

CHAPTER ONE



AC/DC AND THE ART OF CONSISTENCY

Greatness begins with a clear identity and consistency. One band that truly understood their identity from the very beginning was AC/DC. For more than thirty years, AC/DC has been doing their thing, never wavering from their mission despite trends and fads. Love them or hate them, it doesn't matter: Everyone knows what AC/DC is all about. AC/DC sings about rock 'n' roll, partying, womanizing, driving fast, and having fun. And little else. That identity spans generations, with plenty of songs about shakin', drinkin', movin', screamin', partyin', and of course, rockin'.

They've never recorded a song about social injustice in the developing world. You won't find a single song in the catalog about the angst that burns deep inside the heart of a man

as he tries to tell the woman he loves how he really feels. And they have so far resisted the urge to use Auto-Tune or a drum machine or even a keyboard for that matter. Count 'em. On the sixteen albums AC/DC released between 1974 and 2010, there are twenty songs that include the word “rock” in the title.

Only Air Supply, another band from Down Under, has been able to state their brand so clearly in the titles of their songs. Remember Air Supply? Air Supply is AC/DC's musical antithesis, but they were equally consistent in their day. They serenaded the world, and strategically worked the word “love” into nearly every song they came up with. In the early '80s, there's a good chance you slow danced to some of their classics, such as “All Out of Love,” “Lost in Love,” “Making Love Out of Nothing at All,” “The One That You Love,” “Young Love,” and “The Power of Love.”

AC/DC is a stellar example of a band that knows what their fans expect, and they deliver it time after time. Yet while their music is simple, not for a moment should it be inferred that AC/DC isn't creative or unique. They have taken chances and recorded some unusual songs that haven't *exactly* fit the mold. But the biggest risk AC/DC took was having the courage to continue to create their unique sound time and time again, album after album, even when trends and fashions were working against them. Consistent—that's what AC/DC has been for more than thirty years, and it hasn't always been easy.

It takes immense skill and focus to be that consistent, creating an endless supply of driving and powerful

straight-ahead rock 'n' roll songs that grab your attention and squeeze tight. Brian Johnson, the lead screamer in AC/DC, once astutely commented that although guitarist Angus Young takes some criticism for creating simple guitar riffs, he should actually be revered for his simplicity. Writing simple, memorable, and powerful music is a rare skill. To paraphrase Johnson, plenty of people hear songs like "Taxman" by The Beatles and think, "That's simple. I could have written that. Sure, but they didn't."

Keeping things brilliantly simple wasn't an accident. In 1975, Phil Carson was charged with the task of finding exciting new bands to sign to Atlantic Records, when he saw some raw super-8 video footage of AC/DC playing "Long Way to the Top." He immediately got on the phone and signed this unknown Australian band to a fifteen-album record deal. At that point, Carson said, keeping things straightforward was already the band's mantra. That simplicity was one of the things that attracted Carson to the band—their pure, unadorned, passionate rock and roll.

"The heart of AC/DC is the rhythm," Carson said. "Drummer Phil Rudd is the epitome of what AC/DC is all about. He hits it hard, every time, right on time. He sticks with it. Cliff Williams is a fantastic bass player. And Malcolm Young's rhythm guitar is amazing."

Beyond the riffs and song titles, even AC/DC's look is consistent. Every album since their debut has included the band's name in the same classic font. You can't look at that font without hearing their music. Since replacing Bon Scott in 1980, Brian Johnson has been wearing the

same “newsboy” hat, dark jeans, and sleeveless shirt. Angus Young’s school boy uniform, complete with white shirt, tie, and shorts, has been a part of his signature look since the band began.



Angus Young’s school boy outfit has been part of AC/DC’s signature look since the early 1970s.

They never wore glitter, no matter how big David Bowie and the glam rockers got. They never worked a disco beat into their songs like KISS, Rod Stewart, and The Rolling Stones did. In the '80s, when rock 'n' roll men wore big hair and make up, AC/DC looked exactly as they always have: with straight long hair, without any hair spray. When the '90s rolled around, and the rock 'n' roll look-du-jour was sloppy and grunge, AC/DC still looked the same. It is almost as if the band exists in its own world, far removed from the factors at play in music and fashion.

AC/DC simply recognizes and respects what their audience expects from them. No wonder they are so successful,

even as times change. Their 2008 album *Black Ice*, released thirty-five years after the band formed, went to number one in nineteen countries. That certainly speaks volumes for their place in contemporary music. It wasn't through dumb luck. The band, according to Carson, was always aware of their image and their audience, and they have worked hard to never violate those expectations, even when times were tough.

