Some also advocate that a tribe can be just a feeling, a fancy, a fantasy. Tribal members are never alone because they belong, in fact or virtually, to a vast and informal community (Maffesoli, 2000).

The recognition of tribes requires a different and special effort (Maffesoli, 1996b). The marketer is well advised to cast aside the more traditional mono-disciplinary, systemic approaches and to favour practices based on detecting signs, foraging for hints and exploring the unusual by undertaking:

- desk research on everything that can be said or written about the tribe in newspapers and books, on chat lines, diffusion lists, Net forums; all that done in a similar approach to the one developed by Kozinets (1997) for his X-Philes "netnography" in the US;

- semi-structured interviews and non structured interviews with members on an individual or group basis (focus groups);
- participant and non participant observations on specific places where the tribe (or part of the tribe) gathers.

Figure 2 illustrates somewhat metaphorically⁶ the signs that can be found in the environment.

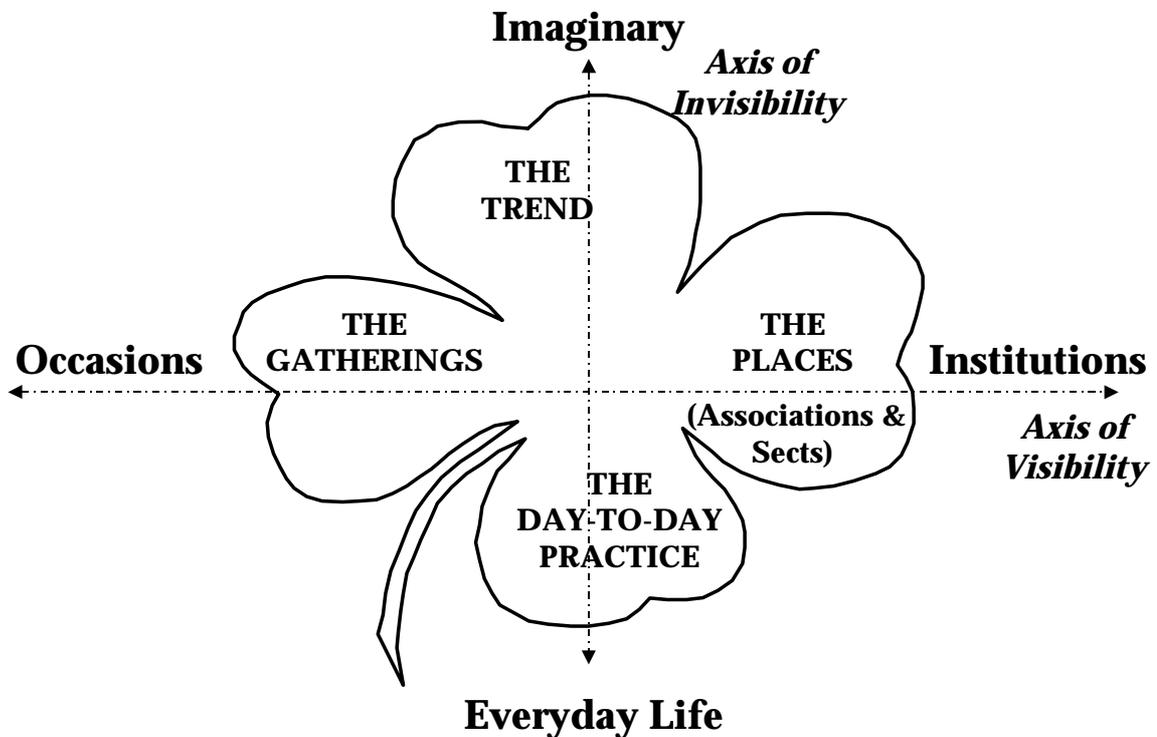


Figure 2: The Tribal Clover

In this framework, the physical evidence of tribes are located on the horizontal or "visible" axis (traces or evidences). This includes, on the temporal plane, the moments when tribal members come together for their rituals (occasions), and on the spatial plane, the physical meeting places and virtual spaces (institutions) where tribes convene. On the vertical or "invisible" axis (hints or shadows), we detect the signs coming from day-to-day activities (the personal and shared experiences) as well as the trends and vogues and other constituents of fantasy and imagination that sweep briskly through society.

From this clutch of evidence we can work out the roles adopted by tribal members in their dealings with each other and their surroundings. As Figure 3 illustrates tribal members can adopt four roles. These are:

- a "member" of institutions (associations, religious sects);
- a "participant" in informal gatherings (demonstrations, happenings);
- a "practitioner" or adept who has quasi daily involvement in tribal activities;
- a "sympathiser" or fellow traveller who moves with the vogues and trends and is marginally/virtually integrated to the tribe.

