

Community centre

Airbnb's global expansion will result in 200 million nights being spent in its properties by the end of this year. Now, it's setting out to reach a far wider audience by embracing experiences in its quest to become a community-powered super brand

28. 8. 2017

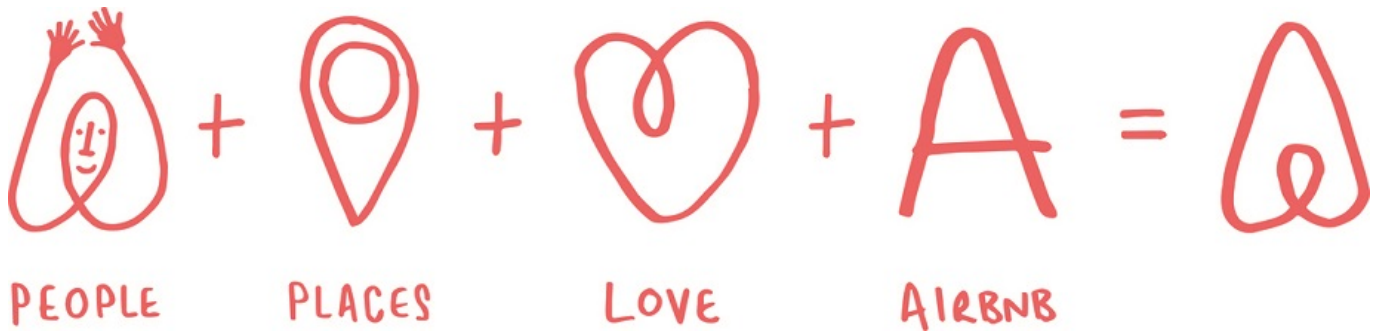


Like any self-respecting adult, Airbnb is outgrowing hosting people on airbeds. In fact, the company's ambition goes far beyond providing weary travellers with a unique place to crash. Now the brand is expanding its community of hosts and travellers globally, and is branching out into trips to encourage more people to participate, without even leaving their city.

One of Jonathan Mildenhall's first tasks when he joined as CMO in 2014 was to oversee this transition. Previously SVP of integrated marketing communication and design excellence at Coca-Cola, Mildenhall believes that global brands need a universally understood icon and value proposition, but his ambition for Airbnb extends far beyond recognition. 'We will not rest until Airbnb becomes the brand that defines this generation,' he says.

To broadcast its ambition and mark the start of this shift, Airbnb unveiled its brand redesign in 2014. At its heart was a new logo, 'a universal symbol of belonging', the Bélo. Made up of a person, a location marker, a heart and an A for Airbnb - but no airbeds - the logo was designed to work equally well whether you come across it as a keyring, an office sign, or on an iPhone. James Greenfield led the project at DesignStudio and now works with Airbnb through his own studio, Koto.

He set out to create an international symbol that, no matter where you encounter it, 'would stand for something'.



Stretching the brand

However, in order to achieve this audacious aim, Airbnb knew that it needed to broaden its reach and expand globally. The brand has to, as Mildenhall sees it, 'stretch as wide as possible'. 'No brand has ever gone from millennial-cool to family-accepted. No brand has ever stretched itself from being a value proposition to being a luxury proposition,' he says. 'There is no precedent. We will try and figure it out on our own and in so doing establish an entirely new playbook for 21st-century brand marketing.'

Airbnb has already made the shift from being a Silicon Valley-based tech company to one that's hospitality-focused, but now its prime challenge is 'scaling while retaining that which is special to us', global brand marketing director Alexandra Dimiziani says. Neil Barrie, chief strategy officer at TBWA\Chiat\Day in Los Angeles, the brand's agency of record from 2014 to 2017, says that as the company continues to scale, it has to navigate a 'classic founder's dilemma... crossing that chasm into the mainstream without losing your soul'.

To compound this, Airbnb is up against established big spenders such as Booking.com, Expedia and HomeAway. Mildenhall says: 'I'm outspent 10 to one by our biggest competitor so, my work has to shout 10 times louder.'

