

Great American brands?

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19-MAY-05

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On a recent trip to the US, Cross Colours' Adele Wapnick discovered that some 'great American brands' are better than others. This is her story of the two brands with which she had a close encounter:

Tabasco, Louisiana

Tabasco is 133 years old. It's a brand that features in most households and restaurants around the world. It exists unquestionably. It's almost a generic for hot chilli sauce. Little else compares in terms of consumer awareness. The small bottle of hot liquid which drops delicately onto food, into drinks holds a whole lot of fire, and so we left hoping our visit to the Tabasco 'factory' would mimic this same fire.

The journey was a two hour drive from New Orleans to Avery Island. Through southern marshes and bayous we arrived at a nature reserve that was inhabited by indigenous flora and fauna. Crossed a toll, paid 50c and arrived on the property.

It was all very quaint, southern and quite pleasant. We entered the main building where guests were greeted in a small, pokey entrance and in what seemed to be a foreign language. This was where it went amiss.

We were shuffled along and seated in small AV auditorium. The 'host', dressed for gardening, welcomed 'ya'all' and left, advising us to leave through 'that' door once the video was finished. We sat in awkward silence. The video, conducted by a lady who appeared to have experience either as an air hostess or bank teller complete with suit, scarf and smile, told us about the McIlhenny family. She told of their chilli farms, one in Avery Island (never saw it) and some down south... presumably South America and Mexico, it's cheaper. And concluded the video by holding a bottle of their new sauce and told us to 'buy it'.

We left, walked along a corridor, viewed the factory on our left through a glass wall and ended in a small room, which was their museum or the history of the brand, and their process documented. There were a couple of pictures, photos of some of their hero's and a plastic chilli thermometer, larger than life. We left, feeling cheated and sought out their 'store'.

Now the thing is, one eats Tabasco. It's a condiment, after all. Their store didn't sell food, there was no quaint restaurant serving deliciously fresh chicken salads or gourmet burgers on which to taste the Tabasco range of sauces and experience the brand, firsthand. No.

At the end of a huge room full of schlock souvenirs, save the odd apron or dishcloth which have some relevance, was a row of sauces to be tasted. Their holding device was a piece of pork sausage and they were presented in small dishes with age ensuring that the sauces were encrusted. Needless to say our party did not partake of the tasting! In true southern style, I sat on a rocking chair on the 'stoep' waiting for my colleagues to purchase the mandatories. After all, we were there to see how other great brands illustrated their magnificence and heritage.

Jack Daniels, Tennessee

The Jack Daniels distillery lies in the heart of Lynchburg. It is Lynchburg! It's a small and intimate district and paradoxically, is set in a dry county. There are approximately 360 inhabitants most of whom have some association with Jack Daniels.

The Jack Daniels staff arranged for a luxury limousine to collect us from our hotel, The Gaylord Opreyland. Set in what felt like the twilight zone - it was somewhere between Sun City and Pleasantville. The journey was short, the environment typically southern, with lots of open spaces, wooden homes, all distinctive with Southfork-style barns. The distillery was impressive, but modest.

The Museum in the main building was tastefully done, with interesting facts on the history of the brand, the making of the liquor and Jack's life. There was a life-size statue of Jack in the centre, introduced as the man of his time, a truly dapper gentleman. (Once I discovered that he had remained unmarried, that he was extremely interested in clothing and fashion and that his real name was in fact, Jasper, I became convinced that the man must have been gay.) Needless to say, I kept this to myself. It did not matter, his legacy was evident. A charismatic guide gave us a tour that was filled with humour and charm. The process was fascinating, their facilities simple, yet state-of-the-art. The pure process of the manufacturing was apparent.

We were extremely privileged to have a tasting with the Master brewer - Jim Bedford. He is brewer no 5 (there's only ever been 5 master brewers in a 139-year history). It was clear that he is an extremely powerful and well-connected man, throwing in the odd comment about 'congress'. He taught us well. The entire experience was distilled. It was welcoming, warm and pleasant. Very southern. There was no hard sell, yet we all felt the desire to acquire something - to have a piece of Jack. The entire experience was authentic and honest, it matched perfectly the impression one has of their brand and more especially, their advertising.

These were some of the lessons we learned:

There are many marketing and branding books, theories and philosophies about how best to sell a brand experience. Emotional branding, the brand as a stage, experiential branding and the experience economy. It's endless. These can all help in finding ways and means to sell product and/or brand experience in a unique way.

However, offering your brand up as a destination in the way that Tabasco and Jack Daniels has done is another matter. To visit these locations, customers must have some affinity to, or at the very least some curiosity about, the brand. It becomes critical then that the experience, on every level and in every sense (literally), is delivered, and more. It should be done in a way that best reflects the brands' values, beyond all expectation. Visitors should leave feeling impressed, even delighted and most of all, fulfilled.

I may have the odd drop of Tabasco in my Bloody Mary, but boy, am I having fun with my newfound cocktail based on Jack, the Lynchburg Lemonade. You should try it.