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# Unify, Simplify, Amplify: How Moleskine Gets Branding Right

Ken Carbone dissects how the Moleskine brand is both expanding and staying true to what makes people love their brand.



## KEN CARBONE

Last month I [offered some branding advice](#) based on the belief that, in order to win, companies need to Unify, Simplify and Amplify their brand message. This month I will showcase my first example of a brand that puts this formula into practice -- the Italian brand Moleskine, or as they pronounce it in Italy, “mol-a-skeen-a.”

Moleskine is the “little black dress” of notebooks. Like that fashion staple, it is a blank canvas for personal expression ready to be dolled up at the creative whim of its owner.

# Their brand guidelines balance cohesion and openness

The Moleskine notebook is not an original idea. It is the rediscovery of a legendary French notebook by a small Milanese publisher who, in 1998, put these books back into production. Today, they are coveted and beloved by designers, architects, writers, artists and travelers around the globe. With annual sales of over 200 million dollars and 35% growth per year, this brand is in high gear. For a look

inside the company, I spoke with Maria Sebregondi, Head of Brand Equity and Network Relations, in Moleskine's Milan headquarters. With a charming Italian accent, she explained with conviction: "Moleskine is a cultural icon. It is not a simple notebook, and it is not a commodity, but a free platform for creativity."

A simple message fuels the brand's resonance and consumer loyalty. Their mission is built on four pillars: imagination, travel, memory, and personal identity. Sebregondi states that there are two main target audiences: one for those focused on "creativity and the artistic side" and one for "productivity, those professionals who want to get things done." Acknowledging that current culture is all about mobility, she believes Moleskine supports "contemporary nomadism." The Moleskine experience begins with a network of "believers," from employees to partners. Even when recruiting they look for people with a passionate cultural background.



[Moleskine's in-store display in Selfridge's]

Everything about Moleskine's retail presence is built to reflect the four core characteristics. According to Sebregondi, "we control the whole merchandising display," through distributing communication materials and providing videos showing the brand values. Their brand guidelines show that these controls strike an unusual balance between cohesion and openness that allows for spontaneous creative contributions from their partners and fans.

Moleskine produces 300 products that are distributed in 62 countries. Impressive for a small company that just recently grew to only about 100 people in Italy and the USA. "We have a strong network of partners, and each has its own network of retailers. Our business model is to cultivate a big network, while keeping the company small."

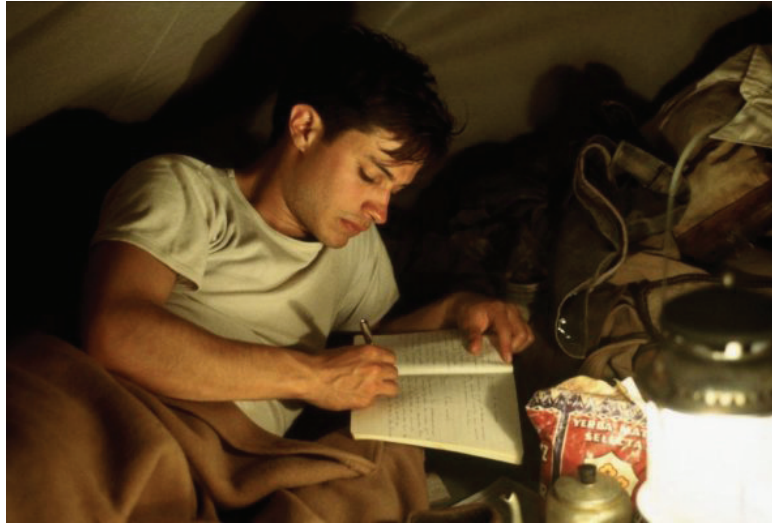


To "amplify" their brand, the in-house Moleskine team is doing everything right. Their [website](#) offers a deft online expression of the brand with comprehensive offerings and animated videos that bring their products to life. Then there are the interactive components, such as a beta version of their travel aide [MoleskineCity](#) and their official blog, [Moleskinerie](#), which boasts a rich visual archive that dates back to 2004. From a predominantly analog brand, they have a comprehensive social media presence: an unprecedented 75,000 Facebook fans far exceeds that of the competition.



[Moleskine's Bauhaus line for MoMA]

A curious dimension of Moleskine's marketing is the absence of advertising. Instead, the company leverages word of mouth and their special editions designed for institutions such as MoMA and events like Tribeca Films and the Montreaux Jazz Festival. "We create visibility for brands in special moments close to our target and provide opportunity for people to see the brand in a special occasion." These have proven to be successful collaborations and offer beneficial exposure to their customers and a revenue source for the company.



[Gabriel Garcia Bernal, as Che Guevara, writing in in a Moleskine in *The Motorcycle Diaries*]

Free advertising comes in the form of "sightings" Moleskine enjoys what I call "brand anonymity" allowing their products to become props in films and TV. Their classic black notebook blends into the background yet can't be missed. Their journals have appeared in films such as *The Devil Wears Prada*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, and on the series, *C.S.I.*



True to their commitment to be a brand in motion, Moleskine created a traveling exhibition called "Detour." It features notebook creations by internationally recognized artists, architects, film

directors, graphic designers, illustrators and writers. Curated by Raffaella Guidobono, this show has been featured in eight cities worldwide including New York, Istanbul and Shanghai.

These initiatives do more than advertise: they help Moleskine define its brand. As with any leader, Moleskine has its share of inevitable knock-offs and high-style competitors such as Guildhall and Markings. Sebregondi sees this as confirmation of the company's success. "We need to protect our brand. We prefer to work on the brand values that are not reproducible by others including the content we create for the public. No other brand can offer this."

If not competition, then the single biggest challenge to Moleskine could be the company's own ambitions. In April, they will launch new products by Giulio Iacchetti that will go beyond the notebook. This will include bags, pencils, pens, reading glasses, computer cases, a rechargeable reading light and an e-reader stand.



[Teaser sketches of the upcoming product line]

Is there a danger that the brand will be diluted in the minds of their loyal fans? Sebreghondi acknowledges the risk but insists that since inception, the Moleskine brand has been conceived as a cultural project rather than a single product. “The idea has always been to put the notebook in the center of the galaxy, a system of nomadic objects related to contemporary lifestyle and technologies.” It seems counterintuitive that such a strong analog brand could thrive in the frenetic digital world we live in where mobile devices, apps, laptops and e-readers offer ways to get organized and creative. Moleskine sees its function, design and overall aesthetic appeal--of its notebook and upcoming launches--as complementary tools for these popular technologies.

Moleskine is a category leader because it speaks loudly with a soft voice. Its ubiquity is contrasted by the humble way its logo is blind stamped on the back of each book, saying “this book is all about you, not us.” The colorful band, or “fascetta,” that wraps each product is easily removed, like a drawn curtain on a stage that allows the performance to begin. These are all masterful ways that Moleskine connects with its customers, insures their loyalty, and is recognized for its creativity.



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