"When we first brought AC/DC to America, there was a stunning burst of indifference," Carson said. "Atlantic Records was a very forward-looking company, and they thought we were nuts to sign them because the band was so straight-ahead rock 'n' roll." Yet AC/DC persevered through the initial resistance, winning over audiences, and their record company, one passionate straight-ahead rock 'n' roll song after another.

The initial push-back was strong. Progressive rock was the flavor of the time. The record company wasn't eager to push a raw rock band to radio stations and promoters were reluctant to book them. But as the band persistently played live night after night, eventually Phil Carson started getting positive reviews about his Australian discovery, including one on the Philadelphia radio station WMMR that claimed "AC/DC doesn't just rock 'n' roll, they *are* rock 'n' roll."

In the minds of their fans, AC/DC owns a piece of their mental real estate, which is as valuable as a Manhattan condo or ocean frontage in Santa Monica. We all have a limited amount of brain space reserved for things we care about. We only remember a few brands of shoes, breakfast cereals, dishwashing soaps, furniture stores, and other products. We can't possibly remember all of the brands that compete for

our attention, so the brands that occupy our mental real estate are fortunate. AC/DC is one of the music industry's greatest examples of a band that has claimed their mental real estate and refuses to let go.

In the mid-1980s, when hard rock bands had long hair and wore make-up, AC/DC suddenly seemed out of touch. Sales for their albums *Flick of the Switch* and *Fly on the Wall* were disappointing, and many thought the band was finished. Carson remembered seeing the band during those trying times, playing a concert at Nassau Coliseum on Long Island with only eight thousand people in the audience. There were as many empty seats as filled ones. Yet AC/DC played like it was a packed house because they knew they had to meet the expectations of those eight thousand people. To AC/DC, there was no “phoning it in.” It isn't just their sound and their look that AC/DC has kept consistent during the past three decades. It's also a commitment to keep the band within the grasp of their fans.

“The band is very conscious of ticket prices and merchandise,” Carson said. “They've always tried to keep their concerts accessible to the average fan.”

It has paid off. Just like Volvo stands for “safety” and Coldstone Creamery stands for “rich ice cream,” AC/DC stands for “straight-ahead rock 'n roll band.” Their iconic logo, stage show, wardrobe, song choices, and every other aspect of their image support their brand. It would be foolish for AC/DC to attempt to change it. Anything other than “straight-ahead rock 'n roll” from AC/DC just doesn't make sense to their fans.

What would happen if AC/DC changed their look and sound and recorded an Air Supply–like love song? Two things. First, very few of their fans would accept it because it goes against what they know and love. Second, the band would most likely not win over new fans because most non-fans already have a clear idea of what AC/DC is and they don't like it. In fact, when any brand creates a product that isn't congruent with what their fans expect, it interferes with the mental real estate the brand already owns! It diminishes the brand's value.

Unfortunately, that simple truth is lost on many businesses and musicians. The temptation for profit is too great for most brands to resist, and they inevitably compromise the expectations of their customers in an effort to make more money. Business history is littered with stories of brands that pushed their image beyond customer's expectations.

McDonald's deserves a world of credit for building an incredibly strong worldwide brand, and it's done so through amazing consistency. The Big Mac you can buy in Moscow, Idaho, is nearly identical in look, taste, and smell to the Big Mac you can buy in Moscow, Russia. A McDonald's restaurant looks the same no matter where in the world it sits. Behind the counters, the kitchens and equipment are standardized to create a consistent product at a consistent price. Since defining the fast food genre in the 1950s, McDonald's has built an empire driven by consistency. Yet not everything McDonald's has done has been consistent, and it has made some high-profile mistakes. In the early 1990s, McDonald's went on an expensive, ill-fated adventure into pasta

and pizza. It renovated restaurants and installed expensive new pizza ovens. Drive-through windows were widened to accommodate pizza boxes. The staff was trained on how to make pizzas, since flipping a burger is different from tossing a pizza.

And then there was the marketing. McDonald's needed to tell the world about its new products, so Mickey D's saturated the North American market with advertising to support the launch of McPizza. Concurrent to the launch of McPizza, the company launched a line of pasta dishes in test markets around America. To go with the McPizza, it peppered the menu with McSpaghetti, lasagna, fettuccine alfredo, and roast chicken. Fortunately, those products didn't make it past the test markets, and they were never rolled out nationwide. The McPizza story is another matter.

