

David Bowie Branding: Lessons From Rock's Original Chameleon

Author : Claire Falloon

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Before David Bowie was a rock star from Mars, he was an ad man—and a branding genius. Admittedly, he was only in the world of marketing for a year, but if his success at standing out is anything to go by, he was quick to learn its lessons.

While differentiation may have been all the rage in the 60s and 70s, these days, constant adaptability and transformation are more top of mind: how do you maintain a brand in a world that is rapidly and persistently *ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-changing*? David may have made his initial mark quite some time ago, but his approach to his ever-morphing brand can still teach us a thing or two.



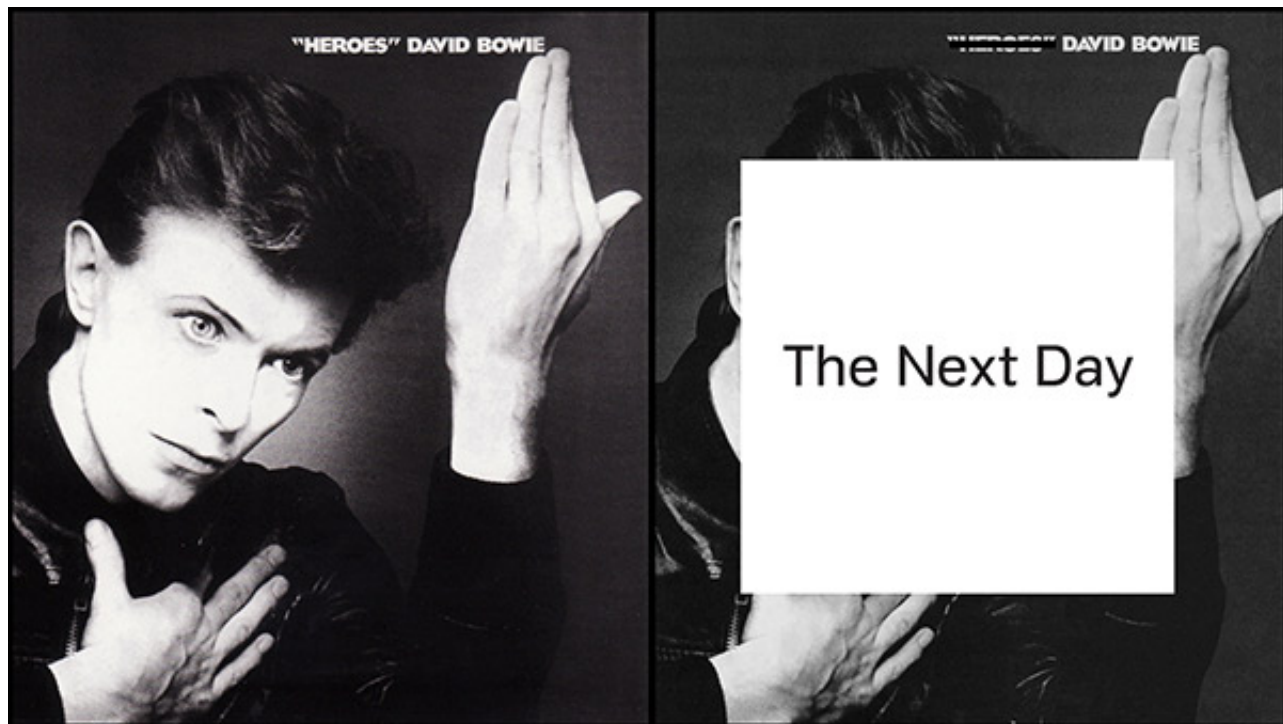
From a visual perspective, if Bowie were a regular brand, he might give his brand guardians some headaches. With a look that has altered drastically from decade to decade, there is little (except coolness) that serves as a red thread. How would one create a guideline on how to execute the Bowie look and feel? Pale skin, maybe. Skinny frame, yes. But a flame-red spike

one year and a silken-blonde flop the next? High heels and bodysuits one moment, 30s-style suiting and fedoras a moment later? It's enough to send any self-respecting brand ops practitioner into a tailspin. Chaos!



And what about his message? Again, Bowie has roamed around. Examining everything from Life On Mars to pop art, sexuality, love, drug highs and lows, loneliness, ambition, superficiality, being weird, or simply the joy of dancing, there isn't a single theme that binds the Bowie brand neatly together.

But Bowie is Bowie, undeniably and recognizably so, as celebrated in the landmark [V&A exhibition](#) that's been touring the world. And Bowie has been Bowie for at least five decades, and powerfully so. So what can brands learn from the artist formerly known as Ziggy Stardust? To stand the test of time, and remain relevant all the while, the only thing that must remain consistent is your sense of self. David Bowie is an artist, an explorer of the new, a thoughtful borrower from artistic traditions past.



An essential part of his brand is that he has the freedom to completely transform, to combine things in new ways, to create things that are unexpected. And does that also dictate that it would be off brand for him to consistently remain the same? Yes. Just like it would be off brand for a company whose purpose was to provide stability and reassurance to be constantly changing up its identity Bowie-style. To thine own self be true. Rock star or otherwise, it's the golden rule of a strong brand. And today it applies more than ever.



In a world where our technology, mediums, and even ecology are in a state of flux, if we can all find our one true thing to stand for and pursue, we will be setting a course for success; creating the only kind of constant that can survive in an environment that refuses to sit still. Not a rigid grid of many rules. But a flexible path with a genuine goal in mind. And if, like Bowie, your one true thing is to embrace and explore many, then as a side note, please also prepare your visual identity guidelines for the very real possibility of rainbow-sequins.

[Image at top via [Henry Cascante Rivas](#)]