⁶ The clover is directly linked with superstition, and so, with archaic values.

Tribal marketing can take aim at all the members of the tribe at once, or focus on a cross-section with a view (or not) to reaching the whole tribe.

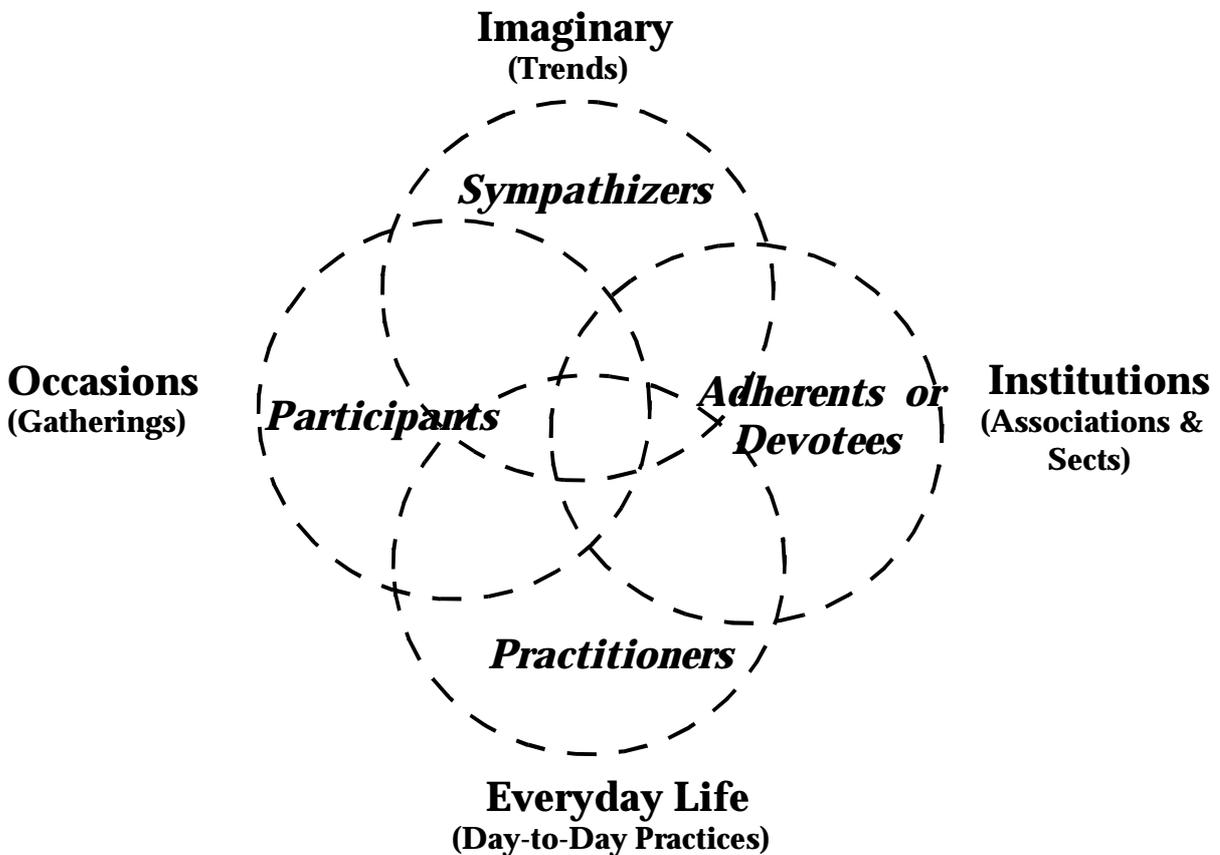


Figure 3: Roles of Tribe Members

Case study: marketing to the urban tribe of in-line roller skaters

Like all tribes, in-line skaters have their "in groups" and "out groups". The "ins" share an experience which produces a bond and distinguishes them from others (we are tempted to say from "normal" people who are "out"). To quote a Parisian skater: "in the street, cars blast their horn at you and run you down ; in the bike lanes, it's the riders who yell and holler at you ; and on the sidewalk, it's the pedestrians who scream in anger".

