

# Vintage labels find a new life

Dormant brands with strong recognition may prove profitable for companies wanting to co-opt a rich heritage, writes **Rhymer Rigby**

Shoppers of a certain age in the UK's House of Fraser department stores might be forgiven for coming over all nostalgic in the women's wear department. Among all the usual brands the store sells is one more normally associated with the 1960s. This is Biba, a brand that was very much part of swinging London and which originally ceased trading in 1975. It has since been resurrected several times, most recently last year by House of Fraser.

"The original Biba [is] very iconic," says Stephanie Chen, director of women's wear and accessories at House of Fraser. "It changed the face of fashion and people loved it – it was affordable, easy and sexy. The new Biba has been the most successful launch in the House of Fraser's history – it's done way, way better than we'd expected."

Biba has proved to be a successful example of brand resurrection. Here, what are known as "dormant brands" – once well-known trademarks that may have been off the shelves for years or even decades – are dusted off and modernised. The reasons for doing this vary. The brand may have great consumer recognition in spite of its dormancy. Or it may have a rich and fascinating heritage.

"I don't believe that iconic brands really die," says Mark Thomann of River West Brands, a Chicago-based company that buys dormant brands. "Most of the time consumers keep the brand alive. So what you do is look for brands that have positive recall and high brand awareness."

Mr Thomas points to a US brand due to be relaunched called Brim coffee, which was big in the 1980s and

went by the catchy slogan "Fill it to the rim with Brim". Brand awareness, he says, is 80-90 per cent of the challenge.

Taco van Sambeek, a Netherlands-based entrepreneur who revived the Commodore computing brand for video gaming, says: "If you try to start a new brand, it takes two to three years to prove yourself, but when you use a brand like Commodore, you get something like 80 per cent recognition."

One of the reasons that Mr Thomann thinks old brands have such resonance is that many of them were developed before the media landscape fragmented. "If you look at Brim coffee, back in 1978 there were three main TV channels. So if you spent \$10m, you probably hit the entire consumer space," he says. "To do that today would cost vastly more – if it was even possible."

However, he adds, when you revive a brand, you cannot just simply capitalise on awareness. "There needs to be innovation to make it relevant again." To this end, the new Brim will be a coffee with added nutrients.

River West has relaunched other brands, too. These include Eagle Snacks – "We sold that to a large salty snack private label; it was very successful" – and Coleco, the US toy company behind the Cabbage Patch dolls – "it modernised very well and we did a deal with a [video] gaming company."

Not all his brand revivals have been as successful. "We relaunched the Salon Selectives haircare range in 2008 and bought in \$10m worth of capital but it didn't go as well as we'd

hoped. So we're relaunching it and cutting the price," he says.

In some cases, revived brands enjoy virtually no recall at all. In these cases it is often the story that the new owner is after.

In the UK, for example, a company called Brand Cellar that buys up dormant brands also injects new life into underperforming ones. David Birchall, chief executive, says that his quest for forgotten brands has sent researchers into Fortnum & Mason's drinks cellars and to the British Museum.

Brand Cellar recently bought a spirits brand called Crowning Glory, which was first registered in 1877. "It hasn't been on the shelves for 30 years but it has an incredible heritage and history," explains Mr Birchall. This, he says, will go down very well in Asian markets, where provenance is hugely important.

Rita Clifton, chairman of Interbrand, the branding consultancy, echoes this view. "It [a dormant brand] can be a real strength to build on and can be much better than making it up," she says.

There are, however, a number of pitfalls for the brand revivers. Ms Chen says: "Our biggest worry was people remembering Biba in its gorgeous heyday and being disappointed."

Ms Clifton argues that the brand should not be too niche, as this may limit room for manoeuvre. "If it's too

specific, it can very difficult to disengage the brand from one product," she says.



**I**t is also worth remembering that acquiring the brand is likely to be a relatively minor expense compared with the cost of relaunching it. Mr Birchall says Brand Cellar is shortly to relaunch Dewhurst, once a well-known high street butcher in the UK.

"With Dewhurst, we checked with the administrators and the trademark had lapsed. So we just re-registered it, meaning the cost was negligible," he says. But he adds: "The real cost is working...to revive the brand. It's everything from research and really understanding it to updating it and marketing and PR."

With brands that have failed before, it is critical to examine the reasons why. As Mr van Sambeek says: "If you look at Commodore, there have been a lot of bankruptcies among those who have tried to bring it back. They call it 'the curse of Commodore'."

There are also some brands that face a bigger challenge. The US airline Pan Am, for example, was once one of the world's best known airlines but is now linked to the Lockerbie bombing of 1988.

Ms Clifton adds that post-internet brands may be harder to revive. "In a digital age, the ghosts of corporate malpractice never get laid to rest," she says.

Still, Mr Thomann says, it depends how consumers respond to that reputational damage. "Sometimes consumers do forget. If you take a brand like WorldCom, it was a complicated financial scandal, but it didn't really affect consumers. It's also a very generic name, with broad applicability, so it could work."

**Comeback kids**

Before resurrecting a dormant brand, a company needs to consider whether it has a positive legacy or high awareness. Here are some brands that were successfully revived.

● **Wispa** was an aerated chocolate bar made by

Cadbury UK, which was launched in 1981 and withdrawn in 2003. It was relaunched in 2007 by Cadbury, backed by an internet campaign. The success of its temporary revival was such that it was brought back permanently.



● **White Cloud** toilet tissue was discontinued by Procter & Gamble in the early 1990s and its trademark lapsed. The name was picked up by a company called Paper Partners which licensed it exclusively to Walmart in 1999, where it is still sold as an own-brand.

● **Vanity Fair** was one of Condé Nast's first titles, with contributors such as Dorothy Parker. It was published from 1913 to 1936 when it became part of Vogue. Relaunched in 1983, it is now one of the publisher's flagship magazine titles.

**'Look for brands that have positive recall and high brand awareness'**

Mark Thomann  
 River West Brands





In with the old: classic UK fashion brand Biba (above) has been revived by House of Fraser (right) which hopes to tap into its rich heritage. By contrast, a brand such as Pan Am (below) might find it more challenging because of its association with the Lockerbie bombing Getty

