

Is Your Brand Missing the Mark with 60% of U.S. Consumers?

Paul Jankowski

It's harder than ever before to build a brand.

The world is a cluttered and noisy place in the digital age, and it's not good enough to simply have a product with an advertising plan in place. Brand managers need to build and foster strategies that will cut through the chaos and actually build relationships with consumers. Successful ones will engage the right consumer, through the right channel, and with the right content.

That's harder than it sounds, and there's one part of the country where, I think, many brands are completely missing the mark: it's what I call the New Heartland. It's made up of the Southwest, Midwest, and parts of the Southeast and is home to 60% of all U.S. consumers. It's a massive and influential cultural segment that is largely misunderstood and underserved by advertisers—and a huge opportunity for brands willing to make the effort.

So how do brands effectively reach the New Heartland?

Five Ways to Reach the New Heartland

The first thing you need to know about the New Heartland is that its people are bound together by their strong values: faith (not religion), community, and family—all of which directly influence buying decisions, brand loyalty, and attitudes towards brands.

New Heartlanders expect the brands they support to appeal to these values. They want to feel a kinship to their favorite brands, and corporations that are upfront about what they stand for will attract and retain passionately engaged consumers.

I've learned through my own 25 years of experience a recent first-of-its-kind study with the Prince Market Research that, once you understand and incorporate these core values, the best channels to use are: Music, Food, Sports, Outdoors, and digital/social spaces.

Let's take a closer look at each channel.

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Music. Cognitive neuroscience research has established that our choices are influenced by emotional reactions of which we may not be consciously aware. Malcolm Gladwell, in his best-seller, *Blink*, calls this “the power of thinking without thinking.” How many times have you heard a song and been instantly transported to a time or place of your past?

You can see the power music has with recall and association through popular movies or famous ads. Think about *Jaws* and the infamous track that begins to play as the shark gets near. Is it playing in your head right now? That ominous beat is one unlikely to be forgotten by those who experienced the terror and fear of open water that the movie instilled. The same can be said for many TV show theme songs, such as *Good Times*, *Cheers*, *Friends*, *Happy Days*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Breaking Bad*, *Downton Abbey*, *Mad Men*... the list just goes on. The fact that we are still able to instantly recall the *Jaws* theme years after its debut shows just how powerful audio branding can be.

Audio branding can be very beneficial in helping consumers connect with a product or company. The emotional response elicited from music is often associated with a product and aids in the development of a customer’s feelings about a brand. This is why it’s so important to ensure that the music or artist with which you align is representative of your business and beliefs. Your customers can appreciate supporting a company that partners with a brand ambassador whose values align with their own.

If you're interested in connecting with the New Heartland through music, country music should be high on your consideration list.

Country music dominates the New Heartland, not only on the airwaves but in ticket/merchandise sales and album purchases as well. There are an astounding 102 million country music consumers in the United States (most in the New Heartland) and country music is the No. 1 reported format for audiences spanning in age from 18 to 54.

Plus, country fan's annual household incomes now skew toward the higher end—averaging \$75,000 in 2013—making them appealing for brands targeting higher-earning consumers. And don't forget the loyalty factor. Country Music fans are the most ardent and loyal of any fan base.

The phenomenon of the annual Country Music Associations' CMAFest is evidence of this, with a daily attendance of over eighty thousand people. It seems fans will do almost anything to get up close and personal with their favorite Country artists.

“Big name country stars are of the same status as pop music stars right now,” says Kathy Gardner, global head of the DBI at RepuCom. “They're relatable, and that's key. (Country stars) scored well in the most important factors that contribute to consumers making a purchase: trustworthiness, likability, and ‘breakthrough,’ meaning that when you see them on TV, you pay attention to what they are saying.”

Country music is making a splash on primetime TV, too. Nashville, a show about the lives of fictional (and often, unbelievable) country music artists posted strong viewer numbers in its first two seasons. And if you take a look at the history of American Idol alums, you'll hear many of them belting out their tunes on country stations: Scotty McCreery, Carrie Underwood, Kelly Clarkson, Kellie Pickler, and Kree Harrison are just a few past contestants who are in the genre.