Mildenhall is also aware that, in order to complete this mission, Airbnb's inbuilt community of advocates must be kept at the centre of the company as it grows. As Dimiziani says: 'The product is the community.' So, the brand is now responding to this challenge by clarifying and articulating its values, and inviting people in who share them. Creating a world where anyone can 'belong anywhere' gives the brand credibility to expand and invokes a mission that both employees and the community can embrace.




Creating value


In his first interview for the role of Airbnb's CMO, Mildenhall asked co-founder and CEO Brian Chesky: 'What is the value that you're creating in the world?' Chesky replied: 'I genuinely believe that every time I go and stay in a stranger's house, I leave as a friend. And because of that, wherever I travel, I feel a deep sense of belonging.'

The conversation immediately struck a chord with Mildenhall. 'Iconic brands look for those big, universal, human truths or emotions that they can insert themselves into,' he says. 'Belonging could be more valuable to Airbnb than happiness is to Coca-Cola, because belonging is the primary driver of humankind.'

This attitude also clearly appeals to Airbnb's target audience of 'explorers', who have more of a mindset in common than fitting into a particular demographic. 'They have a real sense of discovery, they like to go off the beaten path, they're not afraid of things going wrong. They see this as a great source for storytelling in the future. They embrace serendipity. It's more about the behaviours and


attitudes of the group,' says Dimiziani.

A man with a beard and long hair is captured mid-jump, falling into a swimming pool. He is wearing light blue patterned swim trunks. The pool is surrounded by a modern building with large glass windows and lush greenery in the background. The water is a vibrant turquoise color.

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airbnb
Belong Anywhere

From the inside out

As well as boosting its appeal externally, Airbnb has focused on living and articulating its mission internally. This manifests itself through the product and its marketing, but also influences how the company operates.

In 2016, a review of the platform by Laura Murphy, former head of the American Civil Liberties Union's Washington D.C. Legislative Office 'uncovered the things that fly in the face of belonging anywhere', says Rachel Holbrook, Airbnb's global head of production. 'We need to address prejudice and bias both on our platform and in our communications. It really starts inside. We take a very inside-out approach to that mission.' This has resulted in a concerted effort to improve inclusion on the platform and the diversity of its workforce through targeted recruitment.

Additionally, all employees take unconscious bias training to help ensure that discrimination is eliminated from the company. This is shared through its website and with people attending Airbnb Open, its annual host convention, spreading the inclusion to hosts and guests. Central to this is Airbnb's Community Commitment, which each member is required to sign, agreeing to treat all members with respect and without judgement or bias.

This focus has the potential not only to ensure that Airbnb remains relevant to its audience, but also to guide the company as it evolves. James Goode, managing director of Airbnb's in-house creative team, says: 'I've had the privilege of working for lots of highly popular brands, but I've never experienced a company whose mission is so clearly articulated. I understand that mission, I understand how that relates to the business, I understand how it relates to the user, I understand how it relates to the community of hosts. I can get behind it and it's something I can use to guide my daily work.'



Tony Höggqvist, executive creative director of Airbnb and previously co-founder of Swedish agency Perfect Fools, explains how data and experiments across the platform helped to craft this

Community Commitment. The platform ran tests to see if including or excluding profile images or using instant book, rather than being pre-approved by the host before a booking, made a difference to bias on the site. 'Everyone has an unconscious bias. So what's the solution? Should people be able to select their guest at all? There was so much conversation with our community, so much data. In the end we just needed to express what the brand stands for. That's why we crafted the Community Commitment.'

In this way, Airbnb's marketing, product design and user experience teams work together to design a product that suits both the company's mission and its community. Storytelling and tone of voice are worked into the design, while data plays a strong part in guiding how the platform evolves.

'We use data to inspire us, but not drive us,' says Mildenhall. 'We use our experience, rather than research, to predict consumer response to our work. If other organisations reminded themselves of the power of experience and intuition, as opposed to processes that reduce creativity, that would be good for the marketing industry at large.'

