Cool—the holy grail for youth marketers

How can brand managers effectively reach younger audiences in India? And what makes a brand cool in the eyes of Indian youth? Here are eight ways brands can resonate with this unique group of consumers.
That India is a young country is an oft-repeated cliché. Young India is not only driving the nation’s economy, but also its way of thinking. While many brands define the younger generations—Gen Y and Gen Z—as their primary targets, how many brands are actually able to speak their language?

To connect with this target audience, we recognized that coolness finds huge traction with younger Indian generations. To comprehend coolness, it was imperative to understand the elements that make up the sensibility. We delved into the components of coolness, discovering that although Indian definitions of cool do not necessarily translate to other locales, there are quintessential ingredients—we call them “cool mantras”—that are widely accepted indicators of coolness for Indian youth. The cool mantras in turn infuse brands with their “cool quotient,” or degree of coolness.

To better understand this cool quotient, we looked to brands that have already decoded coolness and made it a part of their brand DNA. By analyzing these brands, we then established a “cool toolkit” to help brands that are still finding their way. Here is an introduction to the cool toolkit for marketers who wish to add a cool quotient to their brands.

The search for cool: Our methodology

After studying more than 100 brands to understand their histories, products, and communication styles, we identified specific brands that are widely considered to be fundamentally cool.1 This was a relatively subjective classification based on empirical data: We looked at online conversations about brands, considered prior contributions by these brands toward shaping some aspect of youth culture, and determined which brands best resonate with a youth audience.2 These learnings were then distilled into the cool mantras and shaped into actionable points as part of the cool toolkit to help brands increase their cool quotient.

What makes something cool?

Cool transcends algorithms and logical definitions. Throughout history, cool has resulted from all sorts of different trends and lifestyles. But all things cool, when studied closely, can ultimately be condensed to a few common characteristics. In India, these include:

- **Cool is silent rebellion**: Subtle hair highlights or hidden tattoos are symbols of nonconformity that make a statement without shouting.

- **Cool is a source of respect**: Being cool means earning the respect of peers, and sometimes even their envy. Coolness achieves something extraordinary that’s difficult to replicate. Perhaps that’s why the stunt-driven, task-oriented reality show *Roadies* called its eleventh season “ride for respect.”

- **Cool seeks detachment but craves attention**: Indian youth may plug in their headphones and update their profile pictures by the hour, but they inwardly crave attention while outwardly seeking to look detached.

- **Cool does more, but talks less**: Many brands like Lenovo and Lead India bring this truth alive through initiatives that glorify an action-oriented, can-do way of life.

- **Cool is the equilibrium between individuality and belonging**: Stand out too much and you’re weird, blend in too well and you’re inconspicuous. Cool is the perfect balance between these polarities.

- **Cool is paradoxically competitive**: Cool is a ferociously competitive spirit disguised in a nonchalant, unruffled refusal to play the conventional game. Blockbuster movies
like *Student of the Year* bring this duality to the forefront.

- **Cool creates its own causes:** As a generation without central causes or great wars to unite it, India’s youth see movements like lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights or the Stop Online Piracy Act as causes to rally around.

### Finding a cool positioning

Whether a brand is considered cool is also driven by how it is viewed by the people who are not its target audience. This group becomes “the others,” those whose reaction to and viewpoint on a particular brand drives the core target audience to adopt, embrace, or flaunt the brand.

When positioning a brand as the next cool thing, understanding how it will be viewed by people outside the target audience is just as important as considering how the brand will be perceived by the core target audience. These outsiders can love or hate the brand, they can accept it or consider it taboo, but either way, their reactions will impact how the core target audience feels about the brand.

To fully grasp the measure of a brand’s cool quotient and understand the cultural space it occupies, it can help to plot the brand on a positioning chart, considering both the target audience and the outsider’s perspective on the brand. Generally, the target’s perspective and outsider’s perspective are opposite one another.

Since cool is mutable, it’s important to note that brands can move across these quadrants depending on the cultural pulse of the moment. Strategic shifts from one quadrant to another can be brought about by specific activities that focus on reinforcing the brand’s cool image in the following ways:
Strategic shift 1: From generic to distinctive

When a cool brand begins to become generic, it’s time for the brand to do something disruptive to align to its tribe. It’s okay to be hated a little by those outside the brand’s target audience, as this reinforces the brand’s cool image.

By creating intrigue and provoking mainstream criticism, a brand can realign to its tribe and reinforce its coolness.

By being disruptive or taking unexpected action, an edgy brand can create shock value and help reposition itself, while building hardcore loyalists in its core target group.
Strategic shift 2: From niche to mass

When trying to maintain diehard fans, brands can sometimes become inaccessible to certain audiences, alienating them by pushing them too far outside their comfort zone. This is the time for brands to dial up their desirability and likability quotient with the outsiders.

To charge a premium, a brand needs to be seen as aspirational.

By allowing a brand’s positioning to be a lifestyle statement that the mainstream sees as unacceptable, a brand can regain ground as edgy or trendsetting.
Strategic shift 3: From passé to the in thing

As culture evolves, brands may suddenly find that their edge has waned—what was once trendy is now ordinary. When this occurs, it’s time to have fun and be a little quirky to break from the sea of sameness.
Strategic shift 4: From “young” to “youth”

There is a difference between those who have a young mindset and those who are young in years. A brand that becomes a symbol of youth often begins to trend with an older crowd. When this happens, it’s time for the brand to do something a little shocking or intriguing to set it apart as a youth brand rather than as a young brand.

Adding spontaneity or quirkiness to a brand can help bring back its youthful edge.