“The stereotypes about the Country Music listener are that they're rural, they're downscale, and they're not very tech-savvy, but our research shows that that's all bunk,” says Chris Ackerman, vice president of Coleman Insights. “The Country music audience is largely suburban, a mix of white- and blue-collar, and a lot more affluent than even the Country industry itself thought. They're a much more attractive target for marketers than might have been perceived.”

Another interesting aspect of country music is how it's able to appeal to such a wide demographic. In no other format will you see such big numbers shared by both Millennials and Boomers. It's a common ground that's rare to find in any industry.

Perhaps because of its crossover appeal, more listeners are able to find something they already like and recognize in country. I believe it also has to do with fans being able to more personally identify with the artists that makes it so approachable. It offers more “regular Joe”

personalities than any other genre. Oftentimes, musicians throw on a ball cap and blue jeans to sing about daily life's joys and sorrows.

Country musicians largely have a relatable personality, so the genre as a whole feels approachable and friendly. These perceived shared values that help fans feel connected goes back to the three core values of the New Heartland.

This sort of connection with a music hero can yield powerful results for brands that support them as well. Be careful not to stereotype though, because not every country act is about drinking sweet tea on the front porch after Sunday church. There's a country act for every brand if the deals come from an authentic place and are done with the right participants.

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Food. Food is far more than just sustenance in the New Heartland—it’s a social experience. We will use any excuse to fire up the grill and break out the baking pans to get friends or family together. It’s not a proper gathering unless food is involved. It’s also how we share our congratulations, condolences, and celebrations. Food is a key component of our lifestyle and woven into our core values.

If you get sick or lose a loved one, you can almost be assured you have covered dishes coming your way from people eager to help lessen the stress load. We bake cakes for fundraisers, tailgate before a game, and hold entire events around cooking a special food item. Have you ever been to a crawfish boil? I highly recommend you get invited to one soon.

From barbecue to casseroles, both heavily promote the idea of community. Their very purpose often involves bringing people together. Whether for a church event, or a small family gathering, our special foods help us bond and strengthen relationships. It’s more than just ingredients—these rituals reinforce our important cultural traditions.

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Sports. For more than a century, brand marketers have partnered with sports teams and individual athletes to grab the attention of consumers—whether it’s through sponsoring the local Little League team, displaying superstar athletes on a cereal box or spending more than \$133,000 per second on Super Bowl ads.

But as costs have skyrocketed over the years, brands have turned a more critical eye on their sports marketing expenditures to examine if the return on investment includes more than just box seats and an autographed ball for the CEO.

If you ask a New Heartland resident about their favorite team, chances are they’ll name a college football or basketball team, as revealed in our New Heartland Consumer Insights Study. The pros are huge, too. But college sports are the personification of the New Heartland’s core values.

Here, your old alma mater is more than just an institution for academic excellence; it’s also the determining factor for how you will spend the majority of your Saturdays from spring football to bowl games. Supporting your college team is a seriously big deal here.

Bleacher Report recently ranked fan loyalty across the 125 Football Bowl Subdivision teams and declared eighteen of the top twenty to be from New Heartland states. The Southeastern Conference (SEC) has dominated the Bowl Championship Series, having won seven consecutive

titles through the 2012 season, making it the most dominant football conference in the country. This domination fuels a nearly maniacal love for college sports.

The NCAA shows our near unbelievable support of college football in the New Heartland with their recently released report outlining fan attendance. Michigan led the list with an astounding average of 111,592 fans at their home games in 2013. They were followed by Ohio State with 104,933, then Alabama with 101,505. The SEC as a whole enjoyed its sixteenth consecutive year as reigning champ in the category, averaging 75,674 fans per game.