The in-line skaters have been around as a recognisable tribal group since the mid 1990s. In 1999, this group was identifiable in a number of ways (Figure 4). Visible traces include physical gatherings of urban skaters:

- two large national gatherings took place in Paris during 1999; in September *Roller City* brought together 15 000 people for a skate through the city ; in October *Tatoo Roller Skating* assembled 10 000 for the same purpose ;
- regular, local gatherings, called *Friday Night Fever*, took place weekly, naturally on Friday evening, in Paris at around 10 PM ; at *Place d'Italie* anywhere from 3000 to 5000 skaters congregated and set off for a night time skate through the city ; similar gatherings also took place on Friday evenings in Bordeaux, Lyon, Marseilles, Rennes and Strasbourg.

Other visible traces included the public meetings of such Parisian associations as *Roller & Coquillages*, *Paris Roller* and the *Roller Squad Institut*. Nationally, there was the French Federation of Roller Skating (established in 1990) with 28 000 card-carrying members! There were also special gatherings like the *Plage du Prado* in Marseilles where hundreds of skaters congregated daily, and also specialist websites where skaters met to chat and connect with fellow members of the tribe.

The invisible side was equally rich in tribal potential. Daily skating offered benefits to fitness freaks as well as to stunt skaters. It has been estimated that there were over 2 million in-line skaters in 1999 France, compared with only 10 000 just 15 years before. There were as many female as male skaters who skated either for fun, as a means of transport, or as a sport. Hard to estimate – because they were less visible - was the number of people who were part of the in-line skating vogue, maybe not skaters but enthusiasts who relate to the more active members of the tribe. There were even smaller tribal factions which found expression through internal rivalries: for example, fitness skaters and stunt skaters belong to antagonizingly different worlds.

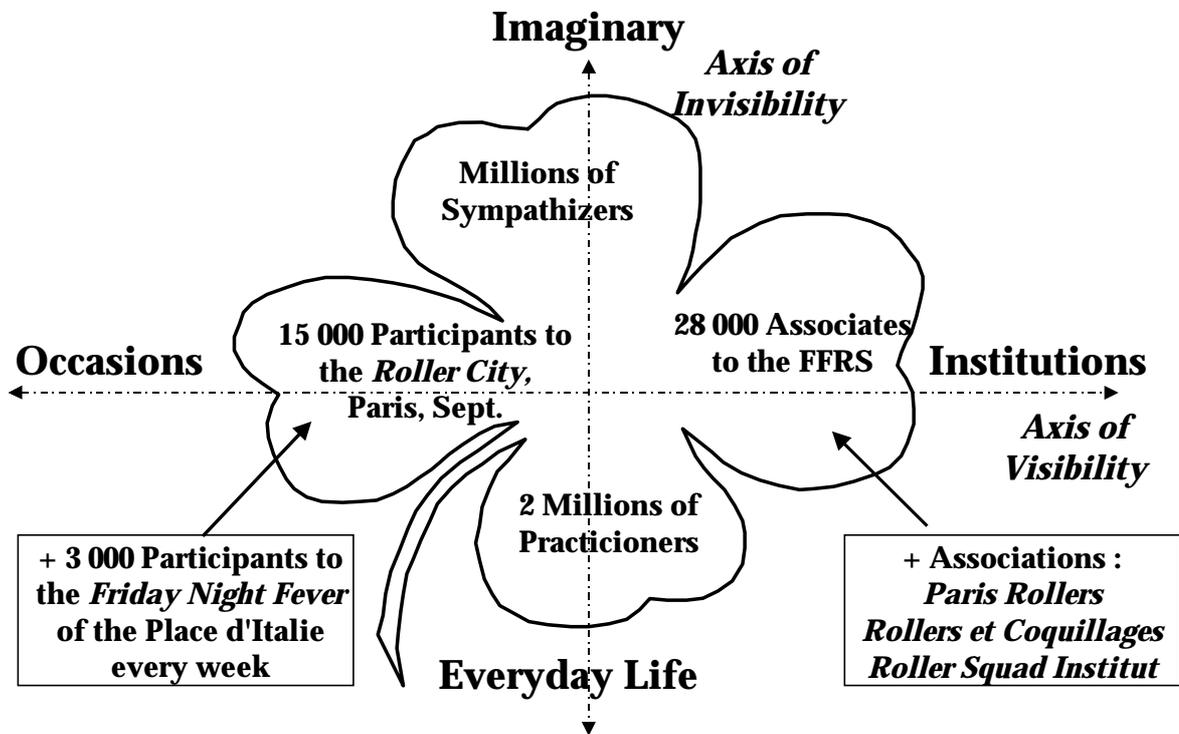


Figure 4: The In-Line Skaters Tribe in 1999 France

The primary task of tribal marketing is to consider the product or service from the angle of its linking value rather than its use value (Cova 1999). It is more important for the firm to know how its product or service can support the tribe in its very being, than how to deliver the offer to the consumer. Here the notion of ritual is critically important to describe the way companies marketed to the in-line roller tribe (“intensive tribal marketing”). Durkheim (1912) discovered that rituals endow a social entity with permanence. Just as every lasting social relationship requires some kind of ritual to establish and sustain itself, so too a tribe relies on rituals to pronounce its existence and

