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A brand is forever! A framework for revitalizing declining and dead brands

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Abstract Over the years, numerous brands—such as Oldsmobile, Pan Am, and Woolworth—have met untimely deaths. Many more have steadily declined into oblivion, while others have been revived. When a brand dies, significant investments that were made to build the brand are also lost. Unfortunately, even the strongest brands with high net worth are not immune from brand decline and subsequent death. In today's market, where new product introductions are both expensive and risky, it may be worthwhile to evaluate brands that are declining and invest in revitalizing them. However, there is a dearth of studies that focus on declining brands. In this article, we use findings from academic literature, detailed case studies, and interviews with marketing executives to provide guidelines in dealing with declining brands. We analyze the conditions that lead to brand decline and brand death, highlight signs that may suggest an impending decline, offer insights into assessing the viability of reviving a brand, and suggest various approaches that can be used to strengthen the brand and give it a second life.

1. Revival of a dead brand

> Say goodbye to the Taurus. After 21 years and sales of nearly 7 million cars, Ford Motor Co. is giving up on what some call the most influential automobile since Henry Ford's Model T.
> —*Associated Press Online, October 19, 2006*

> [By withdrawing Taurus] Ford may have wasted 20 years of investment in a brand name [so we have decided to resurrect the brand name].
> —*Alan Mulally, CEO, Ford Motor Company, 2007*

Launched in 1985, Ford's Taurus quickly became one of the company's top selling models (Krisher, 2006). For 3 years in a row, the Taurus held the enviable record of being the best selling car in the United States (Jaroff, 1995). However, intense competition from two Japanese brands—the Honda Accord and the Toyota Camry—weakened the brand. When Ford decided to pull the plug on the Taurus in 2006, many

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news reports mourned the passing of an era. Soon after, though, Ford did an about-face and reintroduced the Taurus brand; the firm reasoned that the brand still had much to offer, and was clearly a better option in comparison to an entirely new and unknown brand.

While the "death" of a brand is a complex and sometimes controversial issue, there is ample evidence to show that neither the lifespan of a brand nor its ultimate destiny is predetermined. In fact, brand decline is a reversible process. Consider Harley-Davidson, which during its lifetime suffered a significant decline and has since been recently revived. In the early days of the post-World War II period, the brand gained popularity as its motorcycles became known for their unique designs and engineering (Wells, 2001). After decades of market dominance, the brand started bleeding in the early 1970s upon the advent of smaller Japanese motorbikes, which created a dent in the brand's sales. To counter this action, Harley-Davidson created its own line of smaller vehicles; unfortunately, these were perceived by loyal Harley customers to be of poor quality, and sales continued to drop. The company was soon facing huge financial losses, and it looked like death was certain for the brand ("Harley-Davidson," n.d.). Rather than throw in the towel, however, Harley decided to make a significant investment in its quality and distinctive styling. As a result, it is now once again a well-known and revered American brand.

Reviving a brand is not just feasible; it may very well be a more attractive strategy than launching a new brand. As Aaker (1991) pointed out, "the revitalization of a brand is usually less costly and risky than introducing a new brand, which can cost tens of millions and will more likely fail than succeed" (p. 242). Sometimes dying or dead brands may still have significant brand equity in terms of high brand awareness and a strong brand image. It was this thinking that motivated Ford's effort to revive the Taurus brand, the brand's equity being the driving force behind this decision. Ford realized that instead of trying to use another brand name that meant little to the market, it would be better off utilizing the Taurus brand name, which had 90% name recognition and a positive image (Kiley, 2007). Thus, shortly after its death, the Taurus was reborn.

In this article we highlight some examples of brand decline, investigate leading causes of brand decline, identify signs that are precursors to impending decline, and suggest guidelines to revitalize brands. To accomplish this, we reviewed the academic literature and trade publications on this topic, examined case studies of brands that died or were revitalized, and conducted in-depth interviews with practitioners who were knowledgeable about these brands.

2. Decline and death of brands

Branding has been used since ancient times to distinguish products from different sellers (Aaker, 1991). Today the power of a brand lies in its equity with its customers, and over the years, a more customer-based brand equity framework has been developed. Brand equity is defined as "the differential effect that consumer knowledge about a brand has on the customer's response to marketing activity," and "consumer brand knowledge can be characterized in terms of brand awareness and brand image dimensions" (Keller, 1999, p. 102). Thus, when a brand has high awareness and consumers "hold strong, favorable, and unique brand associations," it is considered to have strong equity (Keller, 1999, p. 102).

Familiar brands that have demonstrated strong brand equity include Coca-Cola, Microsoft, IBM, and GE (Kiley, 2007). However, brand equity may decline with the passage of time, sometimes leading to a brand's demise. For example, Pan American World Airways—more commonly known as Pan Am—was an iconic American brand. It was one of the oldest airlines in North America, and the first American airline to operate international flights. For this reason, it was promoted as "The World's Most Experienced Airline" (Reed, 2006, p. 1B). Over the years, Pan Am faced intense competition which began to impact its bottom line. In 1988, the company faced a devastating crisis when one of its airliners was bombed over Lockerbie, Scotland, and crashed ("Pan Am," n.d.). Shortly afterward, Pan Am went out of business. One of the main reasons for Pan Am's death was the significant amount of negative publicity associated with the plane crash; this created a confidence crisis among its customers (Haig, 2003). Today the brand is extinct, save nostalgic memories in the minds of former employees and clients. In sum, the Pan Am case is an example of death which followed an extended period of struggle.

A flagship brand for General Motors, iconic Oldsmobile was known for its pioneering designs and innovations, including chrome plating, fully automatic transmission, and front wheel drive (Haig, 2003). Over time, sales started declining and GM decided to stop production of Oldsmobile models in 2004. There were two primary reasons for the decline of the brand. First, Oldsmobile was perceived as an "old brand" among consumers.