

up, get your bottle soon, because surely an imported drink with opium will be illegal at any moment.

And what about that stag pictured on the label? Rumors spread that the drink contained deer's blood. What about the cross? People researched the religious symbolism. And how about that mysterious poem in the design? What was it saying about God and man and beasts?

It seemed everyone (including the authorities) wanted to know: What exactly floated inside that potion?*

Thus spread the cult, student to student, school to school, a wildfire lit with the taste of kerosene.

These students were not merely buying a drink. They were not even buying flavor. They were buying a flirtation with forbidden ingredients. If their hard-won Jäger bottle tasted delicious, it wouldn't be nearly as compelling. In fact, the more horrific the drink tasted, the more convincing the rumors. With such a repellent flavor, surely an aphrodisiac or two must be lurking in there somewhere.

The Brand Promise of a Toxic Experience

In 1975, the two reigning soda brands, Coca-Cola and Pepsi, waged a war over which cola tasted better. Heard of it? The Pepsi Challenge? It became nearly as competitive as a scene out of *Game of Thrones*. In a spontaneous blind taste test, consumers were asked to take a sip from two unmarked cups of soda (one with Coke, the other Pepsi), and name which one tasted better. Pepsi claimed to be more delicious than Coke, and vice versa, on and on, for years.

The whole mammoth marketing campaign hinged on one factor: taste. Virtually every drink on the market sells itself on the basis of taste. With good reason. Taste is a perfectly rational

* Jägermeister has never confirmed any of the fifty-six ingredients. It doesn't have to. The beverage is imported, and the headquarters in Germany refuses to reveal its secrets. You're welcome to believe whatever you want.

reason to buy one soda rather than another. So how can Jäger sell despite the taste?

Think this through. Can you imagine doing a blind taste test challenge for Jäger, like the Pepsi Challenge? Um, no. Imagine people's facial expressions the first time they did a shot.*

Yet what if you're a marketer trying to sell a drink, and that drink's taste is (in the eyes of many) your main disadvantage? Sidney Frank actively touted the unappealing flavor: a poster showed a man who had just finished consuming a shot with a grimace on his face.

This approach took the barrier head-on, turning the shot into a rallying cry. It elevated the product beyond rational benefits, adding to its growing mythology. With this drink, bad flavor isn't a barrier to trying it; it's a reason for it. An overall toxic experience is part of the brand's promise. Customers can dislike your product but still love its message, if they love what your brand says about them.

Many brands are faced with the difficult task of selling a product that people don't necessarily want to buy. Nobody gets excited about buying headache medication, car mufflers, or burial plots. The beauty of Jäger's marketing is that it sells an extraordinary volume—at a premium price point, no less—of a product that people don't even want and, more to the point, actively dislike.

So how does the brand manage to sell almost as much as Absolut, when the taste puts hair on the tongue?

Under the Spell of Fascination

Think about your own purchase decisions. Why do you buy certain brands and not others? Why do you remember certain messages, but forget the rest?

* If the company did conduct a blind taste test, what drink would it even compete against? Kahúa? Not really. Peppermint schnapps? Hmm. Formaldehyde? Yeah, maybe.