sustain its membership. Large social events and small local gatherings display rituals which can be leveraged by tribal marketing activities. Such meetings are opportunities to reaffirm and strengthen the underlying values of the group at the same time that they bring together and bond the individual member with the tribe. Rituals are a tribe's expression of shared beliefs and social belonging (Segalen, 1998). To perform their function at social gatherings, rituals need to be supported in various ways. Examples include the use of sacred or cult objects, ritual clothing, sacred or ceremonial places, magical or ritual words, idols, icons and sacred images.

For the tribe of in-line skaters, it is clear that the notion of ritual provided manufacturers and marketers a number of opportunities to strengthen the tribal bond. Take cult objects for example. Rollerblade, the brand of the founding father of in-line skating and professional hockey player, Scott Olsson, springs to mind. In the early 1980s Scott Olsson had the brilliant idea of replacing the blade of his hockey skates with four in-line rollers. Another firm, Roces, immediately recognised the value of Olsson's idea and signed a licensing contract with him. Roces then handled the research and development of the product while Olsson through Rollerblade handled marketing and sales. In 1999, Rollerblade was owned by Benetton and remained a cult object among the members of the in-line skating tribe, even in the face of stiff opposition from the likes of Salomon, Fila and many others (K2, Razors, Oxygen, Tecnica, Rossignol, Roces, Nike...).

Look now at the manufacturers of ritual clothing for in-line skaters! This encompassed a full range of accessories, including shoes, key chains, hats, belts, backpacks, sunglasses - the list is endless. Many companies have jumped into the market: Pawn, Senate, USD, England... They have positioned themselves in such a way as to target sub-tribes - e.g. stunt skaters - which had their special practices and rituals and their own special dress codes.

There were also companies which offered special events or places for tribes of in-line skaters. As was mentioned above, Tadoo (the pager or bipper launched by France Télécom) organised the Tadoo Roller Skating in Paris and sponsored a series of events around the country. They have even increased their commitment by opening a website dedicated to in-line roller skating. Salomon organised a night-time skating escapade through the city of Strasbourg with 3000 participants and Kellogg's supported a number of active skating clubs affiliated with the French Federation of Roller Skaters (FFRS).

Then there were the many special words that belong to the vocabulary of the skating tribe. In France, tribe members used English words like "stunt", "tricks", "shine" and "mega". It is difficult to give examples of companies which were positioned in this segment apart from tribal magazines such as Crazy Roller, Urban, Roller Saga or Roller Mag.

Finally there were the high profile idols and icons, the divas of in-line skating who were supported by leading firms. Internationally, they included Aaron Feinberg sponsored by Salomon, Matt Salerno under contract with Fila, and many, many others. Such sponsorship could be found at both the local and national level.

And moreover, companies willing to do marketing with the in-line roller tribe considered that, beyond their products or services, they might have a brand or corporate linking value by the way they interacted with the tribe: helping in the mobilising of the collective competencies of its members, ascribing value to the shared emotion of its members, supporting the (re)construction or (re)possession of meanings by the tribe, assisting the tribe in its interactions with other collective actors in order to influence the public domain.

Some marketing activity takes place outside the context of rituals and tribal supports. Such activity is primarily aimed at the fraction of tribal sympathisers who identify with, but stand silently apart from the mainstream tribal membership (“extensive tribal marketing”). For instance, Ford launched Ka Roller, a limited series of 3000 units, to capitalise on the trend. Its advertising slogans showed that Ford was promoting a product more than a bond: "With Ford Ka, you will thread your way through the city like a skater!"; "With my Ka Roller, everything is in-line!".

Brands like Tatoo built on tribal bonds with in-line skaters to emphasise the bonding value of its offer. In this instance the tribe of in-line skaters was the focus of marketing and an important element of brand identity together with an ingredient of global offering. Tatoo enabled tribal members to stay in contact, whether they belong to the tribe of in-line skaters or another tribe. Like Magic fanatics who haunt Magic Cafés everywhere, the simple fact that there was a fanatical tribe of in-line skaters legitimatised the linking value of Tatoo. In contrast, an effort by the French bank, Caisse d'Épargne, to promote a tribal savings account named “*Tribu*” has been a dismal failure because there was no specific linking value in the offer.

