Kim Jordan, the CEO of the New Belgium Brewing Company, had taken an educated gamble. The brewery’s flagship Fat Tire Amber Ale was a favorite in the Rocky Mountain states. The brewery’s sales topped a 3 percent share in
Colorado, impressive numbers for a microbrewery, with total sales approaching $50 million. The beer had become wildly popular amongst Colorado’s outdoor enthusiasts who flocked to the mountains to mountain bike, hike, Nordic-, downhill-, and backcountry-ski, road bike, mountain climb, kayak, and fly fish. However, Jordan and her husband Jeff Lebesch, owners of the privately held company, had much more expansive ambitions—to win over mass-market beer drinkers, to roll out distribution throughout the country, and eventually to trump Sam Adams as the nation’s number one craft beer. So first the brewery expanded distribution into Texas; and then, in 2002, New Belgium entered Washington state and Oregon, with its sights set on the massive Californian market to the south. To support this expansion, the company invested in a risky and expensive expansion of the company’s bottling lines that doubled the brewery’s capacity.

But the expansion soon hit a snag. While Fat Tire sold well at first in Washington and Oregon, as drinkers were excited to try a new style of beer from an out-of-state brewery, sales soon began to sink. Local micro-breweries, which were much loved by beer drinkers, introduced copycat Belgian brown ales and Fat Tire’s share immediately went into a tailspin. Jordan worried that, unless Fat Tire sales picked up, she would not be able to pay out her capital costs, and, even worse, the brand would begin to lose the new distribution that her sales team had worked so hard to achieve. The company was struggling to figure out a strategy to translate its success in the mountain states to the larger market. She hired us in 2003 to develop a brand strategy that would allow the company to compete effectively in these major metropolitan markets.
Crossing the Cultural Chasm

New Belgium faced a problem that is common amongst entrepreneurial companies with successful niche businesses—what we call the cultural chasm. The company had done very well in cultivating outdoors enthusiasts in the mountain states, the drinkers who had embraced Fat Tire from the beginning. But New Belgium was struggling to extend this niche popularity to the mass market. In this sense, New Belgium’s problem was no different than Jack Daniels in the early 1950s, Nike in the 1970s, or Ben & Jerry’s in the early 1980s.

The strategic problem is the cultural analogue to that faced by many start-up technology companies when they take their technological innovation into the mass market—what Geoffrey Moore famously termed “crossing the chasm.” Working with Everett Rodgers’s seminal model for the diffusion of innovations, Moore noticed that many tech companies failed to make the leap into the mass market, having hit a dead end in the niche market comprised of early adopters of the innovation. Moore argued that early adopters differ from mass-market consumers in the value they ascribe to the innovation and in the decision-making process they go through in order to adapt the innovation. For Silicon Valley industries, this chasm has to do with an aversion to unproven technologies in applications that are critical to the company’s mission. Start-ups often fail to comprehend these differences in demand, and, so, they fail when the launch into the mass market with the same strategy that was so
successful for them early on. Without evolving their strategies, they will not, in Moore’s terms, “cross the chasm.”

The same principle holds for ideological opportunities, except that the chasm is cultural rather than technological. Nike stalled because the company knew how to sell running shoes only to runners. But, when it culled from the runners’ subculture one particular ideological facet that had tremendous appeal to the mass market—the runners’ stubborn competitive tenacity to push themselves even though they were training alone—and presented it in a simple, inviting manner, Nike took off amongst mainstream consumers. The principle is a kind of cultural alchemy: the company converts an ideologically charged element of subcultural experience into a broader marketplace myth, to be enjoyed ritually by less-engaged mass-market consumers.

Cultural strategy offers a powerful tool for entrepreneurs looking to break into the mass market. By crossing the cultural chasm, young companies and niche businesses can transform their offerings into mainstream successes. We put this strategy to work for Fat Tire, a formerly niche offering that became the third largest craft beer in the USA, gaining rapidly on the two top brands, Sam Adams and Sierra Nevada. With minimal resources, we developed a cultural strategy, implemented it, and turned New Belgium’s troubled markets around, putting the company on course to surpass its ambitious sales goals.

**Background**

Jeff Lebesch fell in love with Belgian beers on a bike tour of the famous
monastic breweries of Belgium and became a dedicated home brewer, trying to emulate classic Belgian styles. He proved to be a talented brewmaster, impressing friends. So he and his wife Kim founded the New Belgium Brewing Company in 1991. Jeff, an engineer, constructed a brewery in their basement from old dairy equipment. Kim, a former social worker, sold beer to local merchants from the back of the family station wagon. She sold the beer as anyone in small business would do, by knocking on doors at bars and restaurants and building relationships. She spread the word at beer festivals and got as many drinkers as possible to try their beer. A decade later, the company still relied on this grass-roots approach for its marketing. As the brewery grew, Kim hired a sales team of “Beer Rangers”—gregarious young beer enthusiasts who wore ranger hats bearing the New Belgium trademark—to arrange events in local bars and hand out free beers to the prospects they encountered on the road. The company mounted a touring bike-centric festival, the Tour de Fat, which included a bicycle parade, indie music, vaudeville acts, and the usual beer tasting. Kim hired a marketing director, Greg Owsley, who had previously worked in sales for a Colorado organic produce company. We were intrigued to learn that New Belgium had only two senior managers who had professional training and experience for their current jobs: the brewmaster, whom they had hired from one of Belgium’s famous breweries, and the national sales director, hired to coordinate the rollout, who had previously worked for the Boston Beer Company (brewer of Sam Adams).

