

# Surf, Board and Action Sports

Why the digital space is so powerful for those brands

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# Why the digital space is so powerful for surf, board and action sports brands

by Bertrand Chovet

At The SIMA Surf Summit 2008, Bob Hurley, Hurley International's Founder & Chairman, stated "Companies need to relentlessly focus on consumers...they are our boss." As with all other sectors, the consumer plays a key role in the surf, board and action sports brands space. Given the passion that surrounds such sports, however, it can be argued that consumers play perhaps an even more essential role in this unique space.

The specialized surf, board and action sports brand audience is very passionate about, and dedicated to, their equipment and apparel. Such consumers live and breathe their sport. Several consumers of products in these categories have gone on to turn their own names into global brands; Bob Hurley (surfwear), Tony Alva (skateboards), Jake Burton (snowboards), Robby Naish (windsurfing) and Peter Cabrinha (kitesurfing).

## Global impact

Subcultures tend to be portrayed favorably by the media, since most are new, edgy, and inspirational. When the subculture is particularly exciting, it can even change behavioral norms.

Action sports—from skateboarding and snowboarding to surfing, windsurfing, kitesurfing, motorbike, bmx, basejumping, freeskiing...—definitely fall into one of these influential and dynamic subcultures. Though board sports have roots in the Hawaiian practice of surfing, today, the culture is a catalyst for consumer trends around the world. Indeed, many brands use the culture

to target and engage consumers, particularly those in the young Generation Y (Millennials) groups. Hollister, an apparel chain, captures the spirit of Huntington Beach's surf culture across all touch points from its swimwear-clad sales team to its video wall installations.

Such passion and youthfulness is what drives the boarding industry. In general, its audience—surfers and boarders—view the industry as a lifestyle, not a temporary trend. It is because action sports brands create such a successful, personal relationship with each of their fans (which form their core consumer base), that they are able to transcend a person's job or social status.

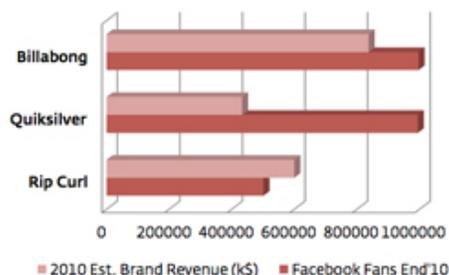
Some may wonder if surf, board and action sports brands are just for teenagers. Not quite. Board-Trac reported that 58.5 percent of the surf and board audience is in the 20-40-year-old range. The majority of devotees are 31+ years old. Such statistics provide a larger picture of what could potentially shape the niche in the future: a search for individual achievement in a community, socialization versus competition and an openness to the environment.

Despite the undeniable potential that encircles this unique area of sports, it does have its own share of challenges. It is still limited to a core community and audience (compared with team sports) and the fragmentation or overlapping of all disciplines is a barrier to its development as a mainstream sport. And yet, the uniqueness and

differentiation that are intrinsic to the category also suggest that surf, board and action sports have the potential to be more inspiring and influential than any other area of sports.

## Surf brands and social media influence

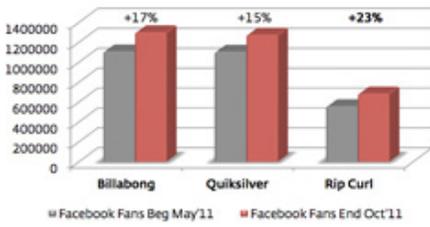
Surfing was initially a sacred ritual until Californians created a lifestyle around the sport in the 1960s. Today, the top three international surf brands are Billabong, Quiksilver, and Rip Curl. In 2010, these top three brands dominated the world market. In total, the surf industry is now worth US \$20 billion.



These three boarding brands are far more effective in creating influence than revenue generation. Indeed, footwear, clothing, accessories, and apparel are a major source of revenue while surfboards, gear, and accessories only maintain a minimal place in sales ranking.

These brands have a much larger social media presence than global sports brands, which outpace surf, board and action sports brands in total sales revenue. For example, Nike Action Sports, the division of Nike dedicated to Nike 6.0 focuses on surf, skateboard, snowboard, moto, bmx, and wakeboarding. It has .6 million facebook fans whereas

Billabong is quickly approaching 1.32 million fans. Similarly, Quiksilver has 1.29 million and Rip Curl has .7 million Facebook fans, respectively.



So what makes surf, board, and action sports brands so influential? What are the unique key components that lead them to outpace other sports brands?

### 1. They are conscious of their core audience

Billabong, Quiksilver, and Rip Curl are successful sports-to-lifestyle brands with great awareness of their core audiences. In different ways, they have been able to secure their respective core audiences while extending to new targets -- Roxy and Rip Curl Girl are good examples of this. All three brands have also been successful at bridging new disciplines (snowboarding, for example) and, most importantly, they have segmented their product distribution between their core

influential customer bases and the general public.

### 2. They are committed

Surf, board and action sports brands are deeply committed to their respective audiences and cultures. Possessing such an unwavering commitment is one of these brands' key assets. Surf, board and action sports have their own communities and distinct languages. Speaking in the right language is essential to reaching influential leaders and creating global influence. For these brands, this long-term commitment needs to be deeply entrenched in the heart and soul of the founders to give legitimacy to the discipline. Such dedication is what ultimately drives the brand and is precisely why surfers and boarders alike (and the mainstream public) keep coming back for more.

