

Repositioning: Sometimes It Works, Sometimes Not

What do MTV, JCPenney, and La-Z-Boy have in common? The answer? Each of these iconic brands has changed its image—or at least has attempted to change it—by repositioning.

MTV At the time there was nothing like it, and perhaps there never will be again. To some it is a shame that it's gone, to others it's a relief. Nevertheless, love it or hate it, one of the most powerful networks to ever hit cable television is now 30 years old. In the first week of February 2010, MTV formally changed its logo, dropping the part that said Music Television. In fact, the MTV of today is a reality TV channel, only occasionally airing something that has to do with music.

When MTV debuted in 1981, "the channel confirmed the concept of cable niche programming, reshaped music marketing, and became a symbol of youth culture," notes Bryan Reesman of *Billboard* magazine. Showing little more than music videos and DJs, music lovers tuned in in droves. By the end of its first year, MTV had over 2.1 million subscribing households. By its second year, the "I Want My MTV" ad campaign was in full force, featuring a number of rock stars, including Pete Townshend, Stevie Nicks, Mick Jagger, and David Bowie, among others. Michael Jackson premiered both "Beat It" and "Thriller" on MTV in 1983. MTV had taken off, and parents everywhere were becoming concerned with their children's "addiction" to music videos.

By the mid-80s things started to change. A British sitcom was added to the programming, as was support for young comedians such as Chris Rock, Ben Stiller, and Jon Stewart. The network also started to engage in philanthropic events by airing 17 hours of the Live Aid concert, running safe sex commercials, and showing "Just Say No" antidrug spots. Eventually, MTV started running its own "Rock Against Drugs"—the first of many attempts to engage viewers with social programming. One of MTV's most popular shows featuring new artists, *Unplugged*, debuted in the early 1990s. By the late 1990s numerous programs were added, with less time for rock videos. The number of antidrug and other social marketing programs also increased.

Throughout the early years of the 21st century, MTV continued to broaden both its programming and its social involvement, launched new channels (there were 64 in 2011), and expanded internationally. The network had clearly begun to reposition itself as something other than just a music channel. Music stars like Madonna, Michael Jackson, and Britney Spears have been replaced by "Snooki" Polizzi from the reality show *Jersey Shore* and Heidi Montag from *The Hills*. As noted by Scott Collins, "MTV has evolved into a reality channel that occasionally runs programs that have to do with music." But why?

David Howe, president of SyFy (which itself used to be the Sci-Fi Channel), says that MTV—like Sci-Fi—realized that being just music television was too limiting, and current viewers didn't relate to it as a music channel anymore. Instead,



the programming has changed MTV, as it no longer competes with VH1 and Fuse but competes with other reality programs more, and the logo is important in communicating that fact.

JCPenney Once again—as it did in 2010 and 2011—JCPenney announced that it was repositioning the brand in 2012, hoping that the third time will be the charm. With a new pricing strategy, thousands fewer employees, and yet another new logo, the retailer's new president said that the store "is redefining the JCPenney brand to become a store for all Americans, by offering an experience they cannot get anywhere else." To do this, the number of sales promotions were drastically cut, replaced by an 'everyday low price policy. New partnerships were established, including a Martha Stewart line of clothing, as well as an exclusive line with fashion designer Nanette Lepore. Ellen DeGeneres (once a JCPenny employee) was the new brand ambassador, in hopes that she will inject new life and excitement to the brand. The logo also has been changed for the third time in three years. All of these strategies were designed to help JCPenney hold on to its existing customers, and hopefully attract even more. Unfortunately, the strategy did not work. At the time of this writing, Penneys removed its president and is seeking yet another positioning strategy.

La-Z-Boy JCPenney probably wishes it had La-Z-Boy's problem. As noted by trade publication *Brandweek*, the strong brand recognition enjoyed by the furniture company may actually be a liability. The problem is that while La-Z-Boy makes sofas, ottomans, love seats, and sectionals, the brand has become synonymous with recliners, and the other stationary products don't reap the benefits of the strong brand name. So La-Z-Boy hired Brooke Shields to be its new spokesperson, hoping that her celebrity status would gain attention for the new message that the company has an entire furniture line—not just recliners. A series of five new commercials to be shown on A&E, Animal Planet, Bravo, and CNN (among others) will be accompanied by print ads in magazines that include *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *House Beautiful*, and a strong public relations effort.

Sometimes repositioning is desirable to maintain success. Sometimes it is a requirement to stay afloat. It is always a difficult strategy to implement.

Sources: Andrew Hampp, "Unplugged to Return to MTV, Courtesy Starburst," *Advertising Age*, March 4, 2010; Scott Collins, "The Network Name Game," *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 2010, pp. D1,12; Bryan Reesman, "Timeline: Rewinding 25 Years of MTV History," *Billboard*, September 2, 2008, pp. 36-45; Mark J. Miller, "JC Penney Re-Refreshes Brand—Third Time's the Charm?" www.brandchannel.com, January 26, 2012, pp. 1-6; Stuart Elliott, "La-Z-Boy, Meet Brooke Shields," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2010, pp. 1-5.