For the West Coast expansion, Jordan and her team tried to execute the same sort of grass-roots relationship marketing approach that had worked so well in
their mountain-state markets. But the problem with this approach was twofold. First, it was logistically impossible and far too expensive to reach a critical mass of prospects with these small, labor-intensive efforts. Second, whatever the scale of the approach, New Belgium was just hawking another craft beer in markets where there were already many dozens of excellent, well-established, local beers made by equally dedicated craft brewers. Fat Tire was just another great beer, and a non-local one at that. Without effective branding, Fat Tire was doomed to fail. As the Washington and Oregon markets began to slip, Jordan assigned Owsley to find a consultant to help crack this problem.

Before he found us, Owsley had tried out two conventional marketing consultancies. The first of these specialized in unearthing “higher order” “unconscious” feelings and metaphors— the approach that we critiqued in Chapter 1 of the book as leading to the commodity emotions trap. Like many other qualitative market research firms, this firm relied upon “laddering,” projective techniques, and visual imagery to push informants to elicit the most abstract concepts that they associate with the brand under study. This technique, called ZMET©, produced results that were similar to other mindshare market research techniques we have encountered: it led to concepts that were so abstract that they could have been applied to most any brand. Because these laddering techniques force participants to rationalize their preferences in more and more abstract terms (by continually asking “why” to any response), they inevitably leads to a very generic strategy advice. In this instance, ZMET© churned out the following deep, tacit, consumer meanings that New Belgium should emphasize in Fat Tire branding:
While such “feeling words” might have been embraced by a more typical MBA brand manager, Owsley immediately spotted the problem. The terms had no specific relation to beer, much less Fat Tire. They would have fit equally as well with a brand of yoga mats, a granola bar, a sports bra, or the state of Hawaii’s tourism efforts. Rather than stake the brewery’s financial health on this list of abstract adjectives, Owsley and Jordan felt it best to see what a second brand consultancy had to say.

Owsley hired another consulting firm, which conducted extensive market research in order to develop a different emotional branding strategy. The diagnostic work centered on a large quantitative branding study in the new Western markets. The research mostly focused on psychological concerns such as the awareness of New Belgium and its Fat Tire brand, and the recall of the benefits that these brands “owned” in consumers’ minds. The consultants discovered that West Coast beer-drinkers had some modest associations with Fat Tire, but no idea about the company brand, New Belgium Brewing. This was hardly surprising since the name Fat Tire was present in big letters on the six-packs, but the New Belgium name could hardly be found, and the same was true of the tap handles in bars, which used the single-speed bike used to
reinforce the Fat Tire name visually. The consulting firm’s first recommendation, then, was to rename the brewery the Fat Tire Brewery to take advantage of this awareness.

They also discovered that Fat Tire was associated with the Rocky Mountains and so recommended that the branding should make effective use of that linkage. By owning this emotional territory, the consulting firm suggested, Fat Tire could significantly enhance its branding in the West Coast markets.

Owsley had even less trouble spotting a fundamental problem the second time around. It would be at least as difficult for Fat Tire to “own” the emotional territory of the Rocky Mountains as it would be for the brand to own generic metaphors such as “balance,” “connection,” and “transformation.” Coors had spent the previous thirty years developing its own association with the Rocky Mountains through mind-numbing repetition. By now, such branding would strike even a neophyte customer as an obvious cliché.

Out of frustration, Owsley and Jordan reverted back to their old ways, but gave it their own emotional branding spin—they wrote a manifesto for New Belgium stating that the company branding would be built around “relationships.” When we signed up, New Belgium was focusing its entire marketing effort on building relationships with consumers. While certainly an improvement over “balance” or “Rocky Mountains,” “relationships” was just as generic and just as unlikely to distinguish New Belgium from a crowd of craft brews whose owners were also very customer-relationship oriented.
Owsley found us through a *Harvard Business Review* article one of us had written. He thought that a cultural approach made a lot more sense than the conventional marketing ideas offered by the other two consultants. As on-again-off-again home brewers, we were excited to sign on. We set up the focal strategic problem in terms of the cultural chasm: how do we selectively leverage Fat Tire’s considerable credibility in the mountain states to craft a cultural expression that would resonate powerfully with the mass-market target in the major metropolitan areas on the West Coast?

**Cultural Orthodoxy in the Craft Beer Category: Artisanal Connoisseurship**

In 2003, the American craft beer segment consisted of nearly 1,500 breweries that together produced about 3 percent of the beer consumed in the United States. This incredibly diverse group of small breweries represented a remarkable turn of events. Previously, the market had been dominated by mass-market industrial beer produced by a handful of conglomerates, such as Anheuser-Busch, Miller, and Coors, which marketed extremely “light lagers” that were cheap to produce and offensive to no one. These virtually indistinguishable beers were the result of long-term efforts to eke out higher margins in a price-sensitive category, which forced the big breweries to shift to cheap fillers such as rice and corn. Beer was an industrial commodity, just as was coffee in the post-war era, as we report in our analysis of Starbucks in Chapter 5 of the book.