### 3. They build community

Surf, board and action sports brands do an excellent job of building a circle of practitioners, consumers, users, and spectators. These brands have built communities around specific types of destinations -- waves, mountain routes or specific streets. Additionally, because

these sports are tailored to the individual and not team-related, the community these brands build is necessary and helpful. Another community these brands have created deal with navigating extreme environments -- barrels, concrete, wind, water and snow.

The ways in which brands in this space differ from team sports are noticeable and signify a strong break from the past. They are very powerful at building a specific lifestyle associated with freedom, sharing, and reinvention-- something that is quite appealing to younger audiences, while also relevant to older ones.

### Surf, board and action sports brands could be the rainmaker of the sports and lifestyle industries

Today, it is obvious that, in the last few decades, the surf, board and action sports industries were emblematic at bridging the relationship between the business, the brand and the audience. Social media practices are evolving at a rapid pace. Consumers are expecting brands to provide services that fit their lifestyle. They want brands to listen to them, to

### RIP CURL TIP2TIP: An exemplary case of animated content anchored to the brand substance

Rip Curl was born from the Search. In the beginning - way back in the 1960s - the Search was expressed in the actions of two young surfers, Doug Warbrick and Brian Singer, and their personal quest for a lifestyle that allowed them to surf and live by the coast.

Launched 16th August 2010, TIP2TIP, is about a 6-month quest about the Infinite Search, from one end of the Indonesia Archipelago to the other creating a journey, far from the product demo or advert and more about discovery, adventure, adversity and the people who share the brand motto: Live the Search. From perfect waves to unlocked mysteries, feral pirates to cabin fever, the voyage perfectly delivered the brand proposition and is now translated in a film launch, Float. See: [www.ripcurl.com/tip2tip](http://www.ripcurl.com/tip2tip)



understand them, to fuel them and to bring them knowledge and content to what they experience in their daily life.

In 2011, GlobalWebIndex research demonstrated that, despite global user growth, active participation on Facebook is falling and slowing down, especially in the US and English speaking countries.

Surf, board and action sports brands are strong because of their clarity, commitment, authenticity and relevance. They are also strong at understanding the relationship they build with their audiences -- the way people engage, buy and commit in today's world. Often, this community becomes a powerful advocate and promotes the brand.

What will happen next within the digital sphere for these brands? With Google+ competing against Facebook as the most influential social network, all sports and lifestyle brands have an opportunity to reset what they are doing.

According to a DDB/OpinionWay 2010 survey, Facebook is mainly viewed as a source of entertainment

for 49 percent of respondents, followed by those who view it as a communication tool that helps one to stay in touch with close friends (32 percent).

It is easy to imagine how the circles of Google+ or the future improvement of Facebook's platform will become a springboard for surf, board and action sports brands to strengthen their influence inside the social network they have built.

As the circles multiply, there are many possibilities for users to share -- watching and experiencing each discipline and lifestyle directly associated with the brand. This will support an enhanced experience for users to bond with their micro-community.

With Facebook's dramatically redesigned user profile page in an online scrapbook, a media interface and an interactive platform letting users listen to the same music or run together while staying connected, it also creates new opportunities for surf, board and action sports brands to develop their multimedia connections with fans.

Today, what is working for surf, board and action sports brands should inspire a lot of brands to strengthen their relationship with their different audiences and communities.

Nike's strategy is about selecting their best growth opportunities and making the most of them. Sandy Bodecker, VP Action Sport at Nike, said the following about Nike 6.0: "There will be an overall thread that ties everything together, but we are committed to being a great skateboard brand, a great surf brand and a great snowboard brand."

As we saw before, Nike 6.0 is not leading the game in social media influence, however, compared with the leading surf brands or the skateboard brands (such as Vans 3.36 million fans or Volcom 1.5 million fans). It seems that the public is not voicing its opinion on Nike 6.0.

While surf, board and action sports brands can face some limits to growth outside of their core category or franchise, they are often superior in terms of strength

## VOLCOM: When the brand is the media and vice versa

In 1991, Volcom was the first brand to merge surfing, skateboarding and snowboarding. By positioning the proposition in the boardsport under the Youth Against Establishment slogan, the founders were dedicated to creating a core lifestyle brand. From that point on, all initiatives followed this vision. Volcom Entertainment was founded in 1995 primarily as a music label that includes bands such as ASG, Birds of Avalon, Guttermouth, Pepper, Sabotage Soundsystem or Valient Thorr. Today it is perceived as more than a label through a web entertainment platform that mixes music, videos, concerts, and blogs around brand communities and boardsports. See: [www.volcoment.com](http://www.volcoment.com)



and influence. For such brands, the most effective way of marketing is word-of-mouth, particularly with the younger generations.

The younger audience supports the brand in building its reputation -- engaging in conversation, and the sharing of experiences.

In some ways, surf, board and action sports brands can be equated to luxury brands in their ability to address and segment needs and influences between practitioners (e.g. connoisseurs or experts of the discipline) and more classic consumers.

Surf, board and action sports brands' use of social media should be a source of inspiration for many other brands. They could help other brands to strengthen their relationships with their different audience circles or tap into an emerging community. They also demonstrate that there is a great opportunity for other brands to build long-term strategies based on owned and earned content.

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### **Bertrand Chovet**

Bertrand Chovet leads our Paris office and seeks to build brand distinctiveness and consumer loyalty in every single client engagement. As Managing Director of Interbrand Paris, his commitment to high performance has resulted in many award-winning corporate, retail and package design programs. For more than 16 years, Bertrand has worked with Interbrand clients on extensive business issues across a wide range of sectors, from corporate, FMCG, retail to luxury brands.