

Legendary brands: Why are consumers still fascinated by the Titanic?

July 26 2013

Brands do not necessarily need to present a clear, well-defined image in order to appeal to consumers, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. Consider the case of the Titanic.

"Titanic. More than a century later, the name of the ill-fated steamship still strikes a chord with millions of consumers worldwide. Consumer fixation with the Titanic is not simply due to the scale of the calamity, since the death toll has been far exceeded on many occasions. Nor is it entirely attributable to humankind's appetite for the macabre or merely a case of being famous for being famous," write authors Stephen Brown (University of Ulster), Pierre McDonagh (Dublin City University), and Clifford J. Shultz, II (Loyola University Chicago).

The Titanic's consumer appeal is partly explained by the myths it embodies – the myth of nature trumping technology, the almost Biblical lesson that great riches are worthless in life-or-death situations, and the accumulating layers of myth that have been added to the awful event by its representations in popular culture.

"Equally important is the unfathomability, the [ambiguity](#), the imponderables at the heart of the Titanic's terrible tale," write the authors. "Was the Titanic considered unsinkable? Why were several ice warnings ignored? Why weren't there enough lifeboats? Were the steerage passengers locked below decks?"

The story of the Titanic leaves consumers pondering various questions

that do not have clear-cut answers. It is this lack of clarity – the inherent uncertainties – that ensure the Titanic's imperishable consumer appeal.

"The Titanic represents a marketing bonanza for movie makers, memorabilia sellers, tourist attraction managers, and many more. This casts doubt on the long-standing assumption that brand identities should be clear, concise, coherent, and consistent. Clarity is overrated. Imprecision is underappreciated. Legendary brands need both," the authors conclude.

More information: Stephen Brown, Pierre McDonagh, and Clifford J. Shultz, II. "Titanic: Consuming the Myths and Meanings of an Ambiguous Brand." *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2013.

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: Legendary brands: Why are consumers still fascinated by the Titanic? (2013, July 26)
retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2013-07-legendary-brands-consumers-fascinated-titanic.html>

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