*We detail in the Starbucks analysis the social disruption that drove Starbucks’ success: the demographic shift beginning in the late 1980s in which a large*
cultural capital cohort entered the adult marketplace demanding more sophisticated cultural expressions in their lifestyle goods. Craft beers catered to this same cohort, but skewed toward males, because men drank a lot more beer than women. The revolution in craft beer followed precisely the same path as coffee, diffusing out of the artisanal–cosmopolitan subculture whose epicenter formed in the Bay Area in the late 1960s. In 1965, Fritz Maytag, a Stanford University graduate and heir to the Maytag white goods fortune, rescued San Francisco’s tiny Anchor Steam Brewery from imminent bankruptcy and brewed beers using a frontier-era “steam” recipe that resulted in a more flavorful beer than the typical light lagers. The artisanal–cosmopolitan crowd loved this odd beer. Likewise, in 1976, Jack McAuliffe launched the New Albion Brewery in Sonoma County north of San Francisco. McAuliffe was the Alfred Peet of craft beers, launching the brewery that would inspire hundreds of beer aficionados to start their own micro-breweries and brewpubs. He produced beers that were more distinctive and esoteric than Maytag’s brews. New Albion Porter became known for its extremely complex layers of flavor. New Albion Stout was the only domestically brewed stout for sale in the country at that time, and its taste was challenging even to beer connoisseurs.
Inspired by these pioneers, beer-crazed entrepreneurs started up dozens of new craft breweries, each one small, independent, and offering its own twists on old-world brewing recipes. The craft-brewing renaissance took off in California, spreading northward up the coast, then in the mid-1980s eastward to Colorado, Vermont, and beyond. By the time New Belgium was considering its regional rollout, craft beer was an established segment in every state in the country, with most liquor stores and bars offering a good selection. And these beers did particularly well in the pioneering markets of northern California, western Oregon, and Washington state.

From the beginning, this segment organized around the same ideology as Peet’s coffee and the original Starbucks: what we termed *artisanal-cosmopolitan connoisseurship*. It is no coincidence that the Bay Area was the initial epicenter. Beer and coffee were two of the early and most important food and drink categories to be aestheticized as the tastes of cultural elites trickled down to an increasingly educated middle class looking to express a new kind of cultural sophistication.

Craft brewers and their insider customers were motivated by the same ideology that Alfred Peet was advancing in coffee. Their goal was to make the most flavorful and interesting beers, not lowest-common-denominator swill. They gave their attention to ingredient provenance, not bland, anonymous filler. They made use of pre-modern styles and brewing techniques, not mass industrial technology. Scale was much less important to them than making a delicious and intriguing beer of the highest quality. They rejected the
processed, the artificial, and the preserved, while celebrating the perishable, the fresh, and the natural. They scorned corporate notions of consistency and standardization and championed the idiosyncratic and the “flawed,” often adding personal touches to each beer. One eccentric Bay Area brewer, for instance, became celebrated for his fall Pumpkin Ale. Craft brewers celebrated the handmade over the factory produced, the small batch over the mass scaled, and patience over speed. They defended brewing as a craft skill, learned over years by apprenticeship, and rejected the notion that it could be reduced to an assembly-line process.

All of the major craft beer brands became proficient at communicating this ideology, using very similar cultural codes. The Boston Beer Company—an aggressive marketer—soon dominated the category with its flagship Sam Adams brand. While selling nearly ten million cases of Sam Adams Lager a year, the company still conveyed the artisanal–cosmopolitan connoisseurship ideology across all of its marketing. James Koch, the company founder, narrated low-fidelity ads in which he recounted how the recipe for Sam Adams was handed down by his great-great-grandfather, a St Louis brewer. He explained that his beer adhered to rigorous German purity laws that limited the beer’s ingredients to hops, malt, yeast, and water, and
boasted about the prizes that Sam Adams has won in various beer festivals. The brewery engaged in an aggressive insider strategy, creating a range of increasingly esoteric “competition beers”—such as beers laced with Belgian chocolate—aimed at sustaining the brand’s credibility in artisanal–cosmopolitan insider circles. In media coverage, Koch knocked the industrial brewers for using inferior ingredients and lowest-common-denominator recipes and for being motivated more by money than by any real interest in brewing.

