A Winthrop & Weinstine blog dedicated to bridging the gap between legal & marketing types.

I'm With The Brand
Posted on September 29, 2010 by Brent Lorentz

What do Glee, The X-Files, and Kiss have in common? I'll give you a hint. It's not kick-ass guitar riffs augmented by over-the-top pyrotechnics (as if there is such a thing as "over-the-top" pyrotechnics – unless you're Great White). It's also not that David Duchovny is a huge fan of all three. Give-up? Okay. All three have readily recognizable fan clubs (official and unofficial) derived from their name. In the case of Glee, we have Gleeks. For X-Files, there's the X-Philes. And with Kiss, there's the Kiss Army.

These particular brands have achieved such a high level of success among their fans that the fans have felt it necessary to not only purchase their goods or services, but to also incorporate the brand as part of their personal identity. Now, the question is whether developing a strong and devoted fan base that is willing to enthusiastically identify themselves as members of said fan base is a good or bad thing.

I initially undertook this post intending to take a position on whether "brand fans" were a good or bad thing, but after mulling it over, I really can't decide. On the one hand, I can see how a particular brand may crave this level of loyalty from its fan base. However, I can also see how this cultish, fanboy obsession could turn off a larger audience that a brand may be trying to woo.

I'll use my own personal experience (or lack thereof) with Apple products as an example. I think its safe to say that Apple has achieved a very high level of fandom (despite the absence, to my knowledge, of a clever moniker for the fans). There is even an online dating site devoted to those who worship at the Church of Apple. Said dating site describes itself as follows:

"Cupidtino is a beautiful new dating site created for fans of Apple products *by* fans of Apple products. **Why?** Diehard Mac & Apple fans often have a lot in common - personalities, creative professions, a similar sense of style and aesthetics, *taste*, and a love for technology."

(Emphases in original).

You know how you can tell when someone doesn't have good taste? When they find it necessary to explicitly and emphatically tell you they have good taste. Hardcore Apple fans make me cringe. (Perhaps they could call themselves "Apple Cores." I expect attribution for that, Mr. Jobs.) Among other things, they reinforce my negative impression that Apple has become more about snake oil and less about substance.

And therein lies the problem with the vocally loyal, heavy identification fan base. What do you do when someone wants to buy your product, but doesn't want the implicit fan club membership that comes with it? I desperately want an iPad, but I don't want to buy anything Apple because I don't want to "join the club." I imagine fans of Star Trek faced the same dilemma with the rise of Trekkies.

Perhaps I'm being too sensitive and the majority of the public doesn't automatically think that anyone with an iPad is an Apple Core. (Catchy, right?) But, I doubt I'm the only one who has considered negative associations with brand fans before making a purchase. What do you think?