Of course the approach has its limits and Tatoo had to be cautious not to position itself as the pager of in-line skaters! Tatoo's target market was much bigger than the in-line skaters' tribe, as its advertising spots wittily demonstrate. Tatoo used imaginary tribes, such as the Tribe of Santa Clauses and the Tribe of Snowmen, to avoid narrow identification with an existing tribe, thus extending its appeal. The astonishing success of the brand Helly Hansen also illustrates the point. Popular among skippers of racing yachts, the Helly Hansen line of clothing has become the rage among rappers! Its Bubble garment became a cult item in France and in one year (1997) sales jumped from 100 to 10 000 and now represents an estimated 15% of world-wide sales! Rather than ignore the surprising success of its brand, Helly Hansen softly supported it by sponsoring rap groups like Manau. At the same time, it continued to stress the themes of genuineness and quality. In its 1998/99 advertising campaign this resulted in an emphasis on the sporting goods connection of its products and the upmarket quality of its label. Its advertising campaign included images of skiers being dropped high up on the mountain slopes by helicopter! What happened to the rapper?

The company side of tribal marketing: Salomon

In 1994, Salomon was a very traditional brand, a little bit outdated, but still a world leader in winter sports equipment. It served people skiing on "closed" tracks and was completely excluded from new "open" winter playgrounds where “style sports” were practised. This also means it was excluded from new forms of distribution channels. One of these style sports was the snowboard. Snowboarding was not considered a winter

game; its roots were to be found in urban passions. Snowboarders represented a marginal group, a tribe, which structured itself against the whole universe of skiing (federations, clothes, brands...). They wanted to stay apart from traditional skiers. They had their own small manufacturers (more than 150 craftsmen), their own distribution channels (Pro-Shops), their cult-brand (Burton) and they hated Salomon which was considered a "daddy's brand".

In 1994, Salomon decided to focus on the snowboard phenomenon. The watchword was "be humble!": "we are starting from scratch", "we will be low profile", "we will go there to listen"... The aim was to build and develop proximity between Salomon and the snowboarders. This was mainly done through participant observation by Salomon people. In 1995, Salomon decided to set up a marketing unit made up of snowboarders. It designed a specific "logo" for its snowboard activities and supported a team of good snowboarders fitted out with non-Salomon boards (Salomon boards did not yet exist!). Some of the tribe members were invited to join the design of Salomon projects.

In 1996, Salomon was ready to launch its snowboard production. No advertising, just physical presence at Summer camps and the launching of an advanced batch of 200 boards for the pro-shops (not the traditional winter sports channels). At the Grenoble exhibition, Salomon boards were on pro-shop stands, not on Salomon's, clearly showing clearly a different type of approach: Salomon respected the special nature of the tribe. The following year Salomon launched its marketing approach of the snowboard tribe:

- huge presence on playgrounds with boards to be tested by snowboarders without any incentive to buy ("we are just there");
- presence at cult places;
- advertising in tribal media with a great variety of visuals;
- support for contests and events.

In 1999, Salomon rose to N°3 in the snowboarding French market.

Along with this first foray into the tribal world with the snowboard, Salomon investigated the ways of supporting the in-line roller tribe. This approach was more systematic:

Phase 1, Ethnomarketing, Salomon moves closer to the in-line skaters (1995-1996)

- Analysis of rituals and practice codes;
- Encounters with the milieu;
- Presence on in-line events;
- Participant observation of in-line skaters.

Phase 2, Co-Design, Salomon launches its in-line activities (1997-1998)

- Design of products in collaboration with skaters;
- Work on distinctive features of the product with skaters;
- Product tests by a team of skaters supported by Salomon.

Phase 3, Tribal Support, Salomon takes root in the in-line skate tribe (1999)

- Salomon is an embedded actor who shares the values of the tribe;
- Salomon supports in-line events not by placing an ad (streamer) but by promoting the practice (contests);
- Salomon creates new events and helps in the building of in-line structures;
- Salomon supports the shared passion of in-line skaters.

In 1999, Salomon achieved 15% of its turnover in snowboard and in-line skate activities. Salomon became number 3 in the world for in-line products. This has changed the positioning of the brand in the mind of the consumers. Salomon organises now its marketing approach around the ideas of practices, tribes and passions. It has a new slogan, "Freedom Action Sports", a new graphic identity (the logo of the snowboard activities becomes the logo of the brand) and a new type of communication, more non-verbal than verbal. Now, Salomon focuses on increasing tribal marketing approaches with such tribes as snowbladers.