Sierra Nevada, the number two craft beer in 2003, advanced the cultural orthodoxy without resorting to mass media. The brewery conveyed its artisanal–cosmopolitan connoisseurship through their choice of old-world brewing styles and recipes, their product names, their label design, their brewery location and design, their brewery tours, and their entry into competitions at craft-beer festivals. The folksy, hand-painted watercolor labels communicated connoisseur details such as the use of generous quantities of Cascade hops that give the ale its fragrant bouquet and spicy flavor. To further communicate artisanal connoisseurship, the brewery launched a variety of specialty brews, such as a hoppy and potent Celebration Ale, a porter, a wheat beer, a stout, a barley wine, a blonde ale, and a pale bock.
Most craft breweries emphasized the craft skills of their brewers and their preference for fresh, natural, fussed-over ingredients. They attributed their creative experimentation and personalized idiosyncratic signatures to their pre-industrial, old-world brewing traditions. As once-esoteric beers such as Pale Ale became standard craft fare, brewers pushed toward ever-more obscure recipes, such as German Kosch and Marzen styles, Belgian “white” beer, French “farmhouse” ales, and Belgian abbey ales. As well, a hop arms race broke out, as breweries raced to make the most bitter ale possible. The brand leading the hophead revolution, Dogfish Head, relied upon exactly the same cultural codes as the first wave of craft breweries.

When we signed onto the strategy project, New Belgium was playing the same game, mimicking the cultural orthodoxy of the craft beer category. The brewery did its best to invest its beers with the aura of artisanal–cosmopolitan connoisseurship. It glorified old-world beer recipes, created defiantly challenging beers, experimented with esoteric ingredients not usually found in beer such as lemon verbena and Thai kaffir leaf, and aged beer in barrels, just as wineries do. Its 1554 “black ale” came from a centuries-old recipe that New Belgium brewers had discovered in an old Belgian brewer’s manual. New Belgium’s labels were produced in the same folksy handmade style as many of its competitors, with the same range of cute homespun names. They produced
comedic, amateurish posters and coasters typical of a craft brewery. New Belgium did make great beer. But, then, so did dozens of other top-notch craft breweries. Their Belgian recipes, once distinctive, were no longer so, as dozens of breweries were even more experimental and esoteric, outplaying New Belgium on these key dimensions of cultural capital.

Fat Tire was different though. It did not play the cultural capital game. Rather it happened to be a very palatable slightly sweet beer that many drinkers who were not connoisseurs liked to drink. So it had the potential to break out of the craft category and become a mass-market beer. But, as Fat Tire won some initial accolades, local craft breweries were quick to offer their own take on the Belgian brown style, with knock-offs that drinkers often liked just as much as Fat Tire. Many craft beer drinkers favor local breweries, and these breweries also had powerful distribution clout, controlling a high percentage of the bar and restaurant taps. So Fat Tire was handicapped. If New Belgium was to compete outside of Colorado on the quality of its beer alone, it would probably lose. Instead of trying to convince drinkers that New Belgium had better beer, our approach was to build an innovative cultural expression that outmaneuvered a marketplace saturated with artisanal–cosmopolitan beer branding.

**Ideological Opportunity: The Ache of the BoBo**

Our aim was to develop a new ideology for craft beer, one that would powerfully resonate with our target drinkers if we expressed it through the right myth and cultural codes. Demographically, our target drinkers were highly educated male professionals and managers, mostly between 25 and 45 years
old, who made a good income and so could afford craft beer priced 50 percent higher than domestic brands. The import demographic was important to us as well, as there was considerable switching between craft and import beers; import drinkers were similar to our target drinkers, but not quite as wealthy or as well educated. The bulls-eye customer in our major metro areas would be the Microsoft designer in Seattle, the Silicon Valley IT engineer, the Dallas lawyer, or a Los Angeles creative director—a successful career-oriented male urban professional who drinks beer after work and on weekends when socializing. By 2003, craft beers had become widely-diffused, expressing cultural capital through their artisanal-cosmopolitan ideology. So our specific goal was to devise an innovative new expression of cultural capital. To do so, we needed to pay close attention to emerging desires for ideology amongst this group.

The Dot-Com Era’s Creative Rebel Discourse.

The dot-com boom of the late 1990s fundamentally changed how the cultural capital cohort envisioned their careers, setting afire the “bohemian” aspects of their identity project with respect to their occupations. Previously, the upper-middle-class occupational goal was to snag a prestigious and well-paying job: a great investment banking house, a powerful law firm, a reputable research hospital, an industry-leading engineering firm. All that changed when the business press began to fill with stories of super-smart young entrepreneurs who were rejecting the rigid bureaucracies of big companies and their incrementalist approach to business in favor of entrepreneurial start-ups pursuing wildly imaginative ideas with reckless energy and creative willpower. Their “offices” reflected their imaginative mindset: no more rows of glass-
walled offices and cubicles, but bare spaces equipped with foosball tables, beanbag chairs, chill-out spaces, whiteboards, and other brainstorming supplies.

The godfather of this bohemian takeover of management was, and still is, Steve Jobs. The 1998 launch spot of Apple’s “Think Different” campaign captured Jobs’s “creative rebel” ideology perfectly:

Here's to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes . . . the ones who see things differently—they're not fond of rules . . . You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can't do is ignore them because they change things . . . they push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do.

