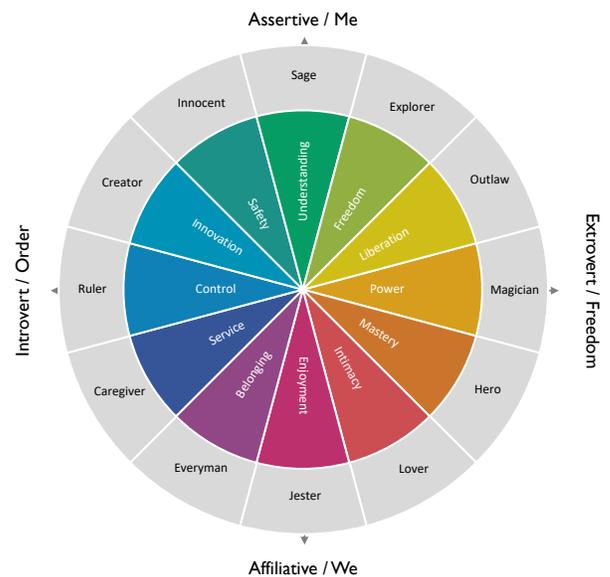


Brand archetypes



Brand archetypes are the Santa Claus of brand strategy: you either believe in them or you don't. There isn't really much of a middle ground. I've worked with clients for whom archetype theory was a critical tool for brand positioning (and Margaret Mark's book, 'The Hero and The Outlaw' was considered essential reading). I've also worked with clients who think believing in archetypes is as silly as believing in the Tooth Fairy.

I've written [elsewhere](#) about my own issues with the blind faith marketers seem to place in archetype theory. I won't repeat those concerns here. Instead, I'll do my best to ignore the fact that archetypes are a work of imagination rather than reflecting profound, eternal, irrefutable human truths (as is often claimed). After all, if brand strategists rejected models and frameworks on the basis of their unscientific origins, we would also have to shun two-by-two matrices, the Five Vs, the Pareto principle, behaviour change models, Sinek's Golden Circle, Strategy Maps, PESTLE, Value Propositions, brand funnels and pretty much every other tool at our disposal. Instead, I'll do my best to focus on a more helpful pair of questions:

What is archetype theory?

And how useful is it to brand strategists?

What is archetype theory?

It begins with psychologist Carl Jung's idea of a "collective unconscious": that underlying our own personal thoughts, beliefs and ways of thinking, everyone has a second psychic system that is identical in every human being. This second system exists in the deepest layers of our unconscious, like a sort of mental museum that has stored up all manner of weird and wonderful archaic remnants from distant and unknown ancestors. Because we are all essentially carrying around the same museum in our heads, this explains why certain themes or "archetypes" can be identified that recur across times and cultures.

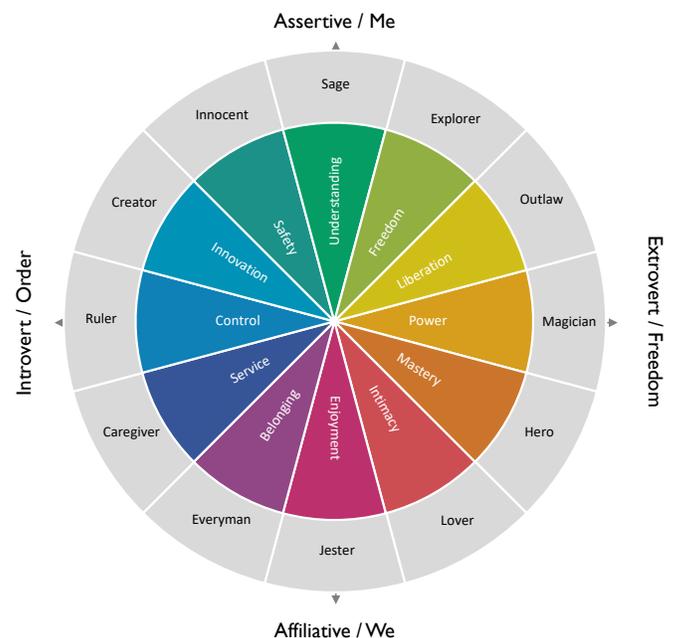
Originally, archetypes might have been a way for primitive men to make sense of the world around them: the sun could have been represented as a god or hero; a ploughed field may have been

interpreted as a nurturing representation of mother earth. Over time, Jung believed that archetypes had evolved to become "a kind of readiness to produce over and over again the same or similar mythical ideas." They are revealed to us in our myths, our dreams and our fantasies. And so, Carl Jung studied his own dreams and fantasies as a way of identifying these motifs: not just classical motifs like gods and heroes but also more modern fantasies like flying saucers. Jung conceived of thousands of archetypes: kings, warriors, sadists, masochists, impotent lovers, slaves, thieves, Oedipal children, cowards, addicts, victims, beggars, bullies and more.

The twelve 'brand archetypes' are a distillation of this cast of thousands into a manageable set of personality traits that have been cherry-picked to appeal as much as possible to the hopes and fears of the modern marketer. They are typically represented in the form of a colour wheel, which can be mapped against two axes:

- Extroverted (freedom-oriented) versus introverted (control-oriented)
- Assertive (me-oriented) versus affiliative (we-oriented)

The resulting map looks something like this:



How useful is archetype theory to brand strategists?

As unimpressed as I am with archetype theory itself, it does have a paint-by-numbers simplicity that is helpful for people who want an out-of-the-box model for developing brand positioning or mapping their target customer persona. If you lack the resource to map a market, profile competitors and identify unmet or undermet needs, the archetype model makes brand positioning as simple an exercise as choosing your favourite sign of the zodiac. The pragmatist in me knows that it's better to align a team around an idea – even if it isn't a “great” idea – than to have no alignment at all. The strength of archetype theory doesn't lie in its rigour or its irrefutability but in its ability to focus people on a narrow set of options, from which they can make a confident choice. It enables them to move from the intellectual to the practical: “we've all agreed we want to be a caregiver brand, so what do we need to do differently from now on to make that decision come to life?”

The brand archetype map can also be helpful, as its axes have meaningful consequences for brand identity development: an extroverted brand is more likely to have a maximalist aesthetic and high energy feel, compared to an introverted brand, which would be more even-tempered and organised. An assertive brand would exude boldness and confidence, compared to the friendly accessibility of an affiliative brand. Defining an archetype for a brand is a fake choice between arbitrary options, but at least it's a choice with clear practical implications.

That's about as positive as I can be about brand archetypes. Reducing a universe of infinite beauty and possibility down to a choice between twelve storybook characters is infantile and misses the point of brand positioning: not just to communicate distinctiveness but to establish uniqueness. Every brand has the potential to be original and to create value in new and innovative ways. Archetype theory is necessarily an act of regurgitation. I'd avoid it if you possibly can.