One way to measure the quality of Salomon's approach is to compare it those approaches developed by its direct competitors on the same market. In 1997, there were four major companies seeking to penetrate the in-line roller market: Salomon, Nike, Fila and Rossignol. Only Salomon succeeded. Fila and Rossignol faced major sales disillusion in trying to enter the tribal market as if it were a classical market, i.e. starting with a product offer! Nike also threw in the towel after a while. In contrast, people from Salomon humbly approached the tribe; they did not seek to get a market foothold, but, to join a tribe and to support its rituals. If we pursue the parallel with business-to-business markets (Hakansson and Snehota, 1995), we can say that they gained a network position. After that, they were allowed to think about bringing their products to the members of the tribe.

Tribal marketing and after: Societing

Tribes such as in-line skaters provide opportunities for marketers to engage in symbiotic relationships with groups of consumers. The best thing about these tribes is that they do not wait to be invited to participate (Aubert-Gamet, 1997), they just get on with it. Marketers who understand the structure and ethos of a tribe as Salomon has done can profit from supporting it. In addition to providing necessary supports for the functioning of the tribe, marketers can also assist in the socialisation of new members, facilitate communications within the tribe, and support events and other experiences that provide havens for the activities of the tribe (Schouten and Mc Alexander, 1995). And rather than limit themselves to the status of non participant observers, marketers can involve themselves with members of the tribe in shared, high emotion and ritual experiences. These methodologies are based on high emotional involvement with consumers and resemble an anthropology of consumption (Sherry *et al.*, 1995). Some define this range of methods as market-oriented ethnography or ethnomarketing (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). These methods enable observation of how the meaning embedded in products is transferred from the product to consumers or how it is altered, diverted and twisted through everyday experiences.

All this contributes to a loss of control on the part of the company in its relation to the market and the consumers. Marketers in Salomon aim more at supporting the tribe than at controlling the tribe. They treat members of the tribes as partners in market and non-market activities. In doing so, Salomon breaks down the wall between the sphere of the market and the sphere of society. In its search for authentic interaction with the tribe, the company is progressively obliged to adopt some of the rules and norms of the tribe. This has direct consequences on the way people are managed inside the company; some of its operating modes in terms of human relations may be altered (Rémy, 2000). It is

not just a question of serving a community, it is a question of being a member of it. And this community is not necessarily a "brand community" (Kotler, 1999, p. 160), but a community supported by a brand, which is slightly different. The very idea of building a brand community is in fact a Promethean dream of marketers which rarely becomes reality. It is much more interesting and socially responsive to support social tribes than to dominate markets.

Here, the idea of partnership between the company and the tribe is another crucial dimension of the tribal approach. If we consider the tribe an actor capable of collective action such as are industrial districts or industrial networks, it is possible to incorporate the tribal experience into the company model: customers are co-developers of tribal experiences and tribal competencies that can be mobilised by the company, just as Salomon did when co-opting skaters to co-design its products. The recognition that tribes are a source of competencies forces marketers to lower the boundaries of the company (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000): the tribe is not outside the company, it's part of the company network just as the company is part of the tribe. All these connoisseurs, regulars, adepts and other collectors produce, in their shared experiences of re-appropriation, a collective expertise of the product, service or brand that can be beneficial for the company if taken into account by the marketers; and, if not, it may be a source of negative rumours.

The central leitmotif of Societing - *the link is more important than the thing* – is clearly perceptible in these examples of tribal marketing approaches. The business firm acts at the societal or micro-social level, which is the level of concrete actors (Desjeux, 1998). It operates in a way close to the "social exchange" as defined by Belk and Coon (1993): it does not look for a balanced or even negative reciprocity in exchange for what it gives the tribe. The tribe and the business firm are more in a system of perpetual mutual indebtedness than in a system of reciprocity. The partner in the exchange is not viewed as a commodity; it comes to be seen as part of the extended self. The return on investment will come later or perhaps never. The company's first move is non market and has a purely societal anchoring, whereas the second move will allow the company to return to the market with the support of the tribe; a kind of partnership to influence the public domain. It has a clear market anchorage. The core of the Societing effort is to support a tribe of enthusiasts whereas the core of the marketing effort is to serve a market (Figure 5).