By creating shock value or going against the mainstream, a brand can realign to its core audience.
The cool mantras: What do Indian youth consider cool?

In our exploration into the world of Indian youth, we discovered that their hyperconnected, socially active, and globally influenced lives have made them quick to judge and unafraid to voice their thoughts. In the process, we uncovered some uniquely Indian characteristics of coolness:

**It is cool to pursue your dreams, even if you fail**

Inheriting wealth, legacy, or tradition is not considered cool anymore. Youth want to break free and become the authors of their own destinies. We witness this in the rise of campus startups and alternate career options that young people are pursuing, leaving behind often-lucrative family professions for uncertainty and independence.

**It is cool to be Indian**

Thanks to younger generations embracing all things Indian with open arms, India as its own brand has found a new vitality. Whether it’s homegrown brands like Micromax, Café Coffee Day, and Fastrack or new phenomenon like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, young consumers are participating wholeheartedly in the Indian story.

**It is cool to take the lead and change the status quo**

The days of Indian citizens being bystanders are coming to a close. There is a growing emphasis on taking the lead and remediing problems. From using technology in constructive ways to raising voices against injustice (for example, India’s Right to
Information Act ensures citizens have transparency into the goings-on in the government), the status quo is shifting. People are no longer accepting things as they are or have been, but are looking to the future and focused on change.

**It is cool to break taboos**

Indian culture has long been riddled with taboos and social distaste for deviation from the norm. But the current crop of youth in India is happy to embrace deviations, even breaking some long-held taboos themselves. Openness to divorce, acceptance of same-sex relationships, and acknowledgement of premarital and extramarital sex are all topics discussed more openly in homes across the country.

**It is cool to be social; it’s even cooler to be on social media**

Brands like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter have ousted soft drinks as the quintessentially cool brands in India. Today in cafés across the country, friends can be seen sitting together hooked into their own electronic devices. The only time the group actually converses is to discuss what was said or done on social media. However, while social media is cool, brands on social media are at best ignored, and more often, lambasted.

**It is cool to be hedonistic**

Unlike previous generations that believed in abstinence and self-restraint, young India is a hedonistic generation. Whether it’s eating out, going to the movies, or frequenting pubs and discos, the super-fast growth of categories like restaurants, hospitality, multiplexes, and lifestyle goods bears testimony to this fact.

**It is cool to be tech-savvy**

With a significant share of discretionary spending on tech and tech-enabled services like cellular data, Internet connections, and mobile phones, technology is a clear favorite among India’s youth. This is also reflected in the fact that Samsung was named the most trusted brand in India in 2016 and the most exciting brand in the mobile category in a study conducted by the *Economic Times*.4

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The cool toolkit: Actions for brand managers

How can a brand be cool for India’s youth? How can it successfully emulate and embrace Indian cultural codes of cool?

1. Act, don’t tell

Brands’ actions will earn respect far more than their words. Channel V’s approach to improving women’s safety through an interactive app instills the brand with coolness, inherently communicating the safety message without being preachy. Cool acts like these are a shorthand that convey a brand’s principles to users.

2. Evolve: It’s the only constant

For the easily bored youth who gets the point in 140 characters or less, brands need to be fast and ever changing to stay interesting. Fastrack has done this remarkably well through its consistently evolving brand narrative that stays in sync with what’s top-of-mind for younger generations.

3. Stay true to your roots

While evolution is critical to survival, staying in character is just as crucial. Brands that step too far out of their zones to capitalize on a clever youth story will often face ridicule. Diet Coke tried to be hip with its You’re on Coke brand campaign but ended up with more trouble than it bargained for. Straying from a brand’s DNA is totally uncool.
4. Create tribes

Being Human, a nonprofit charitable organization founded by actor Salman Khan, ranked first in the apparel category of 2015’s Most Exciting Brands survey conducted by the *Economic Times*. The ideology of the brand combines doing good with looking good, inducing younger generations to sport the brand logo and demonstrate their belief in the brand.

5. Give customers control

Brands that act as a platform for youth to express themselves in unique, personal ways often have a distinct advantage when it comes to being considered cool. Idea Cellular has done this with its MyGang plan, creating a productive platform for youth to connect, share, and bond with their friends.
6. Don’t sell, integrate

Brands that become a seamless part of youths’ lives foster the strongest bonds. Condom brand Skore accomplishes this by connecting to the very progressive and experimental youth generation through its mobile app, providing tips and tricks to spice up one’s sex life.

7. Be humorous and have fun

Bring some fun into the daily lives of the young through adventure, surprise, and entertainment. Gamifying otherwise boring and repetitive activities is one easy way to do this. Brands can also use color and graphics to connect to Indian culture. Chumbak accomplishes this through its brand’s quirky, eye-catching, and bold look and feel.

8. Take a stand

If brands dare to say what others will not or take a stand on a topic that is uncouth, they often grab the attention of the younger generations. Myntra’s advertisement of a lesbian couple preparing to meet their parents made waves on social media. The brand’s courage was appreciated: The ad for the fashion portal’s ethnic-wear collection received over 200,000 hits on YouTube in just a 10-day span.6

Conclusion

Following the cool toolkit is not about prescribing to a firm set of rules. Rather, each mantra in the toolkit is meant to help brands guide their actions while also enabling them to remain relevant. By considering the mantras in tandem with a brand’s promise, products, target audience, and societal context, brand managers can help increase their brand’s cool quotient and gain new admiration from India’s youth.

A word of caution: If you’re trying too hard, it probably isn’t cool.