But if you want to see some serious numbers and admirable brand loyalty, look no further than NASCAR. This is a sport that we, and much of the world, are simply crazy about. The average attendance for an event is just under 100,000. That's the average! Only a small handful of football stadiums in the U.S. even have enough seats to accommodate such a large crowd.

But probably the biggest draw for a marketer is the brand loyalty these fans show. According to a recent Turnkey Sports & Entertainment study, NASCAR fans are 63 percent more likely to consider a brand that is an official sponsor of the sport. And a study from NASCAR and Sports Illustrated found that 66 percent of fans were willing to pay more for a sponsor's product. Furthermore, an amazing finding was that 36 percent of NASCAR fans could name every sponsor of the top thirty ranked cars. Now, that's incredible news for brands.

The Great Outdoors. The geography of the New Heartland lends itself to some fantastic outdoor recreational opportunities, and we take full advantage. We have everything an outdoor enthusiast could want—mountains, woods, lakes, and plains. The temperatures, landscapes, and culture support some passion-driven activities, but there are two that stand out as opportunities for brands.

Hunting and fishing are outdoor sports that have big participation rates in the New Heartland. When it's hunting season, you'd better get used to seeing a lot of camouflage around. The expansive land areas here make for perfect hunting grounds. Deer hunting is the most popular, with 80 percent of all hunters partaking. The New Heartland represents the largest deer hunting numbers, with the Midwest claiming the top spot—nearly 8 percent of the population.

Check out any sporting goods store, Walmart, or Bass Pro Shop in the New Heartland, and you'll see what I mean. According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service's latest National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation Report, hunters spend more than \$33 billion a year on gear and trips.

This isn't just a man's game, either. There are 1.5 million female hunters over the age of sixteen. One out of every ten hunters is female. For those who hunt, it's a way of life. And they're bringing their kids up as hunters, too, as hunting is largely a sport of tradition.

There are a few reasons why hunting is still so popular in our region, and they all have to do with geography and culture. Broad landscapes provide a perfect place for agriculture, and sparsely populated areas accommodate growing numbers of wild animals. Population control for deer and other animals that pose a threat to crops or motorists is a big issue in some regions. Culturally, some residents subscribe to a “live off the land” ideology, while others are simply carrying on the recreational traditions learned from previous generations.

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Fishing is something that can also be enjoyed year-round in many places. A lot of us love to fish. According to our research, people in the New Heartland are almost 50 percent more likely to have fished in the past two years, compared to people living elsewhere in the country.

According to the Census Bureau, one area of the Midwest in particular—made up of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri—boasts 21 percent of its population as anglers. Think about it: One out of every five people in that region fishes!

A particularly intriguing stat on fishing that brands should consider: The wealthier a person is, the more likely they are to fish. Most anglers (56 percent) have household incomes greater than \$50,000, with 16 percent of all anglers bringing in more than \$100K annually.

And most of this spending is going on in the New Heartland. According to the American Sportfishing Association, we've got eight of the top ten fishing states based on annual expenditures.

Social in the Digital Space. The possibilities to connect brands with New Heartlanders are endless when it comes to the digital space, which is why marketers are sometimes overwhelmed when deciding how to maximize this channel. Prior to the Internet, advertising was fairly linear in that ads were placed in TV, print and/or radio, with very few variations available.

The power has shifted to consumers and the barrage of brand messaging that impacts their buying decisions have multiplied significantly. Consumers now control the messaging they receive and how/where they receive it.

Just as all of our devices are increasingly interlinked to create a seamless transition in our online activities, so are most websites we use. And marketers want to know how we're using our devices.

Think about the last five applications you downloaded or sites you subscribed to. Did you receive the option to sign in with one of your social media profiles? That's because marketers increase their new customer registration by more than 33% percent when social login is an option.

It is now standard for sites to incorporate a range of social channel share buttons. These buttons are not only great for getting new eyes to the site, but it's a veritable gold mine of behavioral research on the types of content with which you choose to engage. Not only do marketers know what customers read, buy or share, they also have access to their age, location, gender, and race.

