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Behind the brand: The triumphs and tragedies.



Colt 45

takes aim

by Abram Sauer

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It's Super Bowl time, which for many people means one thing: beer. Though the beer industry in the US has seen a seismic shift in competition and consumer tastes in the last twenty years, Colt 45 has remained a steadfast brand of malt liquor as microbrews and foreign imports have crowded the marketplace with all types of specialty brews. As beer became more sophisticated and snootier, Colt 45 became increasingly viewed as a throwback beer and a symbol of simpler times and unrefined tastes.

Despite a re-branding last summer, the brand has remained true to its roots. Developed in 1963 by Baltimore's National Brewing Company, Colt 45's name was specifically chosen to correspond with the strong imagery of the similarly-named gun. This name was one that Colt 45 (the drink) had to later tip-toe around to avoid upsetting Colt .45 (the gun). Throughout its lifespan the brand has been very successful, a consistent leader in market share. By the mid-90s Colt 45 was the US's second malt liquor brand, and sales remain strong to this day.

Introduced to compete in what was then the very new "malt liquor" market, Colt 45's packaging has changed little over the years, even if its market has. A premium product at launch, anyone familiar with the current Colt 45 brand would probably find some of the product's [early advertisements](#) baffling, or at least off message for its current brand image. A dapper gentlemen, almost James-Bondsian, awaits his Colt 45 and his classy date.

Colt 45 rarely finds itself on any list of "iconic" brands. This is a shameful oversight of a brand that could not have a stronger brand image. Sadly, if understandably, it is exactly this image that makes it a black sheep beer brand. Today it's hard to argue that Colt 45's brand is not commonly associated with "less than discerning" consumers of alcoholic beverages. It's this image that has landed the brand on the working end of some less-than-flattering jokes in movies like "The Ladies Man," and shows like "Seinfeld" and "Saturday Night Live."

It's no surprise that Colt 45 decided it was in need of a re-branding—and the reasons behind that decision are quite interesting as well. A good many re-branding campaigns begin because a brand has either become outdated or because its brand image, over years and years, has become weakened or diluted. This is not the case for Colt 45. In fact, this re-branding appears to be one of the rare cases where the brand's image is too strong.

Colt 45's brand image "problem" is a perfect show of what happens when one side of the brand agreement between customer and producer becomes skewed too much in one's favor. It doesn't matter what the Colt 45 brand owner wanted its brand to represent, it only matters how consumers perceive it. And without any attempts to combat or alter consumer perception, Colt 45's low brow public image eventually metastasized into Colt 45's nearly unassailable brand as a beer for the less fortunate. That's why a re-branding was in order.

Colt 45 is owned by the Pabst Brewing Company, the brewery that produces the famous, or infamous, Pabst Blue Ribbon (PBR) beer—a brand known for its low cost





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and ubiquitous presence at fraternity parties and NASCAR races. So the drive behind Colt 45's current "hipper" re-branding makes sense. However, recent years have seen the explosion of popularity for the brewer's eponymous blue-collar brew. In New York City PBR is served at the hippest of parties and can actually be found on the menu of restaurants in Manhattan's trendy Meatpacking District where the beer goes for US\$ 5—this despite an (admittedly unscientific) testing of Pabst prices in surrounding cities found a six-pack going for about US\$ 3.50 at local markets.

Like PBR, Colt 45 has come a long way. The inseparability of Billy Dee Williams' now-almost-satirical commercial for Colt 45 in the 1980s and the current "ironic" adaptation of the 80's aesthetic (music, fashion, drugs) is a perfect and hilarious opportunity for the brand to reposition itself. The brand message the product has been using since the 80s, "Works Every Time," has basically come to mean "Gets the Job Done." Sounds yummy, right?

To truly understand just how young and trendy the audience is that Colt 45's re-brand is targeting, you needn't look further than the Flash-heavy website [thetalesofcolt45.com](#). The site requires users to be 21 years old; but if any of the (animated) characters depicted inside the site are 21, it's by a day. Nevertheless, legal is legal, and Colt 45 seems to know where the future of the brand's success lies.

In truth, Colt 45 isn't so much re-branding itself as reaching out to a larger market. Its strategic promotional partnering with VICE Magazine has resulted in hip marketing campaigns and well orchestrated parties in New York City.

"When Colt 45 came to us at VICE and said they were going to do an advertising campaign called 'Tales of Colt 45' we said, 'Yeah, that makes sense!'"

Thus began the so-called "mini mag"—a hip, humorous, and cartoonish publication about real-life nights out boozing on Colt 45— which were wrapped around the beverage in an effort to capitalize on the brand's brown bag reputation. Reading through VICE's animated "mini-mag" stories about drinking Colt 45, it's hard to ignore that overboard inebriation is a common theme while "flavor" and "taste" don't receive a single mention.

You needn't look further than [College Humor's online archive](#) of Colt 45-related materials to understand that Colt 45 is simply reinforcing an image that it has had for decades—that of a potent, inexpensive drink favored by those with more motivation than means for a drink that works (every time).

So at this year's Super Bowl party, take a look around to see if anyone is drinking Colt 45. And if they are, walk over to them during the Budweiser commercials, and do your best Billy Dee Williams impersonation.

Abram D. Sauer has written about brands and branding trends since 2001. Visit www.abesauer.com for more of his work on branding and product placement.

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