We Accept

Airbnb's strong vision around belonging has also manifested itself in the brand's marketing. Its Super Bowl spot, We Accept, was beautiful in its simplicity. Close-up shots of people's faces, including Airbnb employees, were taken by in-house photographer David Elliott and overlaid with words based on the community contract. 'It's just so bold to use that spot, use that time with that target group, and run a narrative that is completely mission-driven,' says Höggqvist.

The spot felt all the more poignant because it aired around the time that President Donald Trump announced his travel ban, which flew in the face of Airbnb's mission and values. At the same time, Airbnb also formally launched its Open Homes platform, based on an initiative that has been running since Hurricane Sandy struck the US in 2012. Open Homes allows any host to offer their space for free to people in need.



Mildenhall comments: 'I think brands have to navigate social responsibility in a very, very sensitive way, so that their communities or their consumer bases believe that the brands are in touch with the social zeitgeist. Brands shouldn't necessarily lean into politics, but increasingly there should be a responsibility to make a social stand on the things that you know that your consumer base cares about.'

However, rather than Airbnb coming across as yet another company jumping onto the purposeful marketing bandwagon, the We Accept spot felt natural for the brand because its mission is fundamentally tied to the product's success. 'A lot of brands can be purpose-driven, but acceptance is in the core principles of the business,' says Höggqvist. 'If you close doors, if you don't accept people, our business will not grow.'



Calling explorers

Airbnb's mission forms a rallying cry for its audience of explorers, but the company is increasingly asking its community to bring the brand to life through its marketing as well as through its product. 'The reason we were so successful from the get-go is that we weren't doing so much of the talking, people were doing the talking for us,' says Dimiziani.

In fact, part of TBWA\Chiat\Day's brief was 'looking at the different ways of involving the community in the marketing - every piece of film, real homes, real travellers', says the agency's Barrie. 'The advertising and marketing almost had to get out of the way and let the community take over.'

Airbnb's Don't Go There, Live There campaign, created by TBWA, brings the idea of being an Airbnb guest to life. Similarly, to launch Trips - hosted experiences available on the platform - the company established a new production system to allow the hosts to present videos explaining their offering. Hosts are matched up with a local camera crew, and films are then edited in-house, balancing the unique style of the trip and the host's personality with a consistent look and feel across Airbnb's content.

'We're a storytelling brand,' says Airbnb's Holbrook. 'We represent an incredibly diverse community of hosts and the stories that come about through the travel on our platform, they're rich and they're interesting and we couldn't make them up.'



Relinquishing control of a carefully constructed brand story is often a challenge for marketers, but Dimiziani believes that the company is achieving a balance 'between setting a narrative but then embracing the community and our partners' response to that. That might mean an imperfect narrative from the brand's point of view, but that's probably a perfect narrative from the consumer or the community point of view. And we've become quite comfortable with that.'

Recently, Airbnb has started to exploit its reviews as a previously untapped source of stories from the platform. Based On A True Review is a series of animated conversations between a host and their guest telling the story of a stay, such as a pilot from Singapore who took a lady with a fear of flying on a plane.

By featuring excellent hosts and high-impact trips, even those that help overcome phobias, Airbnb explains its offering through content and also sets a high bar for other hosts who are introducing homes and experiences to the platform. 'That's the hypothesis we have,' agrees Goode. 'If we can enable individuals in our community to express themselves to a high enough level of quality which merits us promoting things, that creates a cycle.'



Airbnb views its hosts as entrepreneurs, and so works to give them the chance to build their own brand and offering, such as the 400 individual posters that Koto created to celebrate the launch of Trips. Treating each host and experience as a standalone offering helps boost this sense of pride and quality. 'Every single host is a mini entrepreneur, and every single host is a brand in their own right,' says Goode. 'They become their own self-sufficient businesses by basically showing their passion, which is quite beautiful.'