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Would you choose to invest your marketing dollars in data derived from a user's cookies or their detailed engagement history? That's exactly why we'll see the continued merging of sites and real-time, preference-driven data.

So as the game changes to morph into the hyper-targeted communication options, you'll want to be sure that you have the right messaging for your ideal customer. That's a minimum expectation for today's savvy digital users.

While time spent with digital media (online, mobile and non-mobile connected devices) surpassed TV viewing for the first time in 2013 that trend is predicted to continue with mobile devices driving the growth. In fact, combining online and mobile devices, U.S. adults are expected to spend five hours forty-six minutes with digital per day in 2014, increasing digital's lead over television to well over one hour per day. Mobile usage alone will increase by 23 percent in 2014, with video content and social networking being two key drivers.

The New Heartland's behavior online is similar to the rest of the country's. We have a slightly smaller audience than our coastal counterparts, with the Census showing that the populations in the South and Midwest have 2-5 percent fewer homes with access to the Internet. But in terms of how we spend that time online, we're pretty much in line with the general numbers across all

states, with one key exception: New Heartland men are 23 percent more likely to have social media recommendations sway purchase decisions than their non-New Heartland counterparts.

Social media can be an incredibly effective way to reach the New Heartland consumer because it creates a sense of community that plays well considering our core values. In order to connect with the New Heartland consumer on a meaningful level, brands need to make sure they have a solid plan in place and a strategy that promotes conversation. Social audiences want to feel like they have a connection to your brand, like their voice matters. This is the forum that they will use to praise your brand, but also be critical—so be prepared to respond to criticism in a brand-conscious way. A plan should be in place to address any issues that might arise on social so that you can either solve the problem in the open for all to see, or move the conversation offline to offer a tailored solution.

Remember that these social media channels are little communities; it would benefit you to treat them as such. They are spaces where you can speak with your customers. Their opinions can be voiced in seconds, so be sure to include them in a dialogue that is respectful and authentic.

I believe that building brands in the New Heartland cannot be accomplished from the forty-second floor of a Manhattan high-rise or in a sprawling cubicle office system on the West Coast.

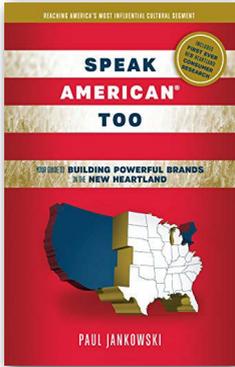
I've seen big and small agency creative teams on the coasts try to do this time and time again, and it is destined to miss the mark with the New Heartland.

In the New Heartland, brands are built at the dinner table, at church gatherings, in the garage, out in the fields, on the production line, at concerts, on the golf course, at soccer practice, and on the front porch after five o'clock. They are passed down from generation to generation, like family heirlooms and treasured recipes. Men drive a certain type of truck because that's what their father drove, and their grandfather before them. Moms buy certain household products because they are the ones their moms used.

In order to truly understand the New Heartland consumer, brand strategists and marketing decision makers must immerse themselves in our lifestyle—or hire brand experts who do. It's vital to understand our heritage; where our loyalty stems from; how core values impact our buying behavior; and how we discover and engage with products.

The brands that invest in truly engaging the New Heartland consumer will reap the enormous benefits that only passionate brand advocates can generate. 🏠

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Paul Jankowski is Founder and Chief Brand Strategist at New Heartland Group (formerly Access Brand Strategies). Clients include Pepsi, Pizza Hut, BB King's Blues Clubs and Mountain Dew. He is the author of *Speak American Too: Your Guide to Building Powerful Brands in the New Heartland*, a hands-on guide to reaching the 60% of consumers living in the New Heartland (Southwest, Midwest, parts of the Southeast). His previous book, *How to Speak American: Building Brands in the New Heartland* defined this massive, yet underserved cultural segment and traced the role core values such as faith (not religion), community and family play in buying behavior. Paul has been a *Forbes* contributor for 3 years, with a blog on marketing to the New Heartland consumer.

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