Despite the tremendous investment it took and the massive marketing behind it, McPizza never connected with customers. The consensus was that it didn't taste very good, and certainly didn't taste good enough to get people to switch from their preferred pizza place. People interested in pizza and pasta had options, many of them equally as fast as McDonald's and perceived to be of higher quality. Dominoes, Pizza Hut and others, were top-of-mind with consumers because of their consistency. There was simply no compelling reason for people to think about buying Italian food at McDonald's. Within a few years, McPizza and McPasta dishes disappeared from the menu and the staff went back to doing what they did best: flipping burgers and deep-frying French fries.

Yet a brand must evolve. If a brand remains stagnant in changing times, it runs the risk of becoming irrelevant and out-of-touch with contemporary consumers. The line between growing with consistency and losing brand consistency is a thin one, and one defined by a keen understanding of what the brand represents in the mind of the consumer. It doesn't really matter what the company *thinks* it represents. The only thing that matters is what the brand represents in the consumer's mind: the mental real estate it occupies.

Coors miscalculated its mental real estate in 1990 when it launched Coors Rocky Mountain Spring Water. At the time, Coors wrongly assumed that its brand represented spring water from the Rocky Mountains in the beer-drinking consumer's mind. After all, for more than fifty years it had invested millions of dollars in marketing Coors beer as better than others because it was "brewed with pure Rocky Mountain spring water." That was their slogan. It's what distinguished Coors from the competition:

- ▶ The king of beers (Budweiser)
- ▶ Head for the mountains (Busch)
- ▶ The beer that made Milwaukee famous (Schlitz)
- ▶ It doesn't get any better than this! (Old Milwaukee)
- ▶ It's Miller time! (Miller)

Where Coors went wrong was assuming that because the water made the brand different, it was the essence of the brand, and that essence could be easily transferred to another product. People didn't buy Coors because of the

water; they bought Coors because of the great beer that happened to be made with spring water. Coors was, and is, a bottle of beer, not a bottle of water. As a result, Coors Rocky Mountain Spring Water was an expensive flop.

Like AC/DC and sappy love songs, or McDonald's and Italian food, Coors and water didn't mix. If a brand isn't consistent with the expectations of its customers, it fails. There's really no way around it.

What would have happened if Coors had decided to launch Rocky Mountain Spring Water under a different brand name? Pepsi would be happy to tell you. Around the same time that Coors suffered losses from its failed foray into bottled water, Pepsi launched its own bottled water. However, Pepsi's bottled water didn't have the Pepsi brand attached to it. Pepsi's product was called Aquafina, and it launched in 1994 in Kansas and quickly spread across the States and Canada. Over the next decade, Aquafina became the top-selling bottled water brand in the United States and a leading brand worldwide. Coca-Cola took notice, and in 1999 launched Dasani—its own extremely successful brand of bottled water.

Had Coors better understood its slice of mental real estate the way Pepsi and Coca-Cola did, the world might be a different place for those who drink bottled water. Today Coors could very well have a monopoly on the lucrative bottled water market. Like Pepsi and Coke, Coors already had the production and distribution networks required to launch such a product. What Coors lacked was an understanding of what its brand represented to consumers and potential consumers.

A Rock Star Five-Step Program: Learning AC/DC-Style Consistency

It's easy to look at AC/DC's consistent branding and see how simple it is. So if being consistent is simple, why do so many brands find it difficult? Here are five lessons you can learn from watching AC/DC do it right for over thirty years.

1. **Do what you do.** For AC/DC that was straight-ahead rock 'n' roll: loud, simple power chords, steady backbeats, screaming vocals, and thick guitars.
2. **Study your customers and understand what they think you do.** AC/DC did it night after night, playing live in front of their fans. When you get immediate and direct feedback from 18,000 fans each night, you understand what they want from you.
3. **Live up to your customers' expectations, not your own definition of what you do.** Brian Johnson, AC/DC's lead singer, actually loves musical theatre. In 2003 he started working on a musical version of *Helen of Troy*, in the same style as *Les Miserables*. It was performed in New York in 2005. AC/DC's name never appeared anywhere near it because while Johnson and AC/DC may love Rodgers and Hammerstein and classic musicals, it isn't consistent with their brand.
4. **Commit to your visual cues.** By using the same iconic font and having Angus wear the same schoolboy uniform for decades, the band has created a strong visual-audio association. When you see the AC/DC name in print or see a picture of Angus in that outfit, you can actually hear the band. That's powerful.

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5. **Constantly remind your fans what you're about.** With every song, AC/DC drives that message home. It is no coincidence that, after a few years away from the spotlight, they released “Rock and Roll Train” in 2008. Why not use the title of the song to once again remind fans what they're all about?