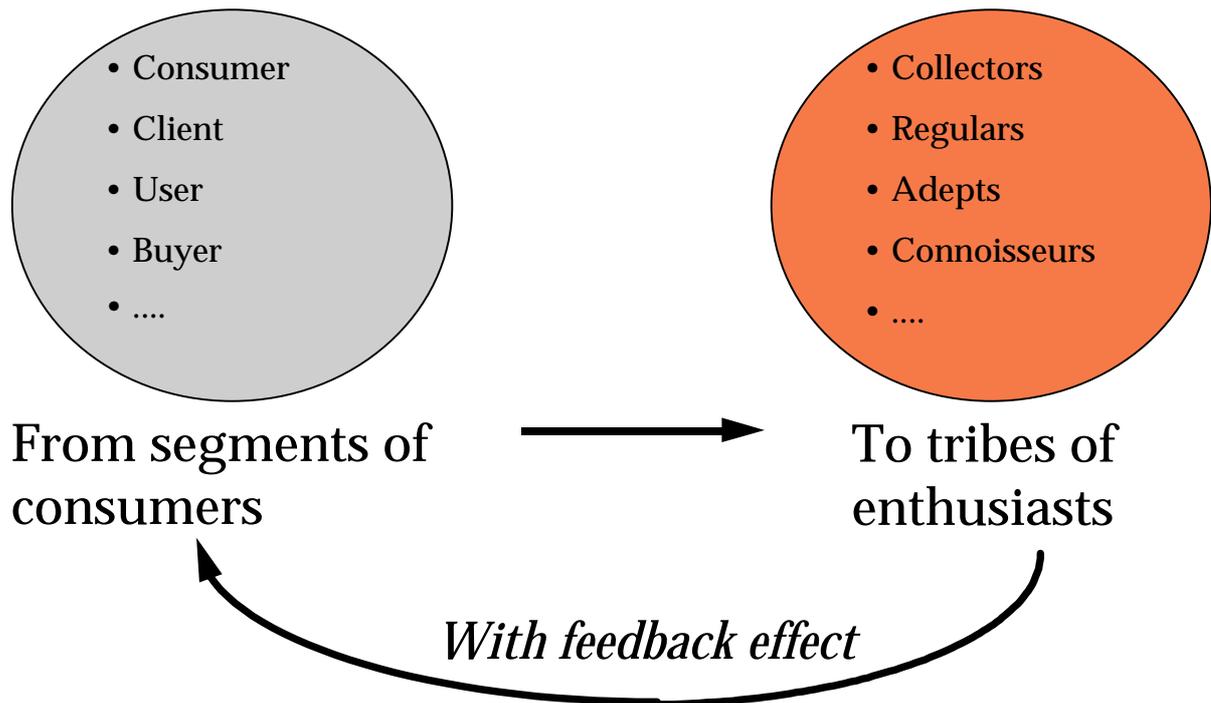


Figure 5: A Different Anchorage of the Effort

Some researchers could put limits on these efforts arguing that “consumers would not like the experiential enclaves contaminated by intrusions from other enclaves” (Firat and Dholakia, 1998, p. 158) and that any attempt to capitalise on a tribe will melt into thin air. We are not sure that the concept of enclave is fit for tribalisation. Tribes can co-exist side by side with mainstream society in a complex and intertwined fashion allowing many re-combinations. The soft marketisation of some of the tribe symbols and recreated meanings, with its agreement and its help, is not always synonymous with colonisation and, consequently, rejection by the tribe members.

Some managers could say that here is nothing new under the sun, and that these kinds of tribal support have always existed. As a matter of fact, they may have existed in a premodern form but have vanished from marketing today. For example in the South of France, Ricard, which produces a very well-known alcoholic beverage *Pastis*, has supported the “*pétanque*”⁷ groupings and competitions for many years. It is noteworthy that this support was dedicated to a geographically bounded group of people, whereas tribes are more conceptually bounded, and that there was no attempt to co-opt and integrate customers competencies whereas tribal approaches are willing to open the company to an outside collective actor. Finally, even the return to premodern practices can be seen as a way of softening the pure business orientation of the company.

Other authors argue that Societing is just another buzzword to hide “the ability of the market to co-opt, usurp, and commodify, as a part of mainstream culture, the subversions attempted by the consumers” (Firat and Dholakia, 1998, p. 64). Globally, Societing would be another vehicle of hypercapitalism (Rifkin, 2000). On the contrary,

⁷ Game of bowls.

we think these critics neglect a reverse movement of hypocapitalism that forces business firms to relinquish part of their power in dealing with tribes of enthusiasts. This movement pushes companies outside the market sphere and involves them in societal efforts. To be intimate with tribal enthusiasts requires the firm to act as a voluntary organisation. In fact, we are not so sure that there is only one move: the invasion of the societal sphere by the market sphere. There may well be a reverse move: the invasion of the market sphere by the societal sphere. More and more tribes of enthusiasts want to play a part in the firm's decisions that concern their object of passion. And this phenomenon is likely to take a new and larger shape with the development of the Internet.