Prestige and a good salary were no longer sufficient. The cultural capital cohort were inspired to find fulfillment by expressing their passionate creativity, unorthodox sensibilities, and intellectual firepower in their work and avocations. In other words, in the late 1990s, the social class game for those who aspired to cultural capital hit an inflationary inflection point. Whereas the 1990s had been dominated by the cultural capital cohort’s quest for culturally sophisticated goods to sprinkle across their lifestyle, now that was no longer good enough. With the consecration of Silicon Valley upstarts as the new ideal, this cohort was given a strong cultural push to “live” their ideology in their
work life, rather than simply buy goods that expressed it. They felt it necessary to do something—in the words of Jobs—“insanely great” with their lives.

Trapped by Technopoly

This new identity project ran head-on into a basic structural problem, however. The dot-coms went bust, and, once the foosball tables, pinball machines, and espresso bars had been cleared out, few jobs remained that allowed for this kind of work, much less demanded it. The careers that offered good salaries and prestige were the same as before: these were jobs that required the rote application of professional skills, which needed to be done well, but were seldom particularly creative or likely to change the world. Even more problematic, many of these occupations were now subject to the same rationalizing forces of process engineering that had made blue-collar and service work so stressful and unsatisfying in the previous two decades. The rationalizing calculi used by private equity investors and M&A bankers as they sought to “extract value” from assets in the market were industriously applied to all professions, instilling a new form of competition to push the efficiency of middle-class labor as far as it could go. Rationalizing management technologies had taken over with no countervailing forces in sight—what critics called technopoly. Even doctors, once the most protected of professionals, were now squeezed by HMOs, insurance companies, and hospital management. They were booking patients in fifteen-minute increments, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., and watching the clock to keep them moving through. No more Wednesday golf outings. The life of lawyers, engineers, and middle managers was no different.
On the job, technopoly created extraordinary competitive pressures. If you did not work harder than others and constantly keep up with the new knowledge and techniques required to do your job most effectively, your position was at risk. Americans now worked the longest hours in post-war history, and professionals and managers worked the longest of any class of American workers. Mobile information technology meant that professional jobs were increasingly a 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week proposition: at first laptops and affordable home Internet, then Blackberries, then WiFi (and now iPhones). Work became virtually inescapable, regardless of how far one traveled away from it.

Despite these pressures, escape was never a legitimate possibility for most of the cultural capital cohort, for the pay was often excellent and golden handcuffs tied them to their jobs: the luxury dining and exotic vacations, the mortgages on townhouses and urban lofts. Not to mention that they relied heavily on their friends in the same predicament, for it was these rat-race-infested social networks that provided them with respect and secured their place in the status hierarchy.
The Ache of the BoBo

How was one to be a creative rebel, pursuing the insanely great, in a world of work dominated by technopoly? The cultural capital cohort had no time or mental capacity to devote themselves to what they most yearned to do: the construction of self through creative acts. They suffered from a kind of attention-deficit disorder, the cultural economy of distraction. Carving out time from technopoly jobs to dedicate oneself passionately to creative acts seemed to be a pipedream. Many had become cultural dilettantes, heavily dependent on the various cultural intermediaries who act as specialists directing their tastes and activities. To characterize this widespread anxiety for our clients, we borrowed David Brooks’s felicitous phrase for the cultural capital cohort—the Bourgeois-Bohemian, or BoBo for short. Hence we termed this profound contradiction the ache of the BoBo.

Media Myth: “I Downshifted to Pursue my Passionate Avocation”

We were convinced that we had discovered a great ideological opportunity, but how to respond to it? We next looked for clues in our target’s mass culture preferences to see if we could find the salves they were relying upon to mend their BoBo ache. We did not find the usual books and films and television programs (though, soon after, many avocation-focused cable channels and websites would jump into this space). Instead, we found that our BoBos were very inspired by a particular kind of story that they enjoyed reading in their newspapers, magazines, and favorite websites. The stories fit a consistent formula: they featured BoBos who had ditched their successful big city careers finally to pursue their creative passions by committing themselves full-time to
avocations that promised little in the way of economic rewards. For instance, an investment banker who had thrown in the towel, apprenticed with a famed cheesemaker in Normandy, purchased 50 acres in rural Maine, and located a heritage breed of goats to populate the pastures, with the goal of making the most interesting chèvre ever to grace American tables. Such stories usually took place somewhere in beautiful pastoral places like mountain towns, the quaint New England countryside, coastal beach towns, or the desert.

We noted that this genre was taking off amongst BoBos in the United Kingdom as well. Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall launched his River Cottage television series in 1998. Hugh was a well-pedigreed upper-middle-class citydweller (Eton College, then Oxford) who abandoned the conventional Oxbridge lifestyle to buy an old farm in the West Country and pursue a downshifted lifestyle. However, ever the BoBo, he applied his passionate interest in food to become an extremely energetic and knowledgeable advocate for the return of preindustrial agricultural practices, cooking techniques, and tastes. An early advocate of eating every part of the slaughtered animal, Hugh made it his goal to sensualize and aestheticize this kind of cooking. BoBos in London were enthralled, and soon enough Hugh was imported into the USA, taking off just as our project began. This genre provided us with a very helpful clue as to how to
compose a cultural strategy for Fat Tire that would respond to the ache of the BoBo.