Airbnb is also careful to promote the benefits that the company and the hosts bring to their local communities. For example, it expects to generate \$340bn of economic output and support 1 million jobs across Europe, its biggest market, by 2020. In June, it announced a €5m (\$5.69m) Community Tourism Programme, a fund available to non-profits, charities and community groups to help preserve local traditions and landmarks.



Global to local

Having a positive impact on a local scale as well as a global one is vital to the brand. Mildenhall believes: 'We have to show up in a way that feels much more local than any other local competitor. So, we are focused on driving massive local relevance, while at the same time building global scale.' In order to do this, each market receives Airbnb's global assets but can also use 20% of its marketing budget to create specific, local pieces of work.

Höggqvist cites the brand's launch in China earlier this year as one example of how this approach has paid off. The company there was named Aibiying in Mandarin, which translates as 'welcome each other with love'. Chinese artists crafted the three Chinese characters of the new local name, and the platform has integrated with popular local services including Alipay and WeChat. 'The China launch was one of those truly local launches where I felt like we didn't do it on the San Francisco principle,' Höggqvist says.

'The content felt like it came from the community. I think that is a benchmark for how we should go to market,' he adds.

Another local execution that had global ramifications came from Airbnb creatives in Australia who brought Belong Anywhere to life as a tangible product. An incomplete ring was created, representing the LGBTQI community's lack of equal marriage rights. People pledged to wear the ring until the law is reformed. 'We're committed to building a global brand that is universally understood, but our local marketing teams have the freedom to interpret what belonging actually means inside their markets. This iterative process fuels outstanding creative work,' says Mildenhall.

Maintaining this cultural relevance and understanding of local issues is going to be vital as the platform grows. 'We have to understand those cultural nuances that fuel things like trust and safety, and all the things that are barriers to people,' says Goode.



End to End

Airbnb's local relevance should be boosted further by its expansion into hosting experiences, covering everything from hunting for truffles in the Italian countryside or discovering sustainable living in Sydney, to exploring speakeasy bars in Paris or learning traditional Samurai swordplay in Tokyo. Paying attention to the audience feedback and data around what works best should help ensure the brand's success as it expands into this area. Mildenhall says: 'All of the experiences are different, all over the world. All the homes are different, all over the world. But, the thing we use to unite them is this sense of human connection and personal hospitality.'

Bringing Airbnb's offering to life through content gives potential users a good idea of the experience, and should help to drive trial. For example, part of the Trips launch involved a Facebook Live stream called We Are Here. Over 24 hours, people could watch live videos from six locations including surfing in LA, performance art in Paris and live street dance in Seoul, bringing the experience to life in as realistic a way as possible through the content.



Introducing Trips adds another important element in bringing Airbnb to a wider audience: you no longer need to own a property to host. For Höggvist 'that is really inspiring because I saw so many different types of people who didn't think they belonged to that part of our community. Now you don't need a home to be a host, you can host so much more.' This answers one of the brand's key challenges of broadening its audience, as the barrier to hosting and participating is lower.

As Airbnb shifts from a travel brand to a lifestyle brand, it is becoming more deeply embedded into people's interests and behaviours. 'We're part of culture, we're part of music because we are arranging music experiences, we're using food, we just onboarded restaurant bookings. And then we become an ecosystem,' says Höggvist. This ecosystem of experiences provides explorers with a more accessible way of making discoveries, and so should encourage more regular use of the platform.



Going forward, the increasing number of options will allow the company to gather more data about what's resonating, to inform how Airbnb evolves. 'Ultimately, the product is going to become more personalised, more driven for you and for the user in the moment, wherever they are,' Goode believes. Add this to the human connections and feeling of belonging that remain at the heart of Airbnb as it evolves, and the company looks well placed to meet its challenges of broadening its appeal and growing globally. And as it plays a more central role in people's lives, its aspiration to become a generation-defining brand feels well within reach. 'We could get Airbnb to go from an app that somebody uses twice a year to, credibly, an app that somebody might use four or five times a week,' says Mildenhall. 'If we get that right, it will be phenomenal.'