On the Internet, virtual tribes structured around a shared passion are growing rapidly (Rauch and Thunqvist, 2000). These emotional tribes that we see as something more than just "communities of interest" (cf. Northern cybermarketing approaches) are to be considered with care: "online consumers are much more active, participative, resistant, activist, loquacious, social and communitarian than they have previously been thought to be" (Kozinets, 1999, p. 261). In order to support these e-tribes, it is not enough to open a new website. It is important to support the myriad websites that already exist. "The goal is not to control the information, but to use it wisely in order to build solid, long-lasting relationships" (Kozinets, 1999, p. 263). For example, the French automotive manufacturer Citroën undertakes tribal marketing on the web in support of a selected number of the 1500 "Citroenthusiasts" sites. This is in addition to its official Citroën website. In doing so, Citroën facilitates the emotional experience these enthusiasts can have on the Web. But even this is not sufficient. Tribes of cyberenthusiasts want to take part in decisions and they have the power to do so. In fact, if you don't want to play with tribes of enthusiasts, never mind, they will play with you anyway! And, they will force the company to adopt Societing.

Societing is an approach which is willing to establish mutually beneficial compromises between market and society rather than an approach that targets the colonisation of one by the other, or the enclavisation of one versus the other. The notion of tribe gives the business firm the opportunity to develop such an approach. Thus, "the company is not only a simple economic actor adapting to the market, but a social actor relating to the societal context" (Badot *et al.*, 1993, p. 51).

Conclusion

In this paper, the tribe of in-line skaters has been used to illustrate the marketer's exciting task of identifying, supporting and integrating neo-tribes in today's society. Opportunity depends on a willingness to discard mechanical marketing thinking and adopt a fuzzy logic which places the link at the heart of the offering strategy. This implies, both in market research and in offering strategies, the tempering of psychosocial view with an ethnosociological approach which is able to take into account the shared experience of consumers in their tribal groupings in order to integrate it into the business model.

The Internet, which provides a powerful tool for people to link and act together in tribes without restrictions of time and space, is bringing to light the need to develop a

Societing approach to go hand-in-hand with the increasing trend of re-socialisation of the individuals.

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Appendix 1: The Latin School of Societing

The vast majority of French, Italian and Spanish marketing researchers do not emphasise their differences with North-American or North-European thinking. They position themselves or within the dominant North-American stream of marketing management or within the promising stream of Relationship Marketing while displaying their virtual membership in the Nordic School of Services Marketing or/and in the Scandinavian School of Industrial Marketing.

In contrast, a group of French, Italian and Spanish researchers are gathering around what we call the "Latin School of Societing". Their common denominator is to be born on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea - a small, warm closed piece of water compared to the vast Atlantic and Pacific Oceans - and to assert their identity (Cassano, 1996). Their shared thinking can be traced in the following simple *manifesto* which is clearly embedded in the Mediterranean way of life (Cova, 1997a):

- people like to gather together in tribes even - and especially - in the age of individualism;
- everyday practices are made of re-appropriation, diversion and distortion of the dominant system of meanings, not only of mere participation in this system.

Actors of the Latin School call for "a knowledge of the Southern type" (Maffesoli, 1996b, p. 217). They believe that there is a close connection between individualism, rationalism, utilitarianism and universalism, which reflect Northern thinking, and that there is a close relation between community, affectivity, futility and resistance, which are characteristic of Southern thinking (Morace, 1996). Latin researchers also hold (Club de Marseille, 1994) that Mediterranean-specific cultural traits have fostered the development of human attitudes oriented towards being, experiencing and gathering together, that is to say a high propensity to self-organise in micro-groups. "*Parier sur l'homme*" ("Betting on the Human), the title of Club de Marseille's book, is a paradigmatic axis for research programmes: we cannot live without human relationships and shared emotions; they are at the centre of our everyday life and therefore orient our research on Societing.

Societing has been defined by Latin researchers (Badot *et al.*, 1993, p. 51) as "a socially relevant perspective of the marketing, design and R&D interface". In a societing approach "the company is not only a simple economic actor adapting to the market, but a social actor relating to the societal context" (Badot *et al.*, 1993, p. 51).