**New Belgium’s Cultural Assets**

We spent a great deal of time at the brewery interacting with the staff and watching the company operate, and our experience reinforced and embellished the strategic direction in which we were moving. While few of the brewery employees were active participants in the mountain outdoor adventure subculture—the senior managers seemed to have little time ever to escape the Front Range—the company was an exemplar of the media myth that BoBos so loved.

The brewery’s founders were both professionals who had given up their careers to pursue the avocation that they were passionate about, regardless of where it took them. They viewed brewing as an eclectic pursuit, where the fun came from experimenting with beer styles and improvising brewing equipment. Very few of the staff were trained professionally for their jobs, and Kim and Jeff liked it that way. For instance, the COO (promoted from CFO) joined the company as a graduate student in philosophy.

**A Company of Amateurs**

The company widely adopted Jeff’s DIY all-consuming passion to become an excellent brewer. It was assumed that people could become superb at whatever
their company assignment through DIY learning and trial and error, if only they were given the free rein to do so. One of the company’s key employees told us a story about how Jeff had pushed him to disassemble and rebuild a piece of complex German brewing equipment with no instructions or direction from Jeff (though Jeff kept a diagram in his desk just in case he messed up). He was eventually able to do, inspiring his passion to become expert in the seemingly most trivial details of the brewing process.

Pastoral Organization as Antidote to Technopoly

New Belgium is organized as an extended family of people drawn together to work in a much more communal and humane way than the dominant technopoly model. Drawing on her social work background, Jordan opened the brewery to families and advocated humane work hours. The company provides employees with stock and encouraged nonstop participation in its local community and the markets it serves. The brewery looks more like a modern ski lodge than a corporate facility, sitting near the banks of the Poudre la Cache River with dozens of single-speed bikes parked out front (employees receive a free bike on their first anniversary). Prospective employees were required to perform a
creative act of some sort to get hired. They painted, they played music, they wrote essays.

The Single-Speed Cruiser

This idea of the pastoral antidote came to life in New Belgium’s design icon—the single-speed fat-tire bike. The bike was a powerful symbol of human-scaled technology: simply designed, easy to work on, the antithesis of high-end bikes decked out with gizmos the riders do not need. The cruiser was a mythic time machine, harkening back to an era when technology was far less invasive in human life.

**Cultural Strategy: Community of Pastoral Amateurs**

We synthesized the insights from all of these analyses to develop a novel ideology for Fat Tire to champion that would respond directly to the Ache of the BoBo—what we called the *community of pastoral amateurs*. To focus our efforts, we wrote a twenty-page manifesto that we summarize here.

The Amateur

An amateur pursues an art, science, craft, study, or athletic activity for the joy of doing it, because it is intrinsically interesting. Amateurism is the opposite of professionalism. Amateurs are not interested in formal institutions and status therein. Rather they are organized informally. They approach the activity with a particular attitude: playful, whimsical, zealous, even obsessive. Amateurs are willing to take risks and plow down blind allies because theirs is not a careerist
profession. They are not trying to climb to the top of the hill the fastest. The fun is in the creative pursuit. Because they do not identify themselves with a formal profession or set of institutional guidelines, they can be stubbornly iconoclastic. Our ideal type here was the iconoclastic British amateur often portrayed on BBC documentaries: a bureaucrat by day, he fills all other available hours of the day with the pursuit of a singular lifelong eclectic passion. Say, early Mesopotamian oil jugs. The interest is entirely intrinsic and leads to wild opinions and sometimes strange diversions. However, because his passion fires such industrious and sustained efforts, our hero becomes one of the world’s leading experts on the topic, all without a degree.

Pastoral
Pastoral is, in the first instance, a place of natural beauty where man exists in perfect harmony with nature. In the United States, the mountain towns of the West are quintessential pastoral places. Even more important is the idea that our avocations should free us from the constraints of technopoly, allowing us to pursue our passions free of the iron cage of rationalizing technologies. Pastoral pursuits are those that express a utopian resolution of man’s interactions with technology. Pastoral activities are activities that demonstrate that technologies can be harnessed and humanized to improve the quality of human life in harmony with nature.

*New Belgium is a community of pastoral amateurs who brew beer amongst other avocations. We approach pastoral amateurism as a life*
philosophy, an approach to living that can be applied to any craft or activity.

**We celebrate quixotic playful exploration.** Pastoral amateurs investigate their chosen domain with intensity. But this isn’t a masculine conquest. This is a playground, not a frontier.

**We champion wildly non-instrumental investments of time.** Pastoral amateurs’ inquisitive ethos means that they will take whatever time it takes to learn what needs learning, pursue the paths of inquiry that are open, experimenting to get things right, attending to the details.

**We believe in humanizing technology.** Pastoral amateurs assert human control over technology.

**We embrace brash iconoclasm.** Pastoral amateurs are not afraid to do something for the first time. “An enamored amateur need not be a genius to stay out of the ruts he has never been trained in.” (D. Boorstin)

**Our approach is communal, not competitive.** Pastoral amateurs live their passion amongst fellow travelers, excited and supportive of the accomplishments of fellow traveler amateurs.