4m

Listings on the platform
in 65,000 cities

200m

Total number of Airbnb
guest arrivals

\$31bn

Airbnb's valuation in
March 2017, following a \$1bn
Series F funding round

120

People in Airbnb's global
marketing team

Airbnb in numbers

\$340bn

Projected boost in economic
output to communities in Europe,
Airbnb's biggest market, with
1 million jobs supported by 2020

97%

Proportion of accommodation
charges earned by local hosts

€5m

(\$5.69m) Community Tourism
Programme fund available to
help preserve local traditions
and landmarks

€2,400

(\$2,740) Average amount
annually made by typical
Airbnb hosts in Europe

BOX OUT / WAYS OF WORKING

Airbnb structures its agency and production partnerships in a way that suits its rapid pace of working. Part of this, James Goode believes, is questioning established ways of doing things. 'It's a symptom of disruptive companies, asking "how do we disrupt anything within our business ecosystem?"' he says.

Airbnb has an in-house creative team, headed up by Goode and executive creative director Tony Höggvist, and in-house production capability, but also works with a variety of agencies, including (until recently) TBWA\Chiat\Day, LA, London-based design agency Koto and product marketing agency Bokeh.

This model is born out of the need to remain nimble to cope with the brand's massive global growth. 'You have to constantly rethink how you operate, how you're organised,' Goode says. 'My personal challenge is having to design a team and create conditions for every single project or brief that is unique. It's always a different configuration of people, and it's never the same skills.'



This requires high levels of collaboration and partnership. 'I say at the onset of any project: 'This is going to be incredibly fluid,' says Airbnb's global head of production Rachel Holbrook. 'We are here to create the best work and we're all going to do it together. No single person or group owns the creative idea.'

Airbnb values agencies that 'really, really believe in partnership', Höggqvist says. This way of working ultimately helps the product and marketing to sit much closer together, providing a better user experience. It enables high-quality content that is global in outlook and relevant to the community to be created efficiently, in a way that is authentic for the brand. James Greenfield, founder of Koto, believes a lot of organisations could learn from Airbnb's approach. 'Creativity is a team game,' he says. 'From our point of view there's a lot of incredibly talented people that work at Airbnb, but it's the fact that we work in collaboration with them that delivers the results.'



BOX OUT / GRABBING A NEW AUDIENCE

Airbnb's Night At platform has enabled the brand to gain access to a wider audience through partnerships. Iconic spaces ranging from museums, to sports grounds, even historical monuments are transformed for a night, offering an incredible space for a few lucky people to stay.

Locations so far have included the top of an Olympic ski jump in Norway, a floating house on the River Thames, the Paris Catacombs on Halloween and Dracula's castle in Transylvania, plus a sleepover at the home of the Boston Red Sox and Chicago Bulls. 'Night At, for me, is our benchmark,' says executive creative director Tony Höggqvist. 'We are offering amazing, amazing places around the world, but fantasy and imagination can go beyond that.'

The Guinness Storehouse in Dublin, a yurt in Italy at Nike's attempt to smash the two-hour marathon barrier and Sonos' Listening Room at Rough Trade Records are some examples of brands playing host to Night At events. Partners can apply to host a space and are assessed by Airbnb, but the benefits are mutual. Airbnb CMO Jonathan Mildenhall describes it as 'a media platform in its own right'. 'It exposes partner brands' communities to our brand narrative and it exposes our community to theirs,' he continues. 'We don't ever put any media dollars or production dollars into these deals. It's more about creating shared value.'

This benefit for partners was proved by The Art Institute of Chicago for Van Gogh's Bedroom, created by Leo Burnett Chicago, which was awarded the Creative Effectiveness Grand Prix at this year's Cannes Lions Festival. Van Gogh's famous painting Bedroom in Arles was painstakingly recreated and hosted on Airbnb. Beyond the publicity, the museum credited the campaign with increasing attendance by 133,000 visitors and generating short-term revenues of \$4.6m. It additionally estimated a long-term revenue increase of \$8.2m because of membership acquisitions.