**We prefer childlike innocence to jaded professionalism.** Untainted by professionalism, pastoral amateurs have a naive innocence about them.
We built a comprehensive brand platform, which directed everything from the names of new beers, to communications, sales protocols, and the design of tourists’ experience when they visited the brewery. The ethos of amateurism extended to everything from website design to coasters to events such as a “ride-in” film festival that featured amateur film-makers, an array of new products such as highly idiosyncratic seasonal beers, and the presentation of online videos celebrating local amateurs as friends of New Belgium. But, to turn around the West Coast markets, we needed to create some sort of mass cultural expression of the pastoral amateur ethos. Our creative challenge was to devise a pastoral amateur call to arms, calling out to BoBos in Seattle, Silicon Valley, Santa Monica, San Diego, and points beyond, allowing them to dream a bit that they too might some day have a chance to give it all for their avocation rather than their 8-to-8 job. Given the vast target we needed to talk to, and the kind of story we needed to tell, we knew that we needed to be working with film, still by far the most compelling storytelling medium. So we convinced New Belgium to invest in its first (and probably only) ad campaign.

**Selecting Cultural Codes: The Tinkerer**

The Tinkerer Character

We wanted to tell a story of quixotic exploration, the humanizing of technology, and the kind of freedom with time that only a child now has. We thought that the best way to tell it was through a simple character study. It would feature a man engaged in his avocation, working at a leisurely pace with no time
pressures, no intrusions from the outside world. He would be driven by his love for the hobby as opposed to status. The study would show him existing in harmony with nature, in a rural setting, and living in a slow-paced locale—the antithesis to fast-paced city life. The study would romanticize manual, get-your-hands-dirty, tinkering activity—the antithesis of abstract, cerebral, professional work. To cast this character, whom we came to call “the tinkerer,” we wanted to avoid a stereotypical mountain outdoors character, or any other stereotype for that matter. To heighten the mythical nature of the spot, that it could be about anyone, we found a young Czech man who happened to be traveling through Boulder, Colorado, and used him in all the spots as our lead character, never speaking a word.

Single-Speed Bikes

We decided upon old single-speed bicycles as the object of his obsession—he is a man who strips down old multi-gear bicycles and converts them into single-speed cruisers (an esoteric hobby at the time, which has since become much more popular—building what is now known amongst bike enthusiasts as a “fixie” for fixed speed). The single-speed bicycle was a powerful pastoral amateur symbol, and Fat Tire owned it, so it was an obvious choice. Around this time, people who imbibed in the pastoral amateur ethos around the country had begun to embrace single-speed bicycles as a symbol of human-scaled technology, a statement against the encroachment of
technology on their cultural traditions and on nature.

Mountain-Town Setting

We wanted to romanticize the pastoral aspects of mountain towns in an utterly authentic but also very romantic way that would pull at the heartstrings of our BoBo beer-quaffing prospects. We worked with New Belgium to assemble a short list of quintessential Colorado mountain towns. The director for the ads, Jake Scott, spent several weeks driving around the state scouting the locations. Most of these were old mining towns in the middle of the mountains, now settled by anyone who could scratch out a living to stay in such beautiful places: Creede, Silverton, Salida, Crestone, and Paonia. We vetoed the most popular destination cities such as Aspen, Vail, Steamboat Springs, and Telluride, because these places had been so heavily commercialized and overtaken by the rich. We settled upon Paonia, Colorado, a town of 1,497 on the Gunnison River, at the foot of the Grand Mesa. The highlight of the Paonia calendar was a three-day Mountain Harvest Festival with music, poetry, an art show, and classes on canning and raising livestock. The town’s combination of beautiful natural
scenery, rusty old farm equipment, and dilapidated miners’ homes evoked a period in American history when life was much simpler and less rationalized, when technology was held at bay. The setting evoked an era that seemed artfully imprecise in time: it brought to mind the early twentieth century as much as it did the current day.

Psych-Folk Soundtrack
To enhance the mythic nature of the campaign, we decided against dialogue. Instead we would run a soundtrack from beginning to end, which would need to work as hard as the visuals to conjure up the ideology. In recent years, a new genre of lo-fi folk-influenced rock had emerged, reinvigorating the original 1960s genre of Graham Parsons, The Byrds, The Grateful Dead, and others. These musicians often celebrated the pastoral in their lyrics and sometimes directly critiqued the encroachment of technology. They also celebrated the ideal of amateurism through their production values and instrumentation. Artists would employ conspicuously DIY production techniques, for instance recording with a handheld cassette machine and leaving in the tape’s hissing sounds, or trying out new instruments with which they had little familiarity. One of the new indie folk musicians who particularly evoked the pastoral amateur ethos was Devendra Banhardt, then a Colorado-based artist. Devendra’s combination of steadily thrumming, finger-style guitar, lo-fi production techniques, and naive musings about the likes of crows, cows, pigs, and flies embodied precisely the pastoral amateur ideology that we wanted to convey, so we made arrangements with him to use his music for all of our spots.
Tagline: Follow Your Folly, Ours is Beer

Because our creative would focus on pastoral amateur avocations other than beer, we felt that we needed a tagline that would make the linkage back to the brewery and the beer very explicit. We wanted to say “here’s the kind of ideology we aspire to, we celebrate all who pursue the same kind of thing, and this is exactly the ideology that is at the heart of our brewery and the beer that you’re drinking.” Through lots of creative brainstorming, we came up with a call-to-arms declaration—“Follow Your Folly”—that was our part-serious part-tongue-in-cheek response to Nike’s “Just Do It” and other hypercompetitive taglines so common at the time. To this we added a hook to say that we are part of this movement as well, not the leaders but fellow travelers who share the same ideology: “Ours is Beer.” So each spot would end with a very simple low fidelity shot of a Fat Tire poured into a glass with the tagline.

The Tinkerer Anthem

We made four ads, but our efforts were particularly focused on one anthemic launch spot, since we had such a small media budget. The Tinkerer relied upon a whimsical, childlike song performed by Devendra called “At the Hop.” The spot begins with our protagonist—the bicycle tinkerer—arriving at a yard sale in front of a rural
Colorado home. He waves a neighborly hello to the house’s owner, a 70-year-old man who is relaxing on his porch with his wife. He wanders through the yard looking at discarded picture frames, distressed cabinets, and vintage soda-pop cases until he spots a rusted old bicycle. The bicycle clearly requires a lot of work, but he sees potential in it, gets a gleam in his eye, and motions to buy it. The owner waves him off, refusing payment for the bike. He returns the wave and leaves.

We next see the Tinkerer at home in his workshop in a converted barn. It appears to be well used—this is clearly a place where he spends a lot of time. He looks at the bicycle studiously and then begins methodically to take it apart. We cut between long ponderous shots that show him captivated by his hobby and short, quirky shots that show him following his whims. In one shot, he tries on a hat that he has made from handlebars. In another, he looks out from atop his barn.

The Tinkerer removes the old racing handlebars and strips off the front cassette cog. We see parts drop to the floor as he works. He happily strips off the old gears. A series of cuts demonstrate that many hours have passed. We see through the window that night has fallen. We see the warm light of the barn under a dark midnight sky.

Finally, the next day, we see the Tinkerer, his toils finished, heading out to try his restored mid-century red cruiser. We see him push down on the pedal, then ride the bike out into the road. His dog follows for a few steps, but soon the
Tinkerer is on his own. He picks up speed and feels the wind in his hair. As we see the Colorado countryside rise up around him, the spot cuts to a Fat Tire poured into a glass with the end line “Follow Your Folly, Ours Is Beer.”

**Results**

Our clients at New Belgium were brave to take on the great expense of this effort and, even more important, to embrace a marketing technique—mass advertising—that they initially disliked and dreaded, no different from Phil Knight back in the day. We needed to demonstrate that we had accomplished what we had claimed we could do from the beginning: crossing the cultural chasm to bring Fat Tire’s ideology to a mass market of beer drinkers far removed from the mountain towns of the Rockies. So we set up a field experiment, dividing ten media markets into two sets of five that were equivalent in terms of both demographics and Fat Tire sales. We ran the campaign in five markets and ran no advertising in the other five. Sales in test markets increased 37 percent in the first six months versus a modest 2 percent increase in control markets, even though the campaign ran for only fourteen weeks. We calculated that the campaign would pay for itself with an 11 percent increase and so the campaign was making money for the brewery from the start. And there were other benefits as well. Part of the initial lift-off in the first month was that the grocery trade was so impressed by the effort that the New Belgium’s sales force was able to drive many more feature ads and displays for Fat Tire along with the brewery’s secondary beers such as Sunshine Wheat beer and 1554 black ale. In addition, the momentum of the ad campaign allowed them to convince grocers to cut in new distribution points for these secondary
beers. Sales of New Belgium’s top secondary beers increased by over 50 percent as a result.

**Summary**

New Belgium is a great example of an entrepreneurial venture trapped in a niche market because the company had hit a cultural chasm. New Belgium had become so adept at relationship marketing that it had trouble seeing that another approach was needed to build the Fat Tire brand on the West Coast. In this respect, New Belgium’s position in the early 2000s was no different from Starbucks in the 1980s or Nike in the 1970s, or Jack Daniel’s in the early 1950s. All four companies delivered a high-quality product that sold predominantly to a niche subcultural market. Because these companies understood their appeal as offering a better mousetrap—connoisseur coffee, the smoothest whiskey, the most technologically advanced shoe, the most interesting and finely crafted Belgian beers—they could not envision that the mass-market prospects were much more interested in an innovative cultural expression than in fine-grained product differences. This is what we term the cultural chasm. As a result, all four companies struggled to compete in the mass market with competitors that had superior resources.

Crossing the cultural chasm requires moving from a marketplace dominated by *insider* customers, who often hold considerable expertise in the category, to what we call *follower* customers, who simply want an accessible way to tap into a valued cultural expression that the product can credibly represent. For New Belgium, this shift required stepping away from the hardcore beer aficionados,
who were the opinion leaders in the craft brew market, and their artisanal-cosmopolitan ideology, to consider what value the brand could offer to the cultural capital cohort in order to